

# **‘EXCELLENCE AND ENJOYMENT’ OR EXCLUSION AND UNDERACHIEVEMENT? A STUDY OF THE ISSUES FACING AN IMMIGRANT RUSSIAN-SPEAKING PUPIL IN AN ENGLISH PRIMARY SCHOOL**

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## **Abstract**

The paper presents the initial findings from a research project into the learning experiences of middle childhood (7-11 years old) English as an additional language (EAL) migrant children with Russian as a first language (L1) in London state primary schools. The aim of this paper is to present the preliminary results from a pilot case study based on a qualitative multiple case study investigation focusing on the following research questions: 1. What experiences/issues does a Russian-speaking migrant child face in a L2 (second language) English school environment in middle childhood? 2. Why does a Russian-speaking pupil have certain experiences? Research into the area of Russian-speaking migrant children with EAL is pertinent to schools given that the percentage of newly-arrived EAL students with Russian as first language in the UK state-funded primary schools has nearly tripled in just 8 years (from 3,511 pupils to 9,722 pupils) (Department for Education, 2016; Makarova and Morgunova, 2009). Research related to this has been undertaken in other European countries such as Finland (Räty et al., 2010; Laihiala-Kankainen, 1998) and the Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) (Šumskas et al., 2012), but to date there is no known L2 study of this in English primary schools. The methodology comprises an interpretive paradigm employing a qualitative multiple case study research approach with embedded ethnography and interviews with creative techniques. The study's theoretical framework is constructed by using a combination of overarching and narrower focused theories (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The overarching theory is provided by Vygotsky's Socio-cultural theory which elucidates a broad based social level or macro-substantive dimensions (Ibid., p. 188). The international significance of the study is that it aims at developing an understanding of the place and influence of Russian-speaking migrant pupils which can be compared to other linguistic minority groups in the diverse cultural realities (Holliday, 2011) of the classrooms in other age groups, school settings, and contexts of other countries.

**Keywords:** Barriers to Learning, Elementary Education, Foreign Language Education, Language Education.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Imagine a London classroom with lots of activity; people, children have got their heads down, some people are writing about their holiday, some about this, some about that. And amongst them is a little boy named Sasha with a smile on his face, sometimes with his brows crossed, happily joining in and writing away, scribbling in his book. The problem for Sasha, however, is that he really is just scribbling away. If you listen closely to Sasha mumbling aloud as he reads, you will realize that the words or sounds he speaks aloud

have nothing to do with the book he is supposedly reading. This vignette posits the questions to be addressed in this paper: Why was Sasha doing this? And what issues does this Russian-speaking pupil face in his UK primary school?

For the purposes of clarity, in this study the term '(im)migrant child(ren)' is broadly denoting the individuals younger than 18 years old who have migrated with their family (or migrated as arranged by their family) and are immersed in a foreign country and culture. In the UK they are referred to as linguistic minority pupils or EAL (English as an Additional Language), defined as English as a second language up to the late 1980s (Leung, 2016, p.159). There were 1,185,960 EAL pupils in England in 2015, 19.4 and 19.3 percent of whom are in state primary schools and other types of primary schools respectively (National Statistics, 2015). My study focuses exclusively on middle childhood Russian-speaking immigrant children (either first or second generation), who are somewhat new to English or intermediate speakers (Conteh, 2012) in state-funded primary schools at Key Stage 2 (7-11 years old). Currently, there are no known studies into Russian-speaking immigrant children's issues in the UK, which is especially significant considering the topicality of the linguistic minority pupils' issues globally as well as in England. What magnifies the issues is that the linguistic diversity in England, while being a 'part of the everyday classroom reality' (Leung, 2002, p.1), still remains 'invisible' and 'understated', tagged as having a problematic nature in educational policy which lacks unanimous structured guidance for EAL support.

