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Family Language Policy and School Language Policy: Can the Twain Meet?

Abstract

This commentary outlines the key conceptualisations and core questions related to multilingual children's language and literacy development across different migration contexts. Addressing various language and educational ideologies held by parents and teachers, it highlights the interactions between families, schools and the wider society. In order to better understand how and why heritage languages are difficult to maintain and develop in migration contexts. The commentary sets the group of papers in this special issue in the disciplinary contexts of family language policy and school language policy. It emphasises how families, as private domains, are situated in dynamic social systems, and how migrant children's language development, including their heritage language development, is influenced by many factors such as society's attitude towards minority languages, the educational system, language programmes and linguistic input from both home and school. The commentary highlights the key claims put forward by the contributors and concludes that home and school can work together for the educational and social wellbeing of multilingual and migrant children.

Keywords: Family language policy, migrant children, language programme, linguistic input, literacy development

1. Introduction

Family language policy (FLP) plays an important role in children's formal schooling and education. But how should parents of multilingual children manage their children's formal education when dealing with multiple languages used in the home? In what way can schools work with parents to develop home language(s) and school languages to facilitate their children's academic performance and social wellbeing? And, most importantly, how do FLPs interact with educational language policies to either speed up the process of language shift, or prevent language loss, or promote multiple language development? This special issue highlights the interactions between FLP and educational policy by looking at how different language programmes and educational curricula that schools implement in different

geopolitical contexts to (un)support migrant children's heritage and school language development. The papers, in this particular issue, address the different language and educational ideologies held by parents and teachers, and discuss how these different ideologies affect multilingual children's language and literacy development. As families are situated in dynamic social systems, migrant children's language development, including their heritage language development, is influenced by many factors such as society's attitude towards minority languages, the educational system, language programmes and linguistic input from both home and school. Exploring how these factors are instantiated in families and schools, the special issue advances our understanding of the important collaborations between families and schools with regard to the affordances and constraints provided by the educational policies and linguistic environments. In what follows, I provide a discussion of some of the factors.

2. Ideologies about Minority Language in Migration Context

Recent studies into FLP have focused largely on how parents' attitudes towards their heritage language translate into their decisions on what language(s) to practice and promote or abandon and let go (Curdt-Christiansen 2014, 2016; Schalley & Eisenclas 2020). These decisions are often made based on their beliefs that maintaining their home language and developing multilingual skills have multiple benefits for their children. Despite their positive beliefs that the home language can reinforce familial ties, strengthen emotional attachment, develop identity and enhance professional opportunities, parents and caregivers are concerned about their children's social and academic development because of the recent upsurge of right-wing populism across Europe and the US (Curdt-Christiansen 2018; Panagiotopoulou & Rosen 2018). Public discourse against migration and its influence on the public perception of immigration and migrants (Fitzsimmons-Doolan 2009; Wodak

and Krzyżanowski 2017) have made migrants fearful of using their home language in public. Parents are often caught in the middle, puzzled by whether they should give up the home language to make more space for the societal/majority language. Teachers tend to play a critical role in shaping FLP when they make (un)intentional negative observations of migrant students (Bezcioglu-Göktolga & Yagmur 2018), show their disparaging attitudes towards heritage languages (Cunningham 2019; Curdt-Christiansen & LaMorgia 2018; Weekly 2018) and provide parents with non-evidence-based advice on the home language as a barrier for children's cognitive and academic development (Curd-Christiansen 2020).

In a comparative study of FLP in Chinese, Italian and Pakistani communities in the UK, Curdt-Christiansen & LaMorgia (2018) found that, owing to different status of and public discourse against migrant languages in the broader UK society and their respective communities, parents showed different ideological convictions towards home languages and made different investments in developing their children's home language and English. Curdt-Christiansen's (2020) study on Chinese migrant children in UK schools also demonstrates that teachers may support the notion of additive bilingualism, while their attitudes towards home language and teaching practices tend to be otherwise. Similar findings of such deficit views on migrant children in UK schools have also been reported by Cunningham (2019) and Weekly (2018).

The fact that FLP is constantly interacting with wider contexts of migration and education as well as language policy in general has serious consequences for children's linguistic development. This is demonstrated by three papers in this thematic issue. Hunt and Davis' study of second and third generation German speakers in Australia shows that three phases of language ideology, *Rejecting*, *Multicultural*, and *Economic Rationalism*, have influenced educational policy and FLP in complex ways. Although these three phases

emphasised the different ideologies of assimilation, multilingualism and multiculturalism, and language of economics respectively, the unofficial and monolingual English-only ideology dominated the wider social and political decisions. Despite the available heritage language programmes in schools, families tend to use outside formal educational opportunities to facilitate maintenance of German as heritage language.

