

Cultural and Linguistic Rights of Immigrant Pupils in Catalonia Schools: The Role of School Principals

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During the last decade, Catalan society has undergone a significant transformation, with structural changes generated by international migrations. In this paper we discuss multicultural societies, linguistic rights, and social cohesion. In order to construct a society that is cohesive and open, based on democratic values, a model of schooling and education is needed that is inclusive, based on “convivencia” (sharing and living together in harmony). Linguistic rights recognize the freedom of all people to use their mother tongue in all social spaces. This implies not only the ability to carry out all aspects of their lives and in their native language, but also that their language will be respected by others. The study that we present takes place in four primary schools in Santa Coloma and Lleida (Catalonia). The aim of the research is to describe, analyze, and interpret the teaching and learning practices related to the cultural and linguistic rights of immigrant students and to focus on the role of the school principal in creating environments in which these practices take place.

Keywords: Children’s rights, linguistic rights, immigrants, primary school; school principals; good practices.

Durante la última década, la sociedad catalana ha sufrido una transformación significativa con los cambios estructurales generados por las migraciones internacionales. Con el fin de construir una sociedad que sea coherente y abierta, basada en valores democráticos, se necesita un modelo inclusivo de enseñanza y educación basado en la convivencia (compartir y vivir juntos en armonía). Los derechos lingüísticos reconocen la libertad de todas las personas de utilizar su lengua materna en todos los espacios sociales. Implica no sólo la capacidad de llevar a cabo todos los aspectos de sus vidas y en su lengua materna, sino también que su lengua sea respetada por los demás. El estudio que presentamos se llevó a cabo en cuatro escuelas primarias en Santa Coloma y Lleida (Cataluña, España). El objetivo de la investigación es describir, analizar e interpretar la enseñanza y las prácticas de aprendizaje relacionadas con los derechos culturales y lingüísticos de los estudiantes inmigrantes y el papel del director de la escuela a la hora de facilitar tales prácticas.

Palabras clave: Derechos de los niños, derechos lingüísticos, inmigrantes, escuela primaria, directores escolares, buenas prácticas.

Introduction

The establishment of majority-minority language hierarchies is not primarily a linguistic process; rather, a “historically, socially, and politically constructed process” that is imbued with wider, and unequal, power relations (May, 2006, p. 259). A distinction is made between national minority groups and indigenous groups historically associated with a particular territory, such as the historical languages of the autonomous regions of Spain (e.g. Catalan, Galician, Basque) and ethnic minority groups who are typically immigrants (May, 2006). At the European level, regional languages have historically received greater protection and promotion than have immigrant languages, despite the growing numbers of speakers of immigrant languages (Extra & Gorter, 2001).

From a strictly academic perspective, research in a wide variety of international contexts documents the advantages of instruction in the native language (L1) of language minority students (Skutnabb-Kangas, Phillipson, Mohanty, & Panda, 2009). The principle of linguistic interdependence posits that cognitive/academic skills and concepts learned in the first language are available to be accessed in the second language with instruction in that language (Cummins, 1986; 2001; 2009). Thus, the concept of transfer of prior knowledge, concepts, and skills from the students’ stronger language to his/her second language serves as a foundation of programs of bilingual instruction. Linguistic interdependence can involve transfer from L1 to L2 of conceptual elements, metacognitive strategies, specific linguistic elements, and phonological awareness (August & Shanahan, 2006).

In countries such as the United States, with large populations of speakers of varied immigrant languages and little recognition of regional languages, the outcome of greatest interest to the state is the ability of minority language students to speak and compete academically in the national language (their L2). The benefits of bilingual instruction over monolingual instruction in the national language have been repeatedly documented for this purpose (Vila, 1995; Francis, Lesaux, & August, 2006; Genesee et al., 2006; Rolstad, Mahoney, & Glass, 2005; Slavin & Cheung, 2005).

“Strong” bilingual programs, or those in which the native language is used for instruction over an extended period of time, have been shown to have superior academic outcomes in comparison with “weak” programs, in which the L1 is used on a short-term basis only as a transition into L2 instruction (Baker, 2006; Benson, 2009). In addition to fostering academic outcomes, institutional support for L1 language and culture is also necessary for students’ self-confidence and positive identity formation, to combat marginalization, and to foster intercultural understanding (Cummins, 2001).

With respect to regional languages, however, the arguments in favor of bilingual education rest less on the cognitive and academic advantages of home language

instruction and more on the rights that linguistic communities should be accorded. Proponents of linguistic human rights argue that minority languages and speakers should be accorded at least some of the protections and institutional support that majority languages and speakers enjoy. In Catalonia, the Catalan Statute of Autonomy of 2006 affirms the co-official status of Catalan in the region along with the national language (Spanish). Policies in Catalonia protect and foster the use and maintenance of its own language in school as well as in diverse public and private spheres in the community and workplace (Roller, 2002).

