Changes to the linguistic landscape of public schools with emergent bilinguals in New York City

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We share findings from qualitative research conducted in 23 schools in New York City that participated in the City University of New York-New York State Initiative on Emergent Bilinguals (CUNY-NYSIEB) project. Prior to their involvement the many languages and cultures of the students were rarely reflected in the school’s linguistic landscape (LL). The schools were supported through professional development to use their students’ multilingualism as a resource in instruction and develop their school’s multilingual ecology. One of the aims of CUNY-NYSIEB is to increase the vitality of migrant and ethnic minority languages in the schools’ LL.

The following research question guided our study:

What changes do school leaders (including principals, administrators, and lead teachers) report having made to their school’s multilingual ecology, and what are their perceptions of the impact of those changes on students and their families?

Data was gathered from interviews with school leaders, as well as from classroom observations and staff meetings conducted from 2012-2015.

We found that many schools in our sample made changes to their school’s multilingual ecology, by altering their physical LL, by changing classroom instruction to incorporate students’ home languages, and – in several instances – by making programming changes moving from monolingual English instruction to bilingual education. While in some schools changes to the LL occurred simultaneously with changes to instruction and programming, in others changes to the LL were a step towards school-wide changes that came after a year or two.

On the other hand, some schools just made a few changes, such as to the physical LL of the building, for instance by creating multilingual welcome signs at the entrance of the building. In these schools, changing the LL offered an ”easy out” when charged with the more challenging task of fully embracing multilingualism throughout all aspects of schooling.

Keywords: multilingual ecology, linguistic landscape, emergent bilinguals.