Using social world theory to understand how FLP intersects with the educational system in Germany, Ballweg shows how two immigrant/multilingual families navigate their language practices and decisions. Although the parents value the minority family language and ascribe it to a sense of belonging and a 'pride' of identity, they tend to exchange the 'pride' of the minority home language for the 'profit' of English and French based on these languages' prestigious status, both in the official educational system and in the broader society.

Ballweg's study shows findings similar to those found in other multilingual contexts. Wang (2017), for example, in her study of Hakka-speaking Chinese families in multilingual Malaysia found that families have to deal with daily discourses and ideologies that place English, Mandarin, Malay, Hokkien and Hakka as the global, regional, national, local and home language, respectively. These languages are thus hierarchically ordered, based on the family members' evaluation of their different values, including so-called 'communicative' (Hokkien, Mandarin), 'instrumental' (Hokkien, Malay, English) and 'sentimental' (Hakka, Mandarin) value. Similar conclusions have been reached by other researchers. For instance, in Curdt-Christiansen's (2016) study of Singaporean multilingual families, she reported a clear indication of language ordering in the families' management activities. Despite the bilingual educational policy which gives recognition to four official languages (English,

Mandarin, Malay and Tamil), English has been ranked as the most valuable language because of its wider communicative and economic value in Asia.

The third paper dealing with similar issues is situated within a complex sociolinguistic and political context of migration in Italy. Valeria Tonioli explored the representations of language education and FLPs in transnational Bangladeshi low SES families. Involving seven families and 14 teachers, she found that these families tend to place higher value on English than on Italian and Bengali even though they live in Italy. From Tonioli's perspective, the parents have not been able to provide their children with qualitative and quantitative linguistic input in Bengali and Italian because of their lower education. Although the study is important, the data seem to be insufficient for the author to make a conclusion that the children are not able to produce cohesive sentences. Given that little information is provided with regard to what COLT is and how the interview is conducted, I find that the author takes a very deficit view of these parents and their children. Instead of considering the value of tapping into the linguistic and cultural resources of these families and their children, the author accepts the teachers' perspective without critically reflecting on the societal ideologies and attitudes against these low SES migrants and on the difficulties these families have to face in their new country.

Studies by the above-mentioned researchers demonstrate how the powerful languages such as English, French, German and Italian can functionally eclipse the preservation of home languages for many migrant/minority language students. Therefore, raising children bilingually or multilingually requires concerted efforts from both parents and teachers to create rich linguistic and literacy environments at home and in school.

3. Language Environment at Home and Language Programmes in School

Linguistic input is a key element in developing bi/multilingual children's language skills and competences. While migrant children may receive ample input in societal language through school and the wider community, the main responsibility, in most cases, for providing and maintaining input in the child's home language rests with the family. Without natural intergenerational interactions, children are unlikely even to hear the language, let alone develop it. Research shows that intermarried parents tend to adopt the 'one parent one language' approach (OPOL), whereas same language-background parents tend to adopt 'home language vs societal language' (hot house approach), and still others choose maximal engagement with the minority language (Curdt-Christiansen 2013; 2018; Döpke 1992; Eisenclas, Schalley & Moyes 2016; Piller 2001; Schwartz & Verschik 2013; Schwartz 2020). Eisenclas, Schalley and Moyes (2016) conducted a case study of three bilingual families (in which French or Spanish was the minority language) in Brisbane, where the families adopted maximal engagement with the minority language. The English-speaking parents played a significant role in supporting the maintenance and development of the minority language. Using diverse home language strategies, the English-speaking parents provided affective support and comprehensive strategies to facilitate the interactions in the minority language between their partners and children.

While these communicative approaches provide essential means for parents to plan their FLP, we still have to answer the questions: what types of linguistic input/discourse strategy can parents adopt in their daily interactions with their children? And what strategies could lead to more efficient bilingual development? Drawing on parent-child interactions in bilingual English-Norwegian families, Lanza (2009) identified five types of discourse strategy that parents tend to adopt: *minimal grasp*, *expressed guess*, *repetition*, *move on*, and *code-switching*.