## 2 RUSSIAN-SPEAKING MIDDLE CHILDHOOD IMMIGRANT CHILDREN CONTEXT

### 2.1 Russian-Speaking Immigrant Children's Presence in the UK

Makarova and Morgunova (2009) consider the phenomenon of Russian-speaking people in Britain as "becoming established and taking on mass proportions" (p. 40). The Russian-speaking population in London has accumulated diverse adaptation strategies and lives as an 'invisible community' (Kopnina, 2005, p. 205). An 'invisible community' which is understood as an absence of feeling of belonging to a community bears influence on children as they attend schools with English taught subjects while using Russian as home language potentially making them even more isolated. This is particularly significant since 2004, and the rapid increase in the number of Russian-speaking pupils in UK schools (Department for Education, 2016; Independent Schools Council, 2015; Makarova and Morgunova, 2009). In 2004, the 'new mobilities were set in place' (Mariou et al., 2016, p. 100) when some of the Russian-speaking countries joined the European Union, the significant influx of Russian-speaking population began and continues to date. The available statistics reveal that the percentage of newly-arrived EAL students who are Russian has nearly tripled in just 8 years (from 3,511 pupils to 9,722 pupils) (Department for Education, 2016) (Fig. 1). The number of Russian-speaking pupils in state primary schools in England has increased 3-fold (from 3111 to 8670 pupils); in Scotland - has increased 3-fold in the last 7 years (from 204 to 610 pupils); in Northern Ireland - has increased by nearly 4-fold in the last 8 years (from 71 to 273 pupils); in Wales has increased by 35% in the last 4 years (from 125 to 169 pupils) (Ibid.).

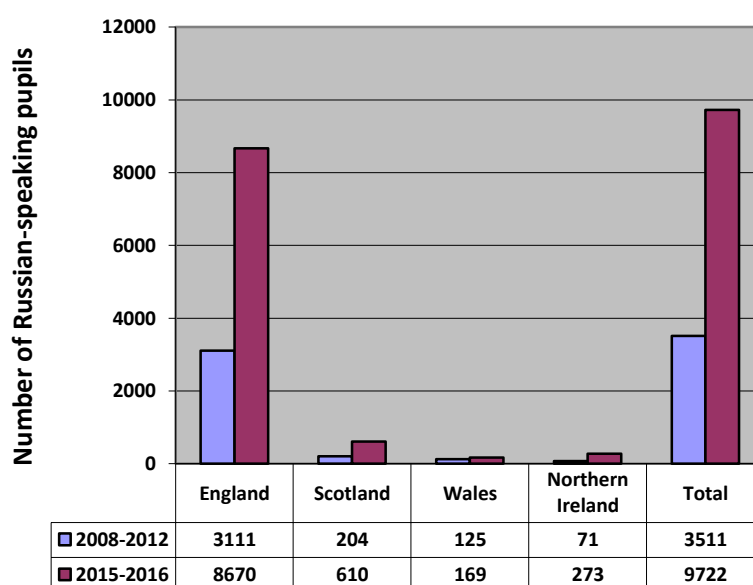


Fig. 1 The number of Russian-speaking pupils in state-funded primary schools in the UK

## 2.2 Research into Russian-Speaking Immigrant Children

Internationally, the research into Russian-speaking children has been conducted in: education in Finland (Räty et al., 2010; Laihala-Kankainen, 1998); educational psychology in Greece (Palaiologou, 2007), Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) (Šumskas et al., 2012); on identity of Russian-speaking children in Esotina (Leino et al., 2006); bilingualism in Turkey (Antonova-Ünlü and Wei, 2016); psychology in the USA (Sekerina and Trueswell, 2011), adoption in New Zealand (Johnstone and Gibbs, 2010), in the UK (comparison of UK children and Russian children in Russia - Charman and Petrova, 2001). The educational studies cast light on the peculiarities of Russian-speaking pupils, e.g. respect for teachers and schools, cognitive and problem-solving abilities, avoidance or 'risk behaviour', feelings of frustration in informal, relaxed atmosphere of schooling where participants are treated as active members of learning, and an understanding of the concept of intelligence by children.

## 2.3 Issues of English as an Additional Language Immigrant Children

### 2.3.1 *The Paradox in the Immigrant Children Studies*

Some Russian-speaking pupils immersed in a new L2 environment are completely new to English. However, the effects of such immersion are unclear as seen from the existing paradox in the immigrant children studies in Education. On the one hand, children are reported to face negative issues when immersed in a L2 school environment, e.g. frustration, anxiety, linguistic barriers, bullying, and subsequent stress, inhibition, negative attitudes towards learning environment, learning and achievement difficulties (Conteh, 2012; 2003; Pim, 2012; Wu et al., 2011; Oznobishin and Kurman, 2009; Conteh, et al., 2007). On the other hand, intercultural adjustment and adaptation of students is reported to be a way to self-formation and contributes to academic achievement and well-being (Marginson, 2013; Motti-Stefanidi and Masten, 2013; Nasir, 2012; Chen et al., 1997; Wentzel, 1991). An example of the positive impact of L2 immersion is the existence of the 'Immigrant Paradox' put forward by American studies on immigrant primary level children (Qin and Han, 2011; 'the paradox of the Chinese learner' by Marton et al., 1997, Glenn and Jong, 1996; Bodovski and Durham, 2010; Kao and Tienda, 1995; somewhat supported by Svensson's (2012) study; in the UK – Chen, 2007). This concept denotes the immigrant children academically outperforming the native children, in spite of the corresponding deprived circumstances (low socioeconomic status) (Palacios et al., 2008). In the UK the paradox is supported by the statistics that EAL children are progressively outperforming native English pupils (Department for Education, 2015; Strand et al., 2015). The existence of this paradox remains controversial (Chuang and Moreno, 2011). One explanation might be that high achievement instances amongst immigrants' children represent only context-related phenomena, as not supported by evidence in the studies of first generation immigrant children, e.g. in Italy (Martini and Mantovani, 2008) or Spain (Vaquera and Kao, 2012). Usefully, Qin and Han (2011) point out that the high achievement paradox should not be equalled with the psychological adjustment and well-being of immigrant children.