The protection and promotion of the historical regional languages of Spain has caused Spain to be cited as an example of “a positive approach to creating respect and appreciation for the many languages that coexists within a country’s borders” (Miguélez, 2001, p. 348). However, others have questioned the extent to which respect for and the fostering of the linguistic and cultural experiences of children of a variety of language backgrounds is part of their educational experiences in Catalan schools, posing the questions of what schooling will look like for an ever more multicultural Spain and who will define its curricular content (Teasley, 2004).

Proponents of multilingual education, or the use of more than one language for instruction, argue that increasing globalization and migration result in settings across the world in which “linguistic diversity is no longer seen as an irregularity in a normally monolingual pattern” but rather is viewed as normality (Busch, 2011, p. 544). In Catalonia, active promotion of their own language has resulted in high levels of bilingualism and of support for the equal use of both languages, Catalan and Spanish. However, the principles of linguistic interdependence and transfer that support bilingual instruction in two-language settings, for the national and regional languages, are equally true for students in classrooms and schools in which multiple languages are present.

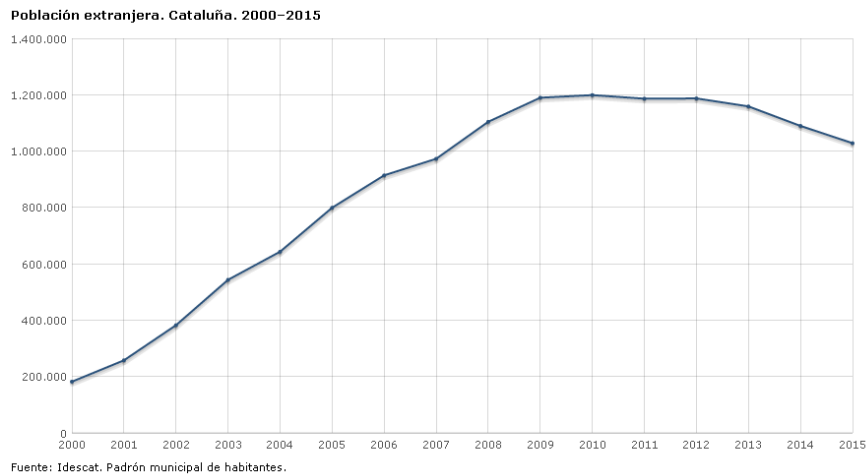
An institutional use and recognition of students’ L1 is equally important to foster self-confidence and combat marginalization of immigrant language speakers. As May (2008) notes, “The promotion of Catalan, while not necessarily problematic in itself, does not as yet extend to the active recognition of other minority languages and cultures within Catalonia” (p. 250). Multilingual education advocates recognize the difficulties in bridging theory and practice in ever more complex linguistic and cultural contexts, asking us to consider how to take the principles of bilingual education and move to the practicalities of multilingual education (Mohanty, 2009).

Catalan Society: Diverse and Bilingual

As suggested above, in recent years, Catalonia has become one of the destinations of immigration from countries in southern Europe. In addition, the region has historically been a magnet for emigration from other parts of Spain and other countries. All of this results in a population that is an amalgamation of different cultures, with what can be characterized as a small autochthonous (or indigenous) minority.

If we focus on the immigrant population using IDESCAT data, we can see that there was a peak in the arrival of emigrants in 2010, with 1,193,283 people or 15.9% of the total population.

Table 1. Migrant population in Catalonia. IDESCAT



However, this pattern has reversed itself in the last six years, with the number of residents in Catalonia in 2015 dropping to 1,028,069. This figure represents 14.5% of the total population of Catalonia, a percentage well above the 10.7% of foreign residents in the Spanish population overall.

The foreign population of Catalonia consists of diverse elements. The Moroccan community is the most numerous, making up 20.84% of the total population of foreign residents. The Romanian community follows with 9.11%, Chinese with 5.01%, Italians with 4.74% (including those with double nationality), and Pakistanis with 4.26%. By continent, 33.37% of the population is of European origin, 28.29% is of African origin (primarily from the north of Africa), 24.64% is from the Americas (primarily South America), and 13.63% is of Asian origin. It is necessary to add to these totals the Roma population. An estimated 100,000 must be added, according to data from Roma organizations.

The cultural diversity of the population qualitatively affects *convivencia*, with contact among groups separated by certain cultural distance and with different life styles, languages, and beliefs. The result is a social distancing as a result of the waves of migration from poor and marginal areas, who are socioeconomically disadvantaged and who find themselves within the receiving society at marginal levels as well.

