'Let’s meet in the conference room’: Developing language-in-education plans for deaf students from multilingual homes

Sarah Compton
University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Language-in-education debates for deaf and hard of hearing children in the United States have centered on which communication modality (or modalities) should be adopted as the language(s) of instruction. The national special education law requires parents and educators to meet annually to develop an individualized education plan (IEP) for each child receiving special education services (CITE). During these meetings, decisions are made with respect to (1) the language (and modality) of instruction, and (2) the level of academic instruction. These set the course of children’s linguistic, social, academic, and professional trajectories. As such, empirical research examining how these decisions are negotiated is needed (Cruickshank, Morse & Grant, 1990; National Council on Disability, 2008).

Drawing on interview and observational data gathered as part of an ethnographic, discourse-analytic study informed by nexus analysis (Scollon & Scollon, 2004) and ethnography of language policy (Johnson, 2013) and carried out in a public mainstream high school in the northeast United States, I map the ‘discourses in place’ (Scollon & Scollon, 2004: 14) that are present in and circulate through the IEP process for students from multilingual families.

In tracing the trajectories of these discourses (i.e., the life cycles of the policy discourses; life histories of multilingual parents and educators; mediational means employed in developing the education plans), I examine how they become linked together at particular moments of the IEP process and how they center on (competing) discourses about the child’s future life trajectories (linguistic, academic, professional). Particular attention is paid to the challenges that educators describe in negotiating the tensions involved in both meeting parent expectations of their children’s linguistic and academic development and appropriating the national special education law (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

Keywords: multimodal-multilingualism, language in education policy, sign languages.