### 2.3.2 *Adjustment, Achievement and Well-being Issues*

Adjustment and achievement-associated factors are considered to be the major issues for EAL immigrant children. Generally, researchers point out individual, school (with the broader social context) and family level factors, or societal (culture, social class, ethnical group), interaction (individuals and their contexts: e.g. schools, family, peers), and individual levels (Motti-Stefanidi and Masten, 2013) affecting immigrant children's success and achievement (Strand et al., 2015; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011; Glick and Bates, 2010; Pong, 2009; Palaiologou, 2007; Portes and Fernández-Kelly, 2008; Conteh, 2003). These levels align with the dialectical domains of the Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory, namely: (1) sociogenesis (sociocultural domain) which refers to a broad environment/social world humans are born (Thorne and Tasker, 2011; Shaffer and Kipp, 2007); (2) ontogenesis which is the development of an individual from early life to maturation (Ibid.); (4) macrogenesis, or microgenetic domain (Lantolf, 2000), comprises specific development of psychological processes, functions, and abilities that emerge over time (Lantolf and Poehner, 2014; Thorne and Tasker, 2011). These domains will be used as a framework in the further discussion.

On the individual level (macrogenesis), Alderman (2008), Conteh et al. (2007), Conteh (2003), and Fuligni (1998) emphasize the significance of fostering a migrant child's ethnic identity for the child's engagement and achievement. Alderman (2008) points out risks of motivation and achievement of migrant children as a result of disidentification, the importance of self-worth protection, communication of the feeling of belonging, valuing the students' cultures. Motti-Stefanidi and Masten state that the individual level includes motivation, cognition and personality, e.g. school engagement, attitude towards school, effortful control, self-efficacy, motivation characteristics, etc. (Ibid.). Motti-Stefanidi and Masten (2013) posit that the school culture and

engagement, and academic achievement are in reciprocal (bidirectional) relationships changing each other as they develop. High academic achievement and successful adaptation of immigrant children is, according to Este and Ngo (2011), associated with high resilience. Resilience is a characteristic that comprises a well-balanced personality, stress coping mechanisms, competent behaviour problem solving skills, communication skills, respects towards oneself and others, realistic and clear goals and expectations. The systems shaping resilience include family, school, community, culture (Este and Ngo, 2011).

On the family and interaction levels (ontogenesis), Strand et al. (2015), Conteh (2003) say that family influence the child's identity, cultural understanding and an overall development to a much greater extent than any other factors (e.g. schools). As pointed by Wallace (2001), 'denying children access to and respect for their home language(s) and culture curtails their development and their ability to make a significant contribution to their communities and society' (p. 178). Sibley and Dearing (2014) have confirmed this by addressing the issues of immigrant family involvement in their children's school life and achievement and the implications of such involvement at primary level in the USA. Educational parental involvement includes assurance of child's safety, school and family communication, voluntary parental involvement in the school activities, supportive home environment (interest and help in learning), participation in a community's life, and taking part in decision-making (Sibley and Dearing, 2014). Suarez-Orozco et al (2008) concentrating solely on newly arrived immigrants' foreign-born children in America (first generation immigrants) emphasize that in a substantial number of cases of high achieving immigrants' children were not separated from their nuclear family as compared to low achievers. These findings support the family influence capital for immigrant children along with the Glick and Bates' (2010) findings: children with lower socioeconomic status (SES) generally have lower achievement results, however, two parents present in the family and strong support of children's schooling have a stronger influence on achievement than low parental education and SES (Ibid.). Pong and Landale (2012) have also found that primary level academic achievement of immigrant children is most firmly influenced by family factor, viz. parents' education before migration that determines home environment, and somewhat by other factors, such as before and after migration SES, home language and culture, English language level.