In the face of this diversity, the challenge is the satisfactory integration of these populations into a society that is already bilingual and bicultural, since there has been the explicit intention in Catalonia to politically foster bilingualism. In the school

arena, interculturalism presents certain challenges. In terms of language, the model designed in 1983 has pushed for an authentic linguistic immersion in educational sites, and has placed the non-Catalan speaking student in an educational setting in which the language of communication for the first years of schooling is Catalan.

Over the last few years, the discourse surrounding interculturalism cannot be ignored in classroom settings. This has resulted in the concentration of segregated foreign populations in specific areas and school sites, primarily public schools, that has provoked an increased social pressure. The political will has been made manifest in the National Pact for Education and in the same law in Catalan education (LEC, 2009) with respect to the distribution within the educational system of foreign origin children and youth.

Given this complex and culturally diverse reality, it is necessary to refocus the discourse surrounding intercultural education at the school sites. All schools without exception accept the responsibility of educating students to live in harmony in a diverse society, with the goal of forming future citizens for a multicultural society, such as Catalonia. This broad intercultural goal is supported in spite of the fact that the goal of cultural homogeneity may be more prevalent in their classrooms (del Arco, 2000).

Language, School, and Social Cohesion in Catalonia

The language model for Catalan schools, ratified by the Estatuto de Autonomía de 2006 and the Ley de Educación de Cataluña (2009), establishes Catalan as the language of instruction and the key element for equity and social cohesion. The system of linguistic immersion in Catalán, that has been extended and perfected over the course of the last three decades, has sought to guarantee general knowledge of the language, social cohesion, and equality of opportunities, while at the same time avoiding segregation of students.

Results have been reported by different international organizations. For example, the High Level Group on Multilingualism of the European Union considers Catalonia and its educational model to be an example of multilingualism in practice and as a model that is exportable to the rest of Europe in areas with linguistic situations similar to that of Catalonia.

Knowledge of various languages represents cultural wealth as well as an advantage for *convivencia*. In today's world, plurilingualism can also be considered a necessity. The ability to speak several languages, to different degrees, contributes to the ability to interact in global settings or in culturally and linguistically complex contexts. Plurilingualism stands out as one of the international indicators of employability, in which linguistic ability facilitates success in the labor market. It also fosters the expansion and internationalization of economies globally; a multilingual society is the most efficient in international relations.

Linguistic Plans at Local Sites

With the competitive focus and integrated nature of languages and academic content, which constitute the common framework of the educational system, each site needs to address the distinctive realities of the environment surrounding the school as well as the linguistic background of each student. With this in mind, each school site can define a curricular, methodological, and organizational plan to work with the different languages that responds to the needs of their students and ensures the best outcomes for them. This plan, which structures all of the actions related to languages in each educational site, is formalized and systematized in the language project.

The challenges facing our educational system today with the incorporation of a wide spectrum of students belonging to immigrant families are significant and require innovative planning. This is particularly true in light of findings from numerous studies that demonstrate that linguistic proficiency involved in the processes of teaching and learning is a decisive element in school success or failure. The Plan for Language and Social Cohesion (LIC) of the Department of Education of Catalonia was developed with the goal of modifying the educational system in order to meet the needs of a growing and increasingly complex plurality that now characterizes Catalan society. The objective is to strengthen and consolidate social cohesion, intercultural education, and Catalan language within a plurilingual framework.

This 2004 Plan forms part of the Plan Interdepartamental de Inmigración, with a more global vision than that of the Plan de Actuación para el Alumnado de Nacionalidad Extranjera 2003/2006 (PAANE) elaborated by the administration. The 2004 plan dealt primarily with aspects related to language learning and did not pay sufficient attention to aspects related to acceptance such as emotional, interpersonal, and relational factors, and to social cohesion that directly affect students. The new Plan is, therefore, directed at the total student population of the country, regardless of condition, situation, or origin, in order to strengthen the foundations of a democratic culture based on justice, dialogue; coexistence, management and leadership have an important role (Antúnez, 2000).

Methods

This study is part of a larger project investigating teaching and learning practices related to the cultural and linguistic rights of immigrant students in four schools located in Santa Coloma and Lleida. These locations have historically experienced migration, first from other regions in the Spanish state and subsequently abroad.

Our qualitative study addresses this complex issue, focusing on the following research questions:

1. What do educators perceive as their primary responsibilities in the teaching of immigrant students in Catalan immersion programs?

2. What instructional and organizational practices do they use to respond to the needs of immigrant students?

In this study we focus on the role of the director of the school in fostering a school climate favorable for the recognition of cultural and linguistic rights of immigrant students and for promotion of interculturality amongst all students. The answers to these questions are expected to yield a framework for the schools.

