Chapter 1
Towards a Multilingual Preschool Policy:
A Linguistic Ethnographic Analysis of the Implementation of a Transformative Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

The effects of immersive strategies and the benefits of a multilingual language policy have been extensively explored in the literature; however, it is valuable to look at the actual application of a multilingual policy. Putting linguistic-educational research into practice by implementing a transformative pedagogical approach is characterized by a process of trial and error, which has remained understudied. This chapter aims to fill this gap by adopting a case study approach that focuses on the implementation of a multilingual/cultural policy at a preschool in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. More than half of the children attending the preschool come from a multilingual background. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, consisting of observations, participations, interviews, and focus group discussions with different stakeholders, this chapter analyzes the mechanisms behind the preschool’s switch from negatively undergoing multilingualism to positively engaging with it.

INTRODUCTION

Multiculturalism and pluralistic linguistic societal development are inevitable in the modern day, globalised world and have the potential to enrich everyday life. Furthermore, multilingualism is a reality at Flemish preschools. Statistics show that more than 17% of children in Flemish preschool education do not have Dutch as their home language (Lokale Inburgerings-en Integratiemonitor, 2016, 2018). Multilingualism is mostly concentrated in urban areas and some schools have a population that is even more linguistically diverse. In the case of the preschool at the heart of this chapter, almost half of the children...
attending do not have Dutch as their main home language. Extract 1 below, taken from an interview conducted with the preschool’s care coordinator illustrates that the demographic change required the preschool to adapt and accommodate. In the extract the care coordinator reflects on how this change did not come naturally but required a mental switch, a clear and deliberate turn in thinking. It is precisely this mental turn and the subsequent process of working towards a new and transformative educational policy that is under investigation in this chapter.

Care Coordinator: It has not always been like that. There have been years that we went down a negative spiral, you know how it goes. Parents, I had been hearing critique from parents, ‘Yeah, all those migrants’ and we were like ‘Yeah, all those migrants’ (makes a sad face). But then at one point, we had to turn a corner and we had to tell ourselves ‘Okay, this is not going to change; we have to rethink because of this. If we, continue like this for the rest of our lives, we will become embittered and sad’. And yes, then, I think—we have decided at exactly the right time; we are going to look for policy support and we are going to choose a care coordinator to start up projects. (Extract 1)

In Extract 1, the care coordinator describes how the increase in multilingual children, from 20% in 2009 to 47% in 2017, initially produced a negative reaction from the preschool staff. The teachers did not know how to respond to the change in demography and the educational challenges sparked by these developments. The monolingual Dutch speaking parents also complained. They expressed concerns about the institute becoming a so-called migrant school. However, the preschool decided to rethink the situation. Although the school could not influence the current Flemish demographics, the teachers decided that they could change how they dealt with the rise in diversity and multilingualism. Consequently, they appointed a care coordinator and started looking for policy support to set up some projects in order to start positively dealing with multilingualism instead of responding negatively to the increase in the number of migrants (Jacobs, 2019).

Academic literature has extensively exposed the negative effects of immersive strategies as well as the benefits of transformative pedagogies that encourage multilingualism and celebrate diversity (Ramaut, Sierens, Bultynck, Van Avermaet, Van Gorp, Slembrouck & Verhelst, 2013; Van Avermaet, Agirdag, Slembrouck, Struys, Van de Craen, Van Houtte & Van Hulle, 2016). As a result, some schools, like the one under discussion, were inspired by the research and have attempted to adjust their policies. However, that the act of putting linguistic-educational research into practice by installing a transformative pedagogy is a complex endeavour, characterised by a process of trial and error. Yet, little research has been done on the practical aspect of the implementation of educational policy, that is, the way in which schools have to “navigate through the complexes of attitudes and ideologies that provide the backdrop against which they [multilingual policies] are implemented” (Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech 2015, p. 5). This chapter does not intend to offer a blueprint on transformative pedagogies, but it seeks to support, motivate and guide teachers in responding positively to multilingualism at the (pre)school level. This chapter seeks to do the following:

(1) Analyse the implementation of a policy that welcomes linguistic diversity
(2) Examine the attitudes and ideologies of stakeholders to the implementation of the new policy from a Bourdieuan perspective
(3) Explore the role of the care coordinator and teaching staff in the application of the transformative pedagogical approach in response to the shift to a multilingual educational policy.
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