Language Hierarchisations and Dehierarchisations: Nordic Parents’ Views Towards Language Awareness Activities

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ABSTRACT

This article describes how Nordic societies have become more diverse with regard to languages presented at school. However, strong language hierarchies can be identified, which position majority, migrant and minority languages in the schools differently. This article will present some findings from the DELA-NOBA project which focus on parents’ perspective on plurilingualism and language awareness. In the project, a set of teaching activities focusing on language awareness and diversity were developed in schools in the participating countries in order to contribute to language dehierarchisations. The theoretical framing for this study is based on a conceptualisation of language hierarchisation and dehierarchisation, and the data used are from parents’ pre- and post-questionnaires in Denmark, Iceland and Finland. An important aim of this study was to investigate parents’ choices and representations concerning plurilingualism and plurilingual education. The results indicate that plurilingualism is strongly appreciated by the parents, but the recognition of language hierarchies needs more attention.

KEYWORDS

Attitudes, Language Awareness, Language Dehierarchisation, Language Hierarchies, Model of Language Hierarchies, Nordic Societies, Parents’ Views, Plurilingualism, Representations

INTRODUCTION

As Nordic societies becomes more multilingual, we need greater understanding on attitudes and choices in respect to language diversity in schools. Earlier research shows that plurilingualism helps to develop the cognitive learning skills of children (Chen, Geva, & Schwartz, 2012; Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Cummins, 2012). Similarly, support from the family, community and school is necessary to provide the optimal environment in which literacy acquisition takes place (O’Brien et al., 2014). Language learning is also reported to be an interchange between micro-implementation and macro-policies (Baldauf, 2006). However, the languages present in societies and schools have different positions, either being minority or majority languages or indicating the migrant status of a student. The study
reported on here will look into how languages are hierarchised and can be dehierarchised in Nordic schools, particularly concerning languages that are normally not taught at school.

This paper aims to contribute to the discussion on language diversity, language choices and representations of language learning from the perspective of parents in three Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland and Iceland. Furthermore, the students’ perspective, as reported by the parents, is integrated into the discussion. The parents’ perspective in plurilingual education has in recent years been of growing interest (see for instance the project Involving parents in plurilingual and intercultural education financed by the European Centre for Modern Languages, Council of Europe). However, there are still only a few empirical studies which examine parents’ views on plurilingual education and plurilingualism (see in the Canadian context e.g. Dagenais & Moore, 2008).

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in a critical literature review on immigration studies from the language teaching perspective, discussing terms such as intercultural education, plurilingualism and language hierarchisations and dehierarchisations, with a focus on the power structures between “majority” and “migrant-minority languages”. In the Danish context, within the last fifteen years there has been a theoretical focus on the concept of language hierarchies. Furthermore, there have been empirical investigations of language hierarchisations in the official Danish educational discourse. In this article, these insights from the Danish context will be presented, applied to and challenged by parental data that have been collected in three Nordic countries.

Empirically, the paper will draw on the three-year project called Developing the Language Awareness/Eveil aux langues Approach in the Nordic and Baltic countries (DELA-NOBA, see Daryai-Hansen, Layne & Tonello, 2018) funded by Nordplus Horizontal from August 2013 to July 2016. The project aimed to further develop plurilingual education in the Nordic/Baltic countries and to gain knowledge on attitudes towards language diversity and language learning in these countries by focusing on “languages that the school does not intend to teach (which may or may not be the mother tongues of some pupils)” (Candelier, 2003). During the project, language awareness activities (hereafter referred to as LA activities) based on a pluralistic approach including a large variety of languages, among them minority and migrant languages, were implemented at project schools in Nordic and Baltic countries (for a more elaborated definition of the LA approach see e.g. Candelier, 2003; Candelier et al., 2007; Daryai-Hansen, Layne, Tonello, 2018). Data were collected from the participating teachers, students and parents in the project. In this paper, language choices and interest towards languages from the parents’ perspective and from the pupils’ perspective (as reported by the parents) will guide the analysis. The data was collected with questionnaires completed by parents of the children who took part in the project. The parents were given a pre-questionnaire at the beginning of the project which was followed by the implementation of the LA activities. Finally, towards the end of the project, the parents answered a post-questionnaire.

The article will begin with the theoretical framing of the study. Following a short critical review of interculturality and plurilingualism in education, an in-depth empirical-based theoretical framing of the concept of language hierarchisations and dehierarchisations will be presented taking the Danish context as the point of departure. This will be followed with an introduction of the research context and methodological perspectives and a presentation of the three project schools where the data were collected. Based on a conceptualisation of language hierarchisations and dehierarchisations, the research questions that the study aims to investigate are: 1) Which languages do the parents and children know, use and learn? 2) Which discussions take place at home about language and cultural diversities? 3) Which are the language learning preferences from the families’ perspectives at schools? Furthermore, based on the findings from the post-questionnaire, the study also investigates the impact of the DELA-NOBA project and language awareness activities from the perspective of parents.

According to Beacco et al. (2010), the development and implementation of curricula for plurilingual and intercultural education should be conceptualized on “various levels of the education system: international (supra), national/regional (macro), school (meso), class, teaching group or teacher (micro) or even individual (nano). These levels interact, and curriculum planning must allow for all
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