These strategies can be placed on a continuum from minimal grasp at one end to code-switching at the other “indicating their potential for making a bid for a monolingual or bilingual context once the child has opened negotiations for a bilingual context through mixing” (Lanza 2009, p. 56). That is, parents who make more frequent use of strategies towards the *minimal grasp* end of the continuum are signalling the value they hold for the language in question, in the expectation that this value will be passed on to the child. In contrast, parents who make more frequent use of strategies towards the *code-switching* end of the continuum are signalling (perhaps unwittingly) less concern about the status of the language in question. The risk here is that children will under-develop the language desired by their parents, if *move-on* and *code-switching* strategies are used frequently. Curdt-Christiansen (2013), for example, studied three Chinese-English bilingual families in Singapore, in which she found three different types of FLP characterised by different parental discourse strategies – highly organised FLP, unreflective FLP, and laissez-faire policy, which map onto the continuum described above. In the highly organised FLP, parents regularly monitored the children’s bilingual development and kept speaking Chinese, even in contexts where English might be the more natural choice, for example while their children were doing English homework. In the unreflective FLP, parents frequently used the *move on* strategy, acknowledging code-switching. Observations showed that adopting this approach led to insufficient Chinese input, despite these parents’ stated desire to raise their children bilingually. In the laissez-faire FLP family, the mother’s approach towards the child language practices showed a laissez-faire attitude allowing the child to code-mix and code-switch whenever he wanted. The different discourse strategies used by the parents reflected their different language ideologies, moving from a strong tendency towards balanced bilingualism to the ‘English only’ attitude. The conscious or unconscious ideation

of parents' attitudes towards their child's languages associated with the approaches described on this continuum is critical to the way children develop their habitual language practices. These may last their entire lifetime.

Many parents are concerned about their children's academic development in school and want to provide a rich linguistic and literacy environment for their children. Research has shown that biliteracy experiences can be critical for children's academic and social development (Bialystock et al. 2012; Curdt-Christiansen 2013). But what types of bilingual environments are rich, and how can parents create them? What types of language input are qualitative and quantitative language input? Biliteracy conditions and meaningful language and literacy experiences in the early years may be fundamental for developing conceptual knowledge, comprehension, and reading proficiency in schools.

From an FLP perspective, literacy environments and structured activities are very important planning interventions. These include literacy resources (including digital), library visits, literacy play, literacy activities, parental modeling. Among these planning activities, researchers have found that rich literacy input and parents' familiarity with children's literature, and various reading activities have a clear positive effect on children's literacy development (Rowe and Snow 2019; Neuman et al. 2008). To understand the importance of these planning activities, two key concepts are worth attention: *vocabulary* and *input*.

Vocabulary is essential for reading comprehension. A child's vocabulary size —the number of words they know when they see or hear them (receptive vocabulary) and the number of words they can use (expressive vocabulary) — is a strong predictor of their reading achievement. Related to vocabulary is the concept of input (**quantity** and **quality**). Children acquire their first and additional languages best by being exposed to rich, dynamic, engaging interaction in those languages. **Input Quantity** refers to how much of each

language they hear each day. **Input Quality** is a measure of the variety of vocabulary used in a given situation (Curdt-Christiansen, in-press). Studies related to FLP in home domains have shown varieties of language and literacy engagements organized by parents or siblings. For example, Gregory's (2008) study of Bengali families in East London demonstrated that children learn new words from siblings through playing in home context. Curdt-Christiansen's (2013) study of bilingual Chinese-English families showed that parents used discourse strategies to engage in frequent conversations with their children in order to expose them to varieties of vocabulary in different languages. By asking wh-questions, they encouraged children to talk about past experiences; by providing language cues as well as linguistic needs, they encourage the children elaborate and clarify.

Research shows a positive correlation between being read to and eventual reading achievement (Neuman & Roskos 2012). Listening to read-alouds or being read to exposes children to new vocabulary, new language forms, and provides opportunities to acquire information and adopt the cultural practice of literacy. Because literature brings children into contact with different types of grammatical structures, text forms and literary conventions, reading activities have been found in many bilingual families where children are read to in different languages (Sénéchal & Lefevre 2014; Sénéchal et al. 2017). However, not all families are able to engage their children with reading activities. The study of Bangladeshi families by Tonioli in Italy is a case in point. What we need to bear in mind is that these families may not have the print-related literacy skills that can be passed on to their children, but they have rich cultural and linguistic practices that can be used to support migrant children's language development and identity construction (Conteh & Brock 2011; Flores & Rosa 2015; Yoo 2019).

While families play an instrumental role in developing children's language and literacy skill, without schools' intervention, the task of maintaining and developing a minority language can be very daunting. As Curdt-Christiansen (2020) argues, public education is one of the most important factors influencing immigrant families' decision on whether to raise their children bilingually. Because public education is constantly competing for space with home languages, developing migrant children's home language and literacy skills without school intervention can be a very difficult task.

