'Faith class has become once a week': Investigating change in faith teachers’ multilingual repertoires, practices and beliefs

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Studies on language and literacy learning and socialisation in faith classes have shown how children and faith teachers from a variety of linguistic, cultural and faith backgrounds may have different degrees of access and fluency to sets of semiotic resources, including different languages and values attached to them (e.g. Baquedano-Lopez, 2004, 2008; Fader 2008, 2009; Rosowsky 2008; Ilankuberan and Author 2011). This presentation reports on a recently completed project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, UK on children’s language and literacy learning through faith in four faith communities in London (Gregory et al 2009). The presentation complements and extends previous research by focusing on the faith teachers’ perspectives and on the Tamil Hindu/Saiva faith community in particular. Drawing on interviews with the faith teachers as well as field narratives and interactional data from the faith classes it explores the faith teachers’ pedagogic practices and language ideologies with regard to the use of different linguistic resources, notably, Sanskrit, the liturgical language, Tamil, the minority/community language, and English the majority language in teaching and learning in faith classes. It investigates how the teachers may have adapted and changed their multilingual repertoires, practices and beliefs over time and across continents – from Sri Lanka to London. In particular, it examines change across levels, from the personal, to the institutional, to the communal and the transnational and it illuminates their interconnections. In the teachers’ words the migration experience has altered the scope of faith in many children’s everyday experience in London from faith ”being part and parcel of life” to ”religion becoming once a week”. It will be argued that the institutionalisation of faith through weekly faith classes has been instrumental in shaping the teachers’ flexible multilingual practices and beliefs about languages.

Keywords: faith classes, language ideologies, multilingualism.