Migrant children in Sicilian schools: Language practices and language ideologies

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Migration flows determined by globalized economic forces have transformed many modern cities in multilingual and multiethnic spaces creating unprecedented challenges for schools in Italy, as in other European countries.

This paper investigates the case of an inner city school in Palermo, Sicily, one third of whose students come from a variety of foreign countries, as different as Bangladesh, China, Morocco and Senegal. Data come from an ethnographic project involving participant observation that I conducted in 2011 with one fifth-grade elementary classroom. In particular, I investigate what kind of language practices are enacted by teachers and students, to what extent they are shaped by traditional language ideologies and what kinds of insights they provide on the way both individual students/teachers and the school cope with the changes brought about by these new migration flows. I show that even though the diversity of experiences and cultural backgrounds of the students and their families has created and imposed a variety of new practices in the school and in the classroom, language practices still reflect a rigid “division of labor” in which institutional spaces are reserved mostly for Italian and traditional foreign languages such as English, while the languages spoken by the children of immigrant origins together with the Sicilian dialect are cast into the space of private communication, play and fight among the children. I also discuss the emergence of language hierarchies in the classroom reflecting different migration histories in Sicily.

Keywords: Language ideologies, Multilingualism, Immigrant children.