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Author(s): Tarnanen, Mirja

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Teachers as policy agents in multilingual classrooms



Author: Professor Mirja Tarnanen

With the increased globalisations and dynamic flow of migration, multilingual, multicultural, and multimodal classrooms seem to be a dominant matter rather than the exception in most contemporary societies. However, national policies concerning language education for new arrivals in most states are inconsistent, contentious and contradictory, even in countries with long histories of inward migration like the US and the UK. Some historically sending countries such as Ireland and Finland are legislating for language diversity for the first time (Pöyhönen, Simpson & Tarnanen, 2018; Sheridan, 2015). As a target country, Finland has namely become a destination for increasing numbers of migrants starting from the late 1980s. Thus, in comparison to other European countries, Finland's migrant population is rather small, comprising 258,000 people (4.7% of the country's population) in 2018. In the same year, almost 400,000 people living in Finland have a mother tongue other than Finnish and Swedish (national languages of Finland) or Sami (an officially recognized minority language) (Statistics Finland, 2019).

This turn has affected the most recent Finnish curriculum reform for basic education, which to a greater extent than before promotes multilingualism, as cultural diversity and language awareness constitute one of the seven cornerstones for the development of the school culture. Furthermore, support for pupils' linguistic and cultural identities and the development of their mother tongues have been set as explicit aims in Core Curriculum for Basic Education.

Consequently, schools are currently facing new challenges and opportunities in integrating students with migrant backgrounds and implementing good pedagogy for all. From a policy perspective, teachers can be considered policy agents who are, consciously or unconsciously, involved in representing and reproducing (language) education policies in their talk, practices and classroom interaction (Honan, 2004). In official documents such as curricula, language policies can be explicitly articulated, and how this is done reflects a set of societal values and beliefs. However, there are also more covert underlying assumptions and practices of language use and learning in educational contexts that affect language policies (Tarnanen & Palviainen, 2018). Therefore, teachers are not only actors who implement the curriculum in terms of education policy, but also as actors who represent, produce and reproduce (language) education policies in their talk and actions.

I have studied teachers' beliefs (and mental models) about their work, school community, pedagogy and diverse themes such as multilingualism with my colleagues in several research projects. It seems to me that it is easier to have curriculum reforms or change learning materials than affect ones' belief systems as they can be deeply ingrained assumptions and generalisations that influence how teachers understand the world and how they take action. For example, our study showed that there seems to be a firm belief among some teachers that the use of languages other than the language of schooling might prevent or at least slow down learning of the language of schooling, and the use of other languages and translanguaging are not considered to be a resource or meaningful for learning (Tarnanen & Palviainen, 2018). These types of rooted beliefs, assumptions and expectations might concern other pedagogical and cultural changes, such as assessment of learning or digitalisation in pedagogy as well (Tarnanen et al, 2021).

Teachers' beliefs and assumptions might be seldom discussed, and they might remain tacit in educational communities despite their impact on teachers' everyday decisions and actions. Therefore, it is crucial to share, discuss and reflect on beliefs, assumptions and expectations collaboratively, providing opportunities for reflection that may support teachers' professional learning (Camburn, 2010; Tarnanen et al, 2021). The studies have shown that teachers can learn the most when afforded an opportunity to discuss their experiences in a trusted, confident and constructive atmosphere (e.g., Zwart et al, 2009). Research evidence has also emphasised external resources' importance, such as research-based support and cooperation between university teacher trainers and researchers to promote professional learning and development (e.g. Hauge and Wan, 2019). Thus, at its best, research projects such as TEAMS can act as a facilitator to raise awareness and improve communication and transparency of working practices in the school communities and promote professional learning of both teachers and researchers.

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