

Conference Paper

Multilingualism in the Upbringing and Education of Children in Multinational Families. Case Study from Poland

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Abstract

In this article, through reference to the theories of multilingualism, we would like to outline issues pertaining to the bilingual upbringing of children in bicultural families and their education in Polish schools. Referring to research (interviews) with parents of bilingual children from Warsaw, we will point to strategies employed by parents who communicate with their children in two or three languages. We will also draw attention to difficulties connected with dominant and non-dominant languages (the case of grandparents). In the second section, we will discuss diverse school environments and language in schools where bilingual children function. We also explore the argumentation of both parents deciding to enrol their bilingual children in state schools with Polish as the language of instruction, and those opting for enrolment in private schools with English as the language of instruction or social schools. The research material was collected among parents of bicultural and bilingual children living in Poland, the Mazovian voivodship, including the capital city of Warsaw. The group presented consists of multinational families in which one parent (most frequently the father) comes from a country from the African continent.

Keywords: multilingualism, bilingualism, the upbringing process in multinational families, school education, communication

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1. Introduction

The benefits of being able to speak more than one language can be perceived as universal in today's world [1]. The command of several foreign languages provides young people with opportunities connected e.g. with better access to education in other languages and countries, access to information and knowledge in various languages and cultures, easier career start, the opportunity to make international acquaintances and friendships, easier communication and travelling.

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Multilingualism, i.e. the command of several languages, enables children to communicate with family members belonging to various nationalities and cultures [2]. It is especially important since the number of mixed and migrating marriages and families is on the rise. This situation results from a relatively low number of formal barriers that might inhibit engagement in formal relationships between representatives of various religious, ethnic and social groups (e.g. the possibility of entering into a civil marriage, as opposed to the situation still present in many countries of the world where only religious weddings are allowed). Since an early age, children raised in such families function on the point of contact of cultures, using several languages and negotiate several cultural codes at the same time. There can be differences both between the family home and the outside environment (in the case of migrant families whose original culture differs from the culture of the host country), and between parents (as can be the case with marriages mixed in terms of culture, religion or language).

Speaking, reading and writing in several languages allows one to understand literary texts, the press or information on the Internet in these languages. Thanks to that, a multilingual person is able to evaluate a particular situation in a multifaceted way, through access to information from various sources, while speaking foreign languages is an increasingly more desirable skill. Hence, multilingualism brings a number of benefits, while allowing one to find one's way more quickly in new cultural codes, which is an advantage in various life situations. Thanks to multilingualism, the language does not constitute a barrier in acquiring education, developing professional career or implementing projects going beyond the borders of one's country. Research [3] shows that linguistic competences give Poles greater comfort and a sense of safety when travelling abroad (also as tourists), they are also connected with a sense of social prestige and respect (particularly from people without such well-developed competences in the area of using foreign languages). Additionally, they are perceived as a sign of intelligence and diligence.

In the literature on the subject, a number of terms are used to refer to the phenomenon of using more than one language, defining it with various levels of detail and treated either conjointly or separately by various scholars. Among the terms used are bilingualism, multilingualism, polylingualism and plurilingualism. A question that is also discussed is what level of fluency in a particular language ought to be considered as a command of language allowing it to be analysed in terms of multilingualism. Some scholars define a command of language as fluency in this language comparable to the level of native speakers [4], while for others, basic competence in communication is sufficient [5].

With regard to the multiplicity of approaches to the subject of multilingualism, attempts are made to categorise the phenomenon according to various aspects. The following are distinguished [3]: the criterion of quantity (referring to the number of languages used by a particular person, e.g. trilingualism, quadrilingualism, multilingualism), the criterion of scope (it defines whether the phenomenon refers to an individual or a group, to what degree it is a result of one's own initiative or necessity, whether linguistic competences are built as a result of a conscious choice or acquired by chance), the criterion of quality (in other words, functional multilingualism), the criterion of development and cognitive organisation, the criterion of the level of linguistic competence, the criterion of the age of linguistic activation (distinguishes between the ages at which an individual started learning the next language), the criterion of the way the language was activated and the type of socialisation to the language, as well as the criterion of emotional attitude to languages (which considers the distinction between the mother tongue and a foreign language).