On the school level (sociogenesis), Pong and Landale (2012), McEachron and Bhatti, (2005) highlight the significance of a systematic and holistic approach to EAL school provision, 'stronger partnerships' with staff and parents (Mistry and Sood's, 2012, p. 292). A successful learning environment in multicultural classrooms, Conteh says (2003), is informed by the 'shared culture between teachers and learners, the medium within which all the participants can recognise and feel comfortable about what is taking place' (p. 21), considering that the immigrant students' main concern seemed to be balancing between cultures (Junttila et al., 2013). The teacher will raise the academic achievement of EAL students through a 'positive attitude towards their bilingualism and their native language' (Conteh, 2003, p. 21). In their case study of the academic achievement and ways to raising it among Portuguese immigrant children in UK schools, Demie and Lewis (2010) report that success in schools had been raised by higher expectations of teachers and parents, strong community links, effective leadership, an inclusive curriculum, parental involvement and targeted school staff support (Ibid.). According to Strambler and Weinstein's (2010) quantitative study, teacher's feedback plays an important role in predicting achievement and engagement: perceived positive feedback results in higher achievement, and vice versa. Ly et al. (2012) centres on the issue of teachers' attitude and quality of relationships with immigrants' children, emphasizing affective aspect of the relations, such as, e.g., the 'warm' attitude of teachers and avoidance of conflict. Positive expectation of both teachers and family members play a fundamental role in students' performance referred to as the Rosenthal (or Pygmalion) effect (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968), applied to immigrant children (e.g. Bodovski and Durham, 2010). As one may well notice, the majority of the studies focus on achievement and success of children as the main concern associated with the issues of linguistic minority children. Moreover, most of the studies have employed a quantitative method of analysis of formal tests' results as a determinant of educational progress understanding achievement of immigrant children as a purely academic notion.

Although numerous studies have examined the question of issues of EAL migrant children, there is no known research into Russian-speaking pupils' experiences in the UK. This may be caused by: the recent nature of the phenomenon of Russian-speaking children increasing number in the UK schools; the way of life that Russian-speaking immigrants lead (Kopnina, 2005, p. 205) not settling in close geographical proximity to each other (Malyutina, 2013); the growing worldwide prestige of the British educational system along with the recent acquisition of the free migration status by some partially Russian-speaking countries in EU (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia); the perceived logical generalisability of the research of other immigrant groups in the UK; or possibly since the children do not significantly outperform or underperform native white English pupils in England (Chuang and Moreno, 2011). The merit of attention towards Russian-speaking immigrant children is that, even though, the majority of the Russian-speaking immigrants come from different countries, they do

share similar cultural features since the majority of the Russian-speaking parents of immigrant children were born and raised in the Soviet Union. These countries were united by a unique common socio-political and sociolinguistic context (the Soviet Union) as the world's largest land area and a consciously-constructed and all-encompassing state ideology and educational system, possibly leading to shared cultural expectations of school and views on education in general (Elliott, et al., 2005).

### 3 METHODOLOGY

My understanding of the nature of the world and the functions of myself as a researcher fall under the interpretive paradigm. 'Child as a subject' research approach is employed which emphasizes the importance of seeing a pupil as an 'expert' in his or her life, which allows us to learn from pupils (rather than about them) treating them with 'equality, insight and respect' (Christensen and James, 2008, p. 3). Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory frames my study in the process of data collection as well as serving as a broader lens to explain the data. It purports that with the immersion into the L2 environment of UK schools Russian-speaking immigrant children evidently change their sociocultural environment and language and so appear in a unique linguistic, pedagogical and psychological situation that influences their overall psychological and personality development process (Lantolf and Poehner, 2014; Vygotsky, 2005). The research questions addressed in this paper are: what issues/experiences does a Russian-speaking migrant child have? Why does the Russian-speaking child have certain experiences? The main research approach is a case study with embedded ethnography. The data collection methods included: semi-structured interviews with the Russian-speaking child using creative elicitation techniques or 'researcher-initiated stimuli' (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010, p. 177) (4 interviews approx. 30 - 40 minutes each); in-school participant observations during 1-month period; open-ended interviews with the participants' mother, class teacher and an EAL teaching assistant (1 hour- 1.5 each). Research complies with ethical standards and requirements, and appropriate use of the data (BERA, 2011), with respect to 'democracy, truths, and persons' (Bassey, 1999, p. 73). All participants are assured of anonymity and privacy adhering to legal requirements working with vulnerable participants causing no harm (the Children's Act, 2004; the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989; BERA, 2011; The University of Leeds Research Ethics Policy, 2016). Further, the preliminary findings are presented using pseudonyms for all participants.

