

The Unfamiliar and the Indeterminate: Language, Identity and Social Integration in the School Experience of Newly-Arrived Migrant Children in England

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4 schools participated in the research in 2 phases.

Phase 1 - a secondary and primary school took part. At the secondary school 19 teachers and a governor were interviewed; 5 were re-interviewed six months later to see if their views had changed. At the primary school, 10 pupils from KS2 were interviewed and 5 native English speakers.

Phase 2 - A more longitudinal study over two years. 2 maintained secondary schools took part. The linguistic and academic progress of 22 newly arrived pupils was tracked. Pupils were interviewed pre and post study period and had an open-ended written task to support assessment data.

Key Findings



Aim of the study

To examine the overlap between language, identity and social intergration.

Four themes emerged:

Unfamiliarity
Linguistic enclosure
L1 as communication capital
Simulation

Unfamiliarity: Experiences in the classroom

Children reported the experience as 'scary'.

They feared incomprehension - linguistic inadequacy
They feared being talked about and not understanding - exclusion from peer interactions

One pupil likened the experience to 'stage fright'.

This was like a metaphor for 'communicative paralysis'
It was demarcated boundaries; the student was on a stage (like an actor) being judged by the audience (other students in his class).



In contrast, some pupils used the word 'scary' to suggest excitement - trying to learn and discover new words led to amazement with their situation, as did the challenge of comprehending.

Linguistic enclosure
English carried cultural capital with parents
"They think that school's only for English learning" (Slovakian pupil)
Some teachers were suspicious of pupils using their home languages:
"I don't know what's going on"

L1 Exchange as Communicative Capital
Newly Arrived pupils at KS2 adopted the role of teacher and taught other pupils phrases in their home language. This gained them a form of 'linguