

'My language...I don't know how to talk about it': children's views on language diversity in primary schools in France and England



Ref: Oakleigh Welply (2017) Language and Intercultural Communication

Two classes of 10-11 year olds from immigrant backgrounds were interviewed in groups, one in French Primary school, the other in an English primary school to see how the children viewed other languages.

French schools treat everyone in an indifferent way, ignoring cultural and religious difference...



...whereas English schools try to recognise and celebrate difference.



- Legitimate language of school.
- Teachers had little knowledge of children's linguistic or cultural backgrounds
- Other languages discouraged in class



- Legitimate Language of school despite promoting bilingualism as an asset
- Home language use dependent on an individual teacher's choice
- Children believed Home Languages discouraged for fear of inappropriate use

French children recognised a hierarchy of languages:

- French**
(as a taught, high status, global language)
- English**
(subversive/ illicit -association with Islam)
- Hmong and Loation**
(amongst languages rarely mentioned)

Language hierarchy less explicit and less exclusionary in England

Children found spaces to talk about their languages in the curriculum e.g. in RE and with bilingual assistants



Children saw schools as monocultural and monolingual in both countries despite different approaches.



No status or space for home languages in formal school discourses.

Conclusion: Implications for schools

1. Need to reflect on monolingual structures in schools that ostensibly project a multilingual ethos
2. Children's home languages absent creating a 'child silence' not a space for children's voices
3. Incorporation of home language into classroom spaces legitimises 'other' languages and gives children a voice.