## 4 THE CASE OF SASHA

### 4.1 Introduction

Sasha is a 9 year old boy born in the UK in a Russian-speaking family, studying in Year 5 in a state primary school. His mother is from Latvia, speaks Russian as a home language, and his father is from Ukraine, and he speaks Russian and sometimes Ukrainian as home languages. Both parents speak almost no English. The mother contacted me to be recruited in my research as a participant as she hoped I could help her child as they had had concerns in the school regarding well-being and achievement during the past few years. She said Sasha cried a lot and begged her to change the school a few years prior to the research:

'The whole year we'd had this that he cried, sometimes it happened... he didn't want to get up to go to school... That was a period when his best friend left to another school, *who protected him, helped him*' (Interview with the mother, 2016, para 3, emphasis added).

In addition, the concern of the mother rose when the school's SENCO (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator) had directed Sasha to be medically tested because of his low progress results in the school. The tests that had been returned to the school showed that Sasha was a mentally and physically healthy child. Doctors stated that possibly the child was 'confused' and the teachers thought he was a new immigrant. The school members were also concerned about Sasha as they did not know what the reason was, whether it was a language or learning issues as he was 'behind' other pupils, he did not make any progress at all during his learning. Sasha, as I was told by his mother and school members, speaks English at school and predominantly Russian at home with the exception of starting speaking English with his younger brother who is 4 years old during the recent years.

### 4.2 The School Context

The school in the study is a state-funded primary school in London with a large number of linguistic minority pupils from different countries and speaking different home languages, including more than ten Russian-speaking pupils. Some of the first languages of pupils in the school comprise Bulgarian, Arabic, Spanish, Turkish, Polish, Mandarin Chinese, Japanese, Tamil, Persian, Korean, Lithuanian, Latvian, and others. At the end of Year 4 the class Sasha is in was re-formed out of two classes and many disruptive boys appeared in this class. The children are mostly grouped by ability and Sasha is in the low ability table with three other

pupils. The children are very boisterous, daring, they never miss an opportunity to play, they break rules when unobserved, and they are being disciplined nearly every day when I am there. But Sasha is not a part of the disruptive element of the class. Sasha does not closely communicate with most boys, with the exception of his friend, Alex, but he talks to girls. The overall environment of the class is tense and difficult to control in various lessons; when the class teacher is out many lessons are loud and disorganized. The class teacher organizes and disciplines the class very well and she is the only person they seem to listen to among most of the other adults. However, the class teacher is only working part-time, and she is not in the class a few mornings and afternoons every week. The days when she is not teaching them many pupils are disruptive and disobedient.

### 4.3 Learning and Language Learning Issues

#### 4.3.1 Perceived Learning Experience

Sasha's own perceived experience during the interviews is positive, he describes himself as a happy child who likes learning:

S (Sasha): 'I feel...I feel happy because... because it's ...(long pause)

L (Researcher): because (rising tone). Why are you happy?

S: writing!' (Smiling) (Interview, 2016, para 15)

Sasha does not seem to think that he is different in any way. With further observations it becomes clear that, even though at the time of the study he feels secure and happy most of the time, he has some negative experiences as regards language and, consequently, social interactions. Interestingly, when I asked him what he would change about school, the first thing he said was quite surprising and can denote the deeper feelings he has about his language/s (Ibid., para 44):

L [Researcher]: Imagine, that you are the school Head, what would you change?

S [Sasha]: Change the... language (Raising tone, pause)

L: Oh, really? Which language would you introduce?

S: Ukraine... Russian... and English..., and Poland [sic].

L: Oh, so you would introduce four languages in the school?

S: That's about [sic] a lot! (Smiling)...

#### 4.3.2 Linguistically Confused Boy: 'Caught between Languages'

Sasha was described as a 'linguistically confused' boy which, according to the teachers and as supported by my observations, has caused him to be an underachiever lacking understanding, having difficulties and barriers. In addition, Sasha started to avoid doing specific tasks in order not to make mistakes, which he admits. Sasha has learned basic writing and reading, his vocabulary base is limited so this impacts on his listening comprehension. His speaking is quite fluent. His speaking had been called a 'Tarzan speaking' or undeveloped, simplified speech, which can also be used to metaphorically describe his writing and reading. The teachers noticed that Sasha was not able to cope with his difficulties:

'Within the class there are quite a lot of language barriers but the children have all found strategies of overcoming them, apart from Sasha' (Interview with the class teacher, 2016, 436)

