Challenges and future perspectives for newcomers in heterogeneous and multilingual primary schools: Case studies from France and Luxembourg

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In recent years a substantial growth in mobility has led to an exponential increase of newcomer students internationally. These so-called newcomer students or NAMS (Newly Arrived Migrant Students) do not frequently speak the language(s) of their host country at the time of arrival at their new school. NAMS also suffer from higher school drop-out than their native peers. As this is a relatively recent phenomenon, both school and educational authorities are often challenged by the new situation, especially in school systems where more than one language is the medium of instruction. The present research aims at illustrating the first year of two NAMS and their process(es) of becoming ‘emergent plurilinguals’ of a heterogeneous and multilingual classroom. The study consisted on two 8-month case studies about NAMS belonging to one of the communities most affected by school failure: one romanophone NAMS for Luxembourg and one ”traveller” NAMS from Hungary for Strasbourg. The research thus took place in two primary schools, one in Luxembourg and another in Strasbourg.

From a critical, ethnographic and longitudinal approach, I tried to capture the difficulties these specific children experimented and contrast the diverse points of view regarding their language(s) learning and their development in the new school. A detailed analysis of the actors in contact with these children, including the teachers, parents, and peers, allows for an observation of which practices are legitimated and which ones are marginalized. Some of the conclusions point to the lack of teacher training concerning NAMS and diversity, different perspectives from the educational institution with reference to the language brought by the newcomer and the multiple capitals or resources of the child, as well as the school’s high tendency for homogenization.

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