In the current issue, such school intervention is explored by Simona Montanari, Eva Fisher and Danielle Aceves. They studied an Italian/English two-way immersion programme in California. Demonstrating how parents can be agents of change, their paper highlights how positive parental attitudes towards multilingualism and activism shape the two-way bilingual programme in the community. With the political background of legislative changes in California, the authors provide a historical discussion of the transitions from promotion-oriented to restriction-oriented educational policies, and again back to promotion-oriented policy during the period of 70s to the present. The paper illustrates the critical role of FLP through parental engagement and involvement in establishing the Italian-English two-way immersion programme. Regardless of their Italian language knowledge or proficiency, these parents demonstrate their enthusiasm for and strong appreciation of multilingualism. It is worth to point out that many non-Italian speaking parents (second, third and fourth generation of Italian migrants) find it satisfactory that the maintenance and development of Italian as a heritage language rest not only on their own shoulders but that the responsibility is shifted to the school. The positive views from both Italian and non-Italian speaking parents suggest that children are developing bilingual literacy skills in this programme without sacrificing their academic and cognitive development. Consistent with other

bilingual programmes based on a 90:10 model where English instructional time is significantly lower, this study indicates that children can have an early lag in their English reading and writing skills (Montanari 2014; Montanari et al. 2016). Together with decades of research in bilingualism and biliteracy development (Bialystok et al. 2012; Sun et al. 2020), this study brings an important message to policy makers and practitioners that bilingual programmes can have a positive impact on children's overall academic and cognitive development without causing them confusion and school failure (Bezioglu-Göktolga & Yagmur 2018).

This brings us to the paper by Laia Arnaus Gil (this issue), in which she studies Spanish and German as heritage (HL) and majority Languages (MaL) in early multilingual acquisition. By involving 86 children of bilingual/trilingual speakers, she examines how FLPs (FLP1, FLP2 and FLP3) and other child-external factors have impact on their heritage language competence. The study uses a questionnaire and the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT) to determine the relationship between different FLPs and HL competence. FLP1, in which parents speak 100% HL at home, indicates a significant contribution to HL competence in the early years. This function, however, disappears when children are older than 61 months. Similar to the findings in De Houwer's (2009) study, this study also shows that there is a close relationship between HL presence and HL competence. For example, in FLP2 and FLP3 situations, where parents use 50% of HL and no HL in homes respectively, HL competence is considerably lower or absent. Arnaus Gil (this issue) argues that the institutional support of HL plays a significant role in children's HL competence. As most children attend bilingual preschools, HL support and input are available not only in homes but also outside homes. Her findings suggest that "with HL-support of the bilingual institution, multilingual children scored significantly only if there is already HL-support at

home. Put differently, HL-availability in preschool does not suffice to promote HL-competence but contributes to it when the heritage language is present in the family”.

4. Conclusion

The five studies in this special issue have made original contributions to the burgeoning field of family language policy. The studies draw on a similar source of literature and theoretical frameworks but use different research methods to investigate how FLPs interact with educational policies. Some take a broad view of a community through surveys of parental attitudes towards multilingualism, HL development, and competence. Others use literacy measures and questionnaires to examine the relationship between FLP and HL competence. Some use narratives and semi-structured interviews to understand people’s language beliefs in relation to legislative changes and educational policies. Together, the studies reveal that in the face of powerful national or global languages such as German, French, Spanish and English, heritage languages may be devalued or even stigmatized by members of the wider community and educational policies, and eventually by family members themselves. This phenomenon is well reported in the heritage-language maintenance literature across disparate settings around the world.

Research has shown that advanced knowledge of more than one language has specific brain benefits, such as enhanced creativity and flexibility, increased metalinguistic ability, and enhanced learning capacity as well as cultural and social advantages (Bialystok et al. 2012). This creativity or mental flexibility can be translated directly into advantages in school and life, allowing bilingual learners more ways to address questions, more creative ways to solve problems, and more flexible resources in dealing with academic studies. But earlier research has documented that home environments characterized by a lack of extensive and quality oral communication tend to inhibit the development of bilingual and

biliteracy skills (Hakes, 1982; Warren-Leubecker & Carter, 1988). With this research evidence in mind, it is important for schools and families to work together to create rich linguistic environments for children to develop not only majority/school language but also heritage/minority language. Schools can implement various language programmes to support multilingual and multiliterate development among migrant children. Building a meaningful partnership with families of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds can be instrumental for migrant (and other multilingual) children's language and educational development (Curdt-Christiansen 2020). Yet the language, cultural and literacy practices that these children bring from home have historically not been given recognition in schools (Conteh & Brock 2011; Flores & Rosa 2015; Yoo 2019). To capitalise on the funds-of-knowledge of multilingual and migrant children, a strong and rich collaboration between FLP and educational language policy should be encouraged both in schools and homes. There are a plethora of methods and strategies for parents and teachers to employ in their daily routines and practices with multilingual children. The data and findings in this special issue strongly suggest that home and school can work together for the educational and social wellbeing of multilingual and migrant children.

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