'Where the children would kept in the head [sic] Sasha was being left behind each day he would just stay behind. And just literally not moving at all' (EAL TA, 2016, para 6)

One of the issues that seemed peculiar and unpredicted in the process of data collection was coded in vivo as 'caught between' languages, or 'in-between languages'. Observing Sasha in the first three days and having started speaking in Russian with him I was surprised at how 'undeveloped' his Russian was. However, his English was of a very low level too compared with other children in the class including those linguistic minority children who immigrated to England about a year before the research. The school members emphasized that Sasha's linguistic situation was peculiar, because 'he's not learned all of one language fluently' (Interview with the class teacher, 2016, 509), he was neither speaking 'developed' ('proper') English nor Russian. The school members suggested that it was a language issue that resulted from the fact that he did not develop his first language in full and he was 'exposed to too many languages at home' (EAL TA, 2016). His class teacher commented on this as follows:

'He kind of seems to be caught between English Language and the Russian Language. And he is confused. And he kind of wants to come out of it, but he doesn't know how to get out of it. So he doesn't understand why he doesn't understand something. So you can see that he will be faced with something in front of him, some work in front of him, and he is confused, he doesn't understand why he can't read it or work out what it says. So like with the Maths problem. He understands that he can add six and six and he can get twelve. But he can't understand that he can see within a problem there is [sic] two numbers. But he gets confused is [sic] to why he doesn't understand what is asking him'.

'...Because he is kind of caught between two languages he doesn't really understands [sic] enough in... Because he doesn't speak or write Russian, or he doesn't write or read Russian. He hasn't got that comparison' (Interview with the class teacher, 2016, 450).

Interestingly, I noticed how fluently Sasha was speaking at times of psychological comfort or excitement (e.g. when we played games) or when having a one-to-one sessions with an EAL teaching assistant, how humorous and talkative he was in personal conversations, and how quickly he did the times tables in Maths lessons (Observational notes, 2016). The sociocultural theory explains language as a participation experience, 'characterized by terms such as 'doing', 'knowing', and 'becoming part of the greater whole' (Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000, p. 156) as well as a 'product of human becoming' (Vygotsky, 1999, p. 275, my translation). Therefore, for this unusual case the fact that he is 'caught between languages', his home environment as well as social environment issues in school have been important in his psychological development as regards the development of personality and motivation as experiences of belonging (Alderman, 2008) either observable or reported. Sasha's own opinion towards English and Russian languages values the English Language more strongly than Russian acknowledging that speaking Russian helps him to communicate with his parents (Sasha speaks it merely to be able to talk to his parents) but he mentions that home language is difficult for him as he is not going to live in Russia:

L: What Language do you like more: English or Russian? S: English is easy to me, но [Russian word meaning 'but'] Russian is hard to me because I don't want to go to Russia. Because (...) because I can get confused' (Interview with Sasha, 4, 2016, para 6).

#### **4.3.3 Home Language and Home Environment**

Home environment issues identified are: the lack of L1 and L2 support, passive decision making, and an unstable home environment. The difference in home and school languages stood out strongly during the course of the study as his home environment is predominantly Russian (with the exception of talking to his younger brother, some English cartoons and occasional Ukrainian speech), whereas his school environment is completely English (except for the French lessons, and occasionally overhearing other languages from other children) as reported from the interviews and is evident from the observations. Sasha could not read until Year 3 when he started getting extra support in school (Interview with the mother, 2016, para 3). His parents did not practice reading in English at home as they couldn't: 'Я дома не могу ему помочь' ('I can't help him at home') (Interview with the mother, 2016, para 7, my translation). His mother's English skills are limited, therefore Sasha lacked parental support at home with his English, however, his mother emphasizes that she tries to help him now, and he watches English cartoons, and he is even allowed to choose what to watch. However, on the contrary, at the same time, she says she only speaks Russian with Sasha, and his father also speaks only Russian, and sometimes Ukrainian. And if Sasha started speaking in English, she would say, 'I don't understand you' (Interview with the mother, 2016, para 1). His mother attributes the language problems of Sasha to the fact that he did not get enough support with his English and he refused to learn Russian. His mother admits, that Sasha's younger brother does not have such difficulties and that Sasha is unlucky compared to the younger brother as he didn't have anyone to speak in English to at home. Sasha's brother speaks English with Sasha at home, they never speak Russian with each other but they speak Russian with their parents. The choice of home language was unintentional: 'We didn't decide anything, it just happened automatically', she points out as regards their home language/s which may denote their indecisiveness regarding Sasha, lack of parental support issues and may explain the close bond of Sasha and his brother who share a common language at home.