For the purpose of this article, a definition of multilingualism by the European Commission was adopted, which explains it as an individuals' or groups' ability to use more than one language in daily situations and interactions.

Based on the literature on the subject and with reference to the qualitative study conducted, the text outlines the situations of the upbringing and education of children in bicultural families in which children and adults communicate in various languages.

Referring to interviews with the parents of bilingual children from Warsaw, we point to strategies chosen by parents communicating with their children in two or three languages. We also draw attention to challenges connected with dominant and non-dominant languages (the case of grandparents' language, the language of the environment, the language of the school). In the second part of the article, we discuss various school environments in which bilingual children from multinational families in the Mazovian voivodship (Poland) function. We also address the strategies of bicultural and binational parents living in Warsaw. We point to the argumentation of parents deciding to send their bilingual children to state schools with Polish as the language of instruction, and the motivation of those parents who opt for private international schools with English as the language of instruction, or social schools.

2. Methods and Equipment

2.1. Methods

The study was conducted between 2015 and 2017. The research material presented here was collected among parents of bicultural and bilingual children living in Poland, the Mazovian voivodship, including the capital city of Warsaw. The group presented consists of multinational families in which one parent (most frequently the father) comes from a country from the African continent: the Republic of Central Africa, Eritrea, Somalia, Kenya, South Sudan, Tanzania, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Senegal.

The results are part of a more extensive study *A culturally different child* (The project was implemented in a research team: E. Januszewska, U. Markowska-Manista), which also comprised interviews with teachers working with children in culturally diverse groups, cultural assistants as well as NGO staff cooperating with the schools in which children with a migrant context learn [6]. This broad approach also encompassed the conditioning, problems and dilemmas connected with the presence of "culturally different" students in the environment of Polish schools and environments related to the school. The results of the study allowed us to identify the factors of intercultural opening or closing of the school and institutions cooperating with it. They also enabled us to conclude when and why intercultural orientation has a chance to exist [7].

A qualitative model was adopted in the research. We applied the snowball method, ensuring maximum diversity within the research sample by inviting parents with various national and cultural background. The sample of this part of the research consisted of 24 adult respondents and 17 children. In-depth interviews were conducted with all adult respondents. They were supplemented with meetings with their children, applying overt participant observation. The meetings took place in family homes, the playground, in the park and in the offices of non-governmental organisations in which the parents are active. They aimed at observing what language/languages the children use in daily communication with their parents as well as siblings and peers. The interviews and the communication during observation were conducted in Polish, English and French.

2.2. Ethics

The study was conducted with respect for the respondents' right to information and privacy. The research participants were informed about the purpose of processing the collected data and about their rights as co-participants of the research process. They were also assured that the data would be used solely for academic purposes.

The participation of adults and children (always together with adults) in the research was voluntary. The participants could resign from participation at every stage of the study. They could also refuse to answer questions they did not want to answer. The respondents were informed about the principles of research ethics, including aspects of non-discrimination and human rights [8]. Their identity was coded for the purpose of preparing the report. The interviews were attributed with codes. The families decided independently about the place of participant observation which was accompanied by an interview and took the wellbeing of their children into consideration (such that the children would not have to resign from the activities planned for the particular day). Personal data of the research participants will not be used in any report or academic paper.

The following information was collected from the respondents: sex: male/female, nationality, national language/s, fluency in foreign languages, education and profession, number of years spent in Poland (in case of parents with migrant background), parents' contact with the family of origin, contact between children and grandparents as well as more distant family of both parents.

