How school teams perceive and handle multilingualism: The impact of a school's pupil composition

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H I G H L I G H T S

- School team's perceptions of schools depend on schools' linguistic pupil composition.
- Tolerating multilingualism is rather rare in Flemish primary schools.
- Mixed schools are more tolerant towards multilingualism than other schools.
- Positive and negative motivations lead to tolerance of multilingualism.
- Tolerance is influenced by the expected proportion of Dutch and teacher control.

A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Nowadays, pupils bring a variety of languages to school. This study focuses on how school teams perceive the linguistic composition of pupil populations and how this influences their teaching practices regarding multilingualism. The mixed-method design combines a multilevel regression analyses (of data from 1255 teachers in 67 schools) with focus group discussions amongst teachers and headmasters in ten schools. Our findings indicate that school teams distinguish between schools with different pupil populations. Differences in the linguistic composition of the pupil population results in different levels of tolerance towards multilingualism. Teachers' perceptions are fed by both negative and positive motivations.

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1. Introduction

Societies have become increasingly diverse due to migration and globalization. The rapid changes in demography and the huge growth in scale and complexity of diversity resulted in many societies that are characterized by super-diversity (Vertovec, 2007). As in other domains of society, this diversity is present in the educational domain, with schools accommodating pupils from various linguistic backgrounds. This has led teachers, educational researchers and policy makers around the globe to consciously reflect on the challenges and opportunities raised by the growing diversity in schools.

According to the European Commission (2008) the growth of linguistic diversity in schools should be approached in a positive manner, as a resource that should be tapped:

There are also untapped linguistic resources in our society: different mother tongues and other languages spoken at home and in local and neighbouring environments should be valued more highly. For instance, children with different mother tongues — whether from the EU or a third country — present schools with the challenge of teaching the language of instruction as a second language (…), but they can also motivate their classmates to learn different languages and open up to other cultures. (COM 2008/566, p. 4)

The presence of children with different mother tongues in

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schools is considered both a challenge for teaching and an opportunity for language learning and enhancing openness towards other cultures. Despite the European Commission's objective to value all languages, not only as a scaffold for linguistic and cultural learning, but also as a tool to "deepen and strengthen pedagogies, skills, and knowledge itself" (COM 2008/423, p. 3), international educational research shows that linguistic diversity is often negatively perceived by school staff members and considered to be an obstacle to learning and living together at school (e.g., Blackledge & Creese, 2010; Hélot, 2012).

Analyses of public and teacher discourse reveal that languages other than the language of instruction are believed by many to be impediments to educational success and integration into society (e.g., Dooly, 2005, Dooly, 2007; Gándara & Hopkins, 2010). This perception is particularly strong for languages that are spoken by low-status ethno-linguistic minorities. The pupils belonging to these groups often get submerged in the language of instruction in so-called "sink-or-swim" programs, which according to Skutnabb-Kangas (2009) remain the most common approach to educating indigenous and minority children. Schools have difficulty adapting to the linguistic heterogeneity of their pupil populations, often holding on to a restrictive, monolingual policy that prevents multilingual pupils from using their full linguistic repertoire (Gogolin, 2002). According to Gogolin, a "monolingual habitus" governs the "language-directed perceptions, attitudes and activities of the teachers" (1997, p. 41). In this respect, Hélot (2012, p. 214) refers to "education systems built on the ideology of linguistic uniformity". This monolingual orientation stands in contrast to educational research advocating the use of home languages in the classroom as didactic capital to improve the educational success of children from diverse linguistic backgrounds (Cummins, 2001; García, 2009; Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008).