### **4.4 The Interrelation of Language and Progress/Achievement Issues**

#### **4.4.1 Teacher's Expectations**

Important to mention, are teachers' expectations about Sasha which were quite straightforward:

'He will always be behind' (EAL TA, 2016, para 25). 'He obviously wouldn't be able to do his 11+' (Class teacher, 2016). 'Unless he becomes more fluent with his English and his understanding of his English

becomes much increased, he is going to be very low level' (Interview with class teacher, 2016, 272). 'Sasha is going to have an issue, he will always be... behind. He is smart, I think. There is a line, he hasn't crossed it yet. He may not cross it till the secondary school, he may not!' (EAL TA, 2016, para 36).

These comments remind us of the Rosenthal Effect (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968), i.e. the damaging, crucial, reverse impact of teachers' expectations and also the deficit position of this multilingual boy by his teacher, in relation to his languages - which for the teacher are a problem.

#### **4.4.2 Learning Language vs. Progress in Mathematics**

The interviews show that Sasha's lack of understanding (language skills) was the main reason for his achievement and progress issues (Interview with the class teacher, 2016):

1) For example, the problem solving issue linked to language comprehension:

'If he had a problem where it was: a farmer has eight apples, his wife has eight apples, how many do they have all together? He would struggle in working out what was going on. And he would draw them out. And yet if I said to him, if I wrote a number sentence down and said eight plus eight equals. He'd be able to work out that it's sixteen. And he would be able to work it out quite quickly. But he has trouble applying that information' (Interview with the class teacher, 2016, 73).

2) Or, for example, language comprehension issues described as 'being lost, confused':

'If the conversation is quite fast-paced, you can see that he's gone lost. (...) You can see he... he kind of glazes over, and you can see he gets confused.' (Interview with the class teacher, 2016, 325)

'So he doesn't understand why he doesn't understand something. So you can see that he will be faced with something in front of him, some work in front of him, and he is confused, he doesn't understand why he can't read it or work out what it says' (Interview with the class teacher, 2016, 375).

What was surprising for the staff was that he advanced in mathematics, so his learning difficulties were attributed to language and explained as a 'language issue'. Wherever he has to use language, he was 'behind' other students. Importantly, when I started to observe Sasha, he was quite communicative, speaking easily in English and was eager to write, read, or listen in lessons. Sasha himself said that mathematics was his favourite lesson:

L: What do you like the most in lessons? Why?

S: Maths (rising tone). There are many numbers. I like many a lot [sic] (Interview with Sasha, para 4, my translation).

Clearly, language comprehension is a cross-curricula skill, required to advance in other subjects in a primary school. But in the case of Mathematics, where the numbers predominate over the contents, Sasha expresses a special likeness for numbers because he understands them, and he rapidly advances in Mathematics. Sasha's language issues remind me of a 'transitional' bilingualism (Conteh, 2012; Conteh and Brock, 2006) presupposes the L2 substitutes the L1. However, in Sasha's case, his L2 is not entirely developed (Interviews with Sasha, observations, interviews with the teachers, 2016), which may also be called a 'deficient' or mid-point transitional bilingualism.

### **4.5 Bullying: Social Exclusion, Direct and Indirect Verbal Threats, Direct Physical Abuse**

I noticed social exclusion instances only on the fourth day of observations. Further investigations showed that Sasha had been going through bullying experiences and had been socially excluded by some pupils in the class for a few years, which has resulted in learning and supposedly language difficulties and, consequently, low achievement. His mother describes his breakdown two years ago as follows:

«...Во втором третьем классе был у нас его лучший друг, который его защищал который ему помогал но он агличанин (...) он ушел в другую школу...Для него год, year 3, он очень тяжело прошел, он психовал, он орал "Я хочу уйти в другую школу". (...) Год у нас было такое, что он плакал, бывало, в школу не вставал.... вот это был период, когда он его друг ушел, который его защищал, ему помогал, который ему помогал с ресепшена».

'... In year two... three we had his best friend..., who protected him and was helping him, but he was.. English (...), he went to another school... For him the year,.. year 3, was very difficult, he was panicking, became hysterical, screaming "I want to change the school!" The whole year we had had this, that he cried,



sometimes it happened, he didn't want to get up to go to school... That was a period when his best friend left to another school, who protected him, helped him, who helped him from the reception' (Interview with the mother, 2016, para 3, my translation).. (...).