For research purposes, we prepared instructions for interviews with respondent background data, i.e. we lined out the main thematic areas discussed with the respondents. When initiating interactions and conducting the interviews, we tried to arouse motivation in adult respondents (parents) to share their experience connected with the process of raising children in a multilingual family environment. With regard to the sensitive data we collected at every stage of the interview, we were guided by research ethics and the well-being of the respondents (the names and surnames were coded). This approach required respect for the decision of some respondents to refuse to answer selected questions, or to publish information about the country of origin, nationality etc.

In the case of participant observation, all parents and children had to express their consent to participate in this part of research. It was assumed that even a momentary entrance of the researcher into the everyday reality based on multilingual communication would allow us to see those spheres of educational and socializing influence which would not be visible in the interviews. Participant observation enables a more in-depth insight into the process by which children, their peers and parents communicate, and into communication in the environment surrounding the family home, a playground, a park, an NGO.

3. Results

The research results identify a variety of communication strategies between children and parents, the parents' attentiveness to their children's relations with grandparents and more distant family members from the country of origin of the with a migrant background. They also indicate that the children's language of school communication and instruction is important to the parents.

The study shows that the majority of the parents interviewed place great value on speaking their mother tongues when communicating with their children. The situation of each family was different in terms of the parents' opinion about the usefulness of particular languages for children's functioning in daily situations of the European reality as well as the perspective of further education and a professional career in the future.

4. Discussion

4.1. Communication with parents

In the case of the Eritrean mother, English was the basic language of communication with her husband and children, while she also incorporated some phrases in her native language - *Tigrinya*, into the sentences. She also told fairy tales, sang songs and lullabies to her children in *Tigrinya*. The father additionally used Polish in his communication with the children. After three years, the mother learned Polish and started to use two languages while speaking with her husband (Polish and English), and three languages when communicating with the children (Polish, English and *Tigrinya*). In Polish-Somali families with Polish mothers, Polish and English were dominant languages in daily communication. Additionally, the fathers tried to teach the basics of Somali language to their children so that they would be able to communicate with their grandparents. In the Polish-Sudanese family, communication at home took place in two languages, Polish and English. The father (Sudanese) also taught Arabic to his children. As he stressed in the interview: "We decided at the very beginning that I would speak English with my children and my wife would speak Polish. We communicate with each other using these two languages. The children are bilingual. But I also use Sudanese Arabic when speaking with them. My son speaks it too, my daughter doesn't." (Father, W_16).

In the case of fathers originating from countries that used to be French colonies (the Republic of Central Africa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Senegal), French was the main language, while Polish the second language of communication with the

children. Multilingual communication in a family with the father from the Central African Republic is an interesting example: "My daughters speak Polish at home. We live at my parents-in-law's. But I speak French. My wife doesn't speak French. We communicate in Italian. My in-laws we live with speak Polish when communicating with my and the children. I also sing lullabies to my girls and tell stories in Sango. Sango is my first language, the language of childhood." (Father, W_17).

When speaking with the children, all fathers also used basic phrases from the dialects in which they were brought up -- the language of communication with their parents. These statements and conversations at home were most frequently limited to a narrow range of subjects and constituted a linguistic environment that was too poor to allow the children to fully develop the non-colonial, mother tongue or dialect of the parent.

4.2. Relations with grandparents and more distant family members from the country of origin of the parent with a migrant background

The parents interviewed placed great value on facilitating their children's contact with grandparents and more distant family members of the parent with a migration context (from African countries). It took place primarily on the phone or through Internet communication applications (Skype). Despite this fact, some children were not able to communicate with their grandparents and more distant family members of the parent with a migration context fluently, due to their lack of fluency in Somali, Sango, Tigrinya or Arabic language or dialects spoken in other regions of African countries.

The problematic character of such communication is illustrated in an interview with a mother of two daughters: "Communication with her grandchildren is really important for my mum. We usually speak with the grandma in Eritrea by Skype. But she only speaks Tigrinya. So I talk to my mum, and then translate what she says to my daughters. But they're not very keen on talking to their grandma this way. They're ashamed that they can't speak Tigrinya well." (Mother, W_15).

