

Teachers misunderstanding of translanguaging in preschools

What this research was about and why it is important

Young multilingual children translanguage naturally. They use their linguistic/semiotic repertoire to express themselves, but also to make meaning of the school environment and learn. When multilingual children come to a school where they do not understand the language of instruction, they are confronted with learning difficulties, which influences both their school progress and well-being. Translanguaging pedagogical practices help teachers to create a space in which multilingual children can make meaning, feel well, and learn. By using this pedagogy, teachers support children's multilingualism, which they see as a resource, and design inclusive activities accordingly. In this study, 40 Luxembourgian preschool teachers followed a professional development course on translanguaging pedagogy for over six months. After the course, the researchers filmed what teachers designed as translanguaging activities with children. This article is based on the analysis of the lesson of three teachers in one preschool. During the lesson, the teachers invited the children to choose the flag of their countries. Three children of Portuguese background and one Serbian child claimed they spoke Luxembourgish at home and thus wanted to choose the Luxembourgish flag. The teachers, however, insisted that the children should choose Portuguese and Serbian flags, telling them that it was not possible for them to speak Luxembourgish at home. The children were confused and their body language showed their silencing, diminishing and shutting down. This scene showed not only that teachers misunderstood translanguaging, which they saw as multiple languages attached to nation states and flags, but they also, despite their good intentions, showed raciolinguistic ideologies, harmful for the multilingual children in question.

What the researchers did

- They organized a professional development course on translanguaging pedagogy for preschool teachers working with multilingual children of immigrant background in Luxembourg. The training lasted for six months. Forty teachers, divided into 4 groups, received over 17 hours of training delivered in seven sessions.
- The researchers asked interested teachers to film their translanguaging classroom activities with children, following the principles of translanguaging pedagogy: a positive stance towards children's multilingualism, the design of an activity that opened a translanguaging space, and the teachers' flexibility and support for children's translanguaging.
- Three foci teachers organized an activity in which they invited children of immigrant background to select the flags and language of their respective countries.

What the researchers found

- During the activity, three Portuguese and one Serbian child wished to choose Luxembourgish flag and said that they too spoke Luxembourgish as their peers do.
- They gave several arguments for their choice, explaining that their siblings and parents speak it at home as well.
- The teachers insisted that Luxembourgish was not the children's language and explained why it was not possible for them, their siblings and parents to speak Luxembourgish.
- All four children eventually chose the Portuguese and Serbian flags and withdrew from the activity.
- The teachers did not understand translanguaging. What they designed was more of a multilingual awareness activity than an activity with translanguaging pedagogy elements. They insisted that Luxembourgish is a school language that stands on its own and cannot be part of children's multilingual repertoire.
- Despite teachers' good intentions, the teachers showed raciolinguistic ideologies toward the immigrant children.

Things to consider

- It is important that teachers understand that multilingual children make sense of their complex worlds by using their whole linguistic/semiotic repertoire, which goes beyond named languages and includes multimodalities. What is considered the school language is also part of the children's repertoire.
- Teachers need to develop a translanguaging stance and create activities to support multilingual children. They can invite children's families to participate and learn about children's linguistic and cultural practices, which can help them examine their own attitudes and practices.
- Teachers also need sustained support from the national educational policy and school system.

Material, data, open access article: N/A

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