In addition, Sasha is often left without a partner in pair work. Sasha determines bullying cases either, explicit and violent (pushing), or implicit and non-violent (warnings) (Sasha, 3, 2016, para 7, my translation):

S: I remember we went and Nick went and I wanted to go to the bathroom. And then we went to the bathroom. And then Nick'he [sic] came and did bad. I can't say it. It is very disgusting. Won't be able to.

L: In the bathroom?

S: I won't be able to say it.

L: Does he bully you sometimes now?

S: no.

The teacher comments on the bullying cases as following: 'Sasha will be the target in the secondary school too, because boys always pick on children when they don't have something' (EAL TA, 2016).

## **5 DISCUSSION**

In the case of Sasha the issues have been identified at all levels of investigation (individual, family, interaction and school). It is clear, that Sasha is in a confusing linguistic situation, simultaneously trying to balance learning and avoiding being bullied after going through a bullying trauma. The language and cognitive fluency of Sasha in the state of psychological comfort or excitement denote that it is not a natural predisposition of his language/linguistic abilities and the probable explanation lies in the environment-personality-language relations. Thus sociocultural circumstances act as symbolic tools, i.e. language, shaping later emotional development and well-being. These caused Sasha's submissive behaviour with the signs of distress not being able to develop a constructive, determined personality or progress in school by trying to overcome linguistic confusion. The feeling of 'being lost' or confused as related to language comprehension in Sasha's case I would interpret as the lack of belongingness which is seen from the observations and the interviews: Sasha does not have close friends, he is often left without a partner to work with in lessons. Sasha does not seem to feel that having the L1 is right in its essence, or that it is acceptable. This is supported by his view of a dream of having more languages 'as a norm' in school. Not being able to speak English at home, i.e. be a bilingual *at all times*, up until the birth of his younger brother, Sasha experienced an inner linguistic and personal incongruity or contradiction between home and school languages. His initial response to this was a rebellious one – he refused to learn Russian. By being extremely persistent in his, as it were, linguistic rebellion he made his mother give up on teaching him the L1 resulting in him being illiterate in it. Upon his 'victory' Sasha has established a purposeful view on languages: he only needs L1 to speak to his parents since he was not able to use it elsewhere. The language issues (undeveloped L1 and L2, i.e. lack of understanding of L2, L1 illiteracy, i.e. not being able to read or write in it) have caused further underachievement, teacher's expectations, and social interaction issues. The most detrimental of the latter is bullying. Surreptitious bullying, which is difficult for the teachers to assess and intervene into, and an unstable home environment have deteriorated developmental issues. Sasha's response was that of avoidance and increased sensitivity: signs of recurring anxiety, stress, and emotional instability at the same time as avoiding dealing with the apparent difficulties in learning and socialisation. The apparent contradiction in the aims of the participant's education and upbringing on the part of school and family, i.e. the school aims to develop the L2, and the pupil's family aim to develop the L1, are seen as being caused by the lack of strong communication bonds between the school and parents. Working with the parents as regards the immigrant child's concerns as much as with the child in school (if not more) is seen as a necessity for the primary school level immigrant children struggling with the languages and subsequently the learning progress.

## **6 CONCLUSION**

The presented case of Sasha is a pilot case study that makes a few significant conclusions. Firstly, the language issues appear as the most significant in shaping Sasha's school life, well-being, and progress. L2 issues are viewed by the teachers and parents as causing these problems, and not the fact that Sasha is 'torn' between the two languages as a problem itself, which reflects a dominant monolingual ideology in England. So to speak, the English Language is seen as an end-point and the only right instrument for learning that all of the children should use. The result of this is Sasha's inability to develop both languages and experience achievement and social interaction issues, such as a lack of friends and bullying. Secondly,

the unusual sociocultural environment of Sasha is seen as the cause of the dramatic and destructive shifts in his personality (e.g. avoidance, increased sensitivity, giving-up attitude, submissiveness, lack of belongingness) and low academic performance. Teacher's expectations have further deteriorated the issues. Following on from these, thirdly, the close interaction between the parents of immigrant children and teachers is a fundamental part of the well-being and progress of immigrant children. Overall, the case of Sasha is a case of a Russian-speaking immigrant primary school boy who struggles to achieve, but is lost in his struggles, as if entangled in languages (in linguistic development) and unable to get out. Sasha is an example of the fact that behind low L2 progress difficulties the underlying fundamental issues are concealed even though possibly latent, and have to be encountered by the little boy in order to be a socially, academically accepted and acknowledged equal rather than an isolated L2 learner. All of these turn me to the main underlying theme of these findings is that by giving value (low expectations, giving up attitude towards the child's progress) to this immigrant child meant de-valuing his further effort and progress.

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