To enhance the communicative competence in the third or fourth language, the parents made various attempts to expand the children's linguistic environment. The initiatives included participation in additional activities of national groups and non-governmental organisations during which the children were able to speak Arabic or Somali.

The relations with Polish grandparents were also an important element of upbringing, frequently due to the fact that the families initially lived with the children's grandparents,

or the grandparents took care of the children. Consequently, the children had the most frequent contact with Polish language and Polish culture, making it their basic language of communication and leading to challenges connected with non-dominant languages.

4.3. Communication at school and in preschool

According to SIO data, in the school year 2018/2019 there are about 44 thousand (out of the total number of 4.5 million students) foreigners in Polish preschools and schools, including post-secondary schools, of whom 206 have refugee status, 778 have applied for international protection, 1747 have been granted other forms of international protection (e.g. tolerated stay or humanitarian stay). This number constitutes less than 10% of the general school population and demonstrates a high level of monoculturality and a lack of diversity in Polish public schools (Data from the Ministry of Education 2019). In an environment with such low diversity, none of the groups (pupils, parents nor teachers) have a chance to become accustomed to multiculturalism and diversity, which leads to the situation when their manifestations are treated as a threat and a potential source of disorder in the system.

All children participating in this study were fluent in Polish while communicating with their class teachers, teachers and peers at school or in preschools. None of the children had problems using and learning the first (Polish) and second (English or French) language at school, both in written and spoken form. All had very good results at Polish at school. Additionally, their competences in communicating in the second language (English or French) were also highly developed.

Despite this fact, the parents were afraid that because of different appearance (skin colour differing from the majority of Polish society), the children would be exposed to discrimination and violence on the part of their peers and staff of state care and education institutions [9], [10]. For this reason, since the beginning of their education, four of the seventeen children attended private and/or international schools with English as the language of instruction. Two children started their education in a state school, from which they had to be transferred after several years to a private school due to recurring, difficult experiences connected with their appearance. These challenging situations were initiated by the parents of other pupils and then continued by other children in the class or school. Since the parents requested not to reveal their countries of origin out of fear of being recognised, we do not reveal this information.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this article was to show the situation of bilingual and multilingual families in Poland, based on the example of a group of mixed Polish parents and parents originating from African countries, with children born in Poland and with Polish citizenship. We intended to present the strategies the parents applied in communicating with their children as well as their motivation to choose a particular language of communication at home and the social space in Poland. We also wanted to show how these decisions influence children's functioning in the school environment and among their peers as well as the possibility to build relations with their grandparents and more distant family members of the parent with a migration context.

The study shows that the group of parents for whom local dialects were their mother tongues, were highly motivated to teach them to their children. However, they realised that the only way this knowledge could be used was through communication with the children's grandparents. It would not be, however, a competence that is helpful in daily functioning and further development in European countries. The parents decided to invest in their children's education of the second language (English or French) through participation in additional courses (apart from school classes and communication at home). Having decided to live and raise their children in Poland, the parents understood the necessity to learn this language and gain competences in this area and thus lead a bilingual life in relation to the upbringing and education of their children [11].

The negative experiences of the parents with a migration context in Poland, who faced a number of challenges in the process of adaptation and acceptance due to the lack of fluency in Polish language, strongly influenced these attitudes. All parents also tried to arrange situations in which children would be able to communicate in several languages. They also facilitated their children's encounters with other people originating from their native countries and speaking their mother tongues and other foreign languages. They perceived the command of several languages as a natural competence and wanted their children to acquire this competence as well through contact with members of a nationally and linguistically diverse environment. In the light of the study, defining the place of children with a migration context in Polish schools is a special educational challenge. It is a consequence of the monolithic nature of the country's culture, which translates to a cultural hegemony not only in the school system, but also the peer environment of the children studied [7], [12]. Despite the fact that bi- and multilingual children constitute an increasing percentage of students in Polish schools, both the curriculum, the educational situations, the construction of relations among

the students' parents are still important areas of educational practice, as the cultural polyphony is not a threat, but a chance for the development of individuals: students, parents and teachers.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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