It is clear that the European Commission's objective to use linguistic diversity in a positive manner has not been achieved yet: Linguistic diversity is still perceived by many teachers around the globe as a challenge or even a problem. This is also the case for schools in Flanders, our study setting. Flemish educational research on language policies and practices towards multilingualism (e.g., Agirdag, 2010; Pulinx, Van Avermaet, & Agirdag, 2016) corroborate the findings from international studies in documenting many school teams' strong inclination to adhere to monolingual policies. Flanders, however, makes an interesting case because Flemish schools receive a lot of autonomy in developing their own policies and strategies to meet the attainment targets issued by the Ministry of Education (Van Petegem, 1998). Schools have to meet these targets, but they are free to decide on how to do so. Likewise, schools are free to design their own policy towards the pupils' linguistic diversity. Though most schools adhere to a monolingual policy, there are clear differences between schools, some of which tolerate and use languages other than the language of instruction to varying degrees (Pulinx et al., 2016; Ramaut et al., 2013). At present, it is still an open question if, and in what ways, these differences are related to differences in the schools' pupil composition. In Flanders, these differences range from schools with a vast majority of Dutch-speaking children ("Majority dominant schools") to linguistically diverse schools ("Mixed schools"), and schools accommodating almost exclusively children who share the same ethnic minority language ("Minority dominant schools").

This study examines the relationship between the linguistic composition of schools and the ways school teams deal with multilingualism. This study focusses on multilingualism brought to the schools by pupils whose linguistic repertoire include other languages than Dutch as a result of migration processes. Through relating the compositional school feature of the pupil population's linguistic composition to teacher outcomes, namely the way teachers deal with multilingualism, we address a gap in school effects research which — to the best of our knowledge — lacks "systematic, integrated research into the effects of structural and compositional school features on teachers' outcomes" (Van Houtte, 2011, p. 76). Since previous studies have shown that students' ethnic background influences teachers' perceptions and judgments of pupils, and hence the ways they interact with them (Gillborn, 1990; Murray & Murray, 2004; Pulinx et al., 2016; Stevens, 2005), we expect that there will be a clear link between the linguistic composition of a school's pupil population and the school teams' approach of multilingualism.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Perceptions of multilingualism

Multilingualism is a complex and multidimensional concept, which is often linked to historical, political, social and economic issues such as nationalism, heritage, identity, ideology and power relationships (Blackledge & Creese, 2010; Shohamy, 2006). Some forms of multilingualism are considered to be prestigious when including languages, varieties or abilities that carry commodity value because of their perceived economic, social and/or political relevance. These highly esteemed forms of multilingualism stand in contrast to the lower value that is often attributed to multilingualism originating from migration processes (Martín Rojo, 2010). In this respect, Blommaert (2011) distinguishes between the highly esteemed multilingualism brought about by *elite* migrants, i.e., international top and middle-range executives using English as a lingua franca, and the "bad" multilingualism in the linguistic repertoires of *labor* migrants.

Not only the sources of multilingualism and the value attributed to it can vary, but also the way multilingualism is defined. On the one hand, multilingualism can refer to multilingual repertoires that include two or more (pan-)national languages. In this view, languages are seen as fixed, bounded and countable entities. Multilingualism then concerns the coexistence of parallel linguistic systems, which are strictly separated in language practices. This view on multilingualism has been described as "separate bilingualism" (Blackledge & Creese, 2010), "double monolingualism" (Heller, 2006) or "bilingualism with diglossia" (Baker, 2003; Fishman, 1967). On the other hand, multilingualism can also be seen as the intermingling of languages and language features for the purpose of meaning-making. This view is based on observations of language practices in which language users move between linguistic resources and transgress the linguistic boundaries between languages. This definition of multilingualism emphasizes the dynamic nature of communication in which the borders between discrete languages turn out to be fluid. From this perspective, multilingualism is referred to as "flexible bilingualism" (Blackledge & Creese, 2010), "translanguaging" (García, 2009), "polylingualism" (Jorgensen, 2008) or "metrolingualism" (Otsuji & Pennycook, 2011).

The focus of this study is on multilingualism brought to the schools by pupils whose linguistic repertoire include other languages and language features than Dutch as a result of migration processes. More specifically, we look at the ways in which school team members perceive and deal with this kind of multilingualism, and aim to find out whether this is related to the linguistic composition of their pupil populations. Following da Silva (2005, p. 1), we define perceptions as "physical and intellectual abilities used in mental processes to recognize, interpret and understand events." In his literature review on teacher cognition, Borg (2006) points to the overwhelming array of often inseparable concepts that are linked to teacher cognition, including perceptions which influence and are influenced by other psychological constructs such as