Sample

We intentionally selected schools for participation because they all received the official designation of educational centers with maximum complexity. According to school officials, these schools are characterized by high percentages of parents with low levels of education and in low-skilled jobs or unemployed, as well as by high percentages of foreign-born students. Additionally, the four schools each reported 15-20 different languages. All schools were located in low-income urban neighborhoods with high levels of diversity. We asked the Superintendent for permission to access schools. Participation in the research was voluntary.

This study was carried out with four school principals. Three researchers visited the schools to interview the principal over a 40-minute period. The interviews were transcribed and sent to the directors for them to verify the content.

Instrument

The interview protocol included seven sections. First, the directors were asked to describe how they were named as director of the school, including the time just before they were appointed and in what capacity they worked at that time. Subsequent sections explored their motives for becoming director, their expectations, and challenges, as well as the context of the school organization, its history, demographics, and the concerns of students, parents, and teachers. Within this context, directors were asked to describe their most salient actions in school in relation to linguistic rights.

Analysis

Data from the principals' interviews were analyzed with the help of ATLAS-ti software for qualitative data analysis (Burgess, 1995; Weitzman & Miles, 1995). The researchers read the transcripts and separated the responses into meaningful units using the constant comparative method of Glasser and Strauss (1967). Themes were identified inductively.

Findings

Preliminary results from the study with respect to cultural and linguistic rights indicate that immigrant students require an appropriate school environment. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to create favorable conditions through a set of actions related to organization and administration of the school.

In their responses to the first research question, principals were in agreement that it is essential to ensure in the school a healthy and safe environment characterized by respect, peace, and an accepting social climate. It is difficult to make academic advances if a favorable environment is not created in which students, teachers, and families feel comfortable and content. As one principal said, “It is necessary to train teachers in how to deal with emotions because [the students] live in situations that are difficult and dramatic. So dealing with emotions permits a complete and positive attention [to students]. More than [content] knowledge, it would be necessary to prepare people for this new situation.”

Principals placed relatively little emphasis on meeting the linguistic needs of their immigrant students. They emphasized that students were picking up Catalan very quickly, often pointing out students who were relatively new arrivals and were already able to communicate in Catalan.

In response to the second research question, teachers carry out effective actions addressing children’s emotional needs and the affective climate of the school. If children are welcomed emotionally, they will feel secure and recognized. Teachers feel that this is particularly important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

An activity they promote in this regard is holding traditional celebrations (and their accompanying artistic and cultural manifestations) and special days, as well as sharing legends and stories from the home countries of the immigrant children. These are ideal occasions for fostering respect for linguistic and cultural rights. For example, “when we celebrate the Juegos Florales, some of the families participate. They can read poems in their native language, and then translate them.”

In addition, educators involve the immigrant families. This means opening the doors of the school so that parents can participate collaboratively with teachers in order to foster reciprocal knowledge. On the one hand, teachers understand and learn about the cultures and personal and family situations of their students; on the other, parents learn about the work of the teachers. As one director explained,

What we do is every year mothers and fathers come and they explain a story in their language. We try to have these be traditional stories that the children already know, because if you already know the story it helps you understand. A man also comes who speaks Urdu, and he explains what he did in his country. Then he shares some words (in Urdu) and he translates them into Spanish. So we do this: one [parent reads] in Romanian, another in Arabic, in Chinese, in English, because we have children whose parents know some English (mixed with their own language).

Principals recognize that it is necessary to ensure that there is a strong commitment from the whole leadership team. The leadership team should be the one to promote, energize, and support the processes that address the rights described above. It is necessary, therefore, for the team to include this objective

among its priorities, and that the team is capable of exercising sustained and distributed leadership in both academic and social areas to attain it.

Another director said that the teaching and learning environment itself is essential for successful academic and social student outcomes, concluding that additional professional development is one of the keys in this challenging task:

With respect to preparation, we need to develop other types of professional competencies that we have not had before. One of these would be regarding emotional needs. If you are seeing complex situations on a daily basis, knowing how to deal with them can be difficult.

Conclusions

Our data indicate that schools are in route to improvement in the area of cultural and linguistic rights but are not able to make great advances on their own. They need the help of support services - social workers, cultural mediators, school supervisors, etc. - with whom they need to work in coordination. The resulting synergy is a key factor in success.

Schools vary along many dimensions and chief among them are the culture and make-up of the community. A linguistic rights perspective includes not only respect for and inclusion of the native languages of the immigrant students, but also respect for cultures and commitment to enhance the lives of people.

Linguistic rights are not only centered on the school site, but also related to global issues. Daring leadership that goes beyond preserving the status quo requires attention to macro issues beyond the school and community. It is necessary to continue working with this wider perspective. This includes finding out not only how community leaders feel about key issues but also how external services, such as psychological and instructional support staff and school inspectors can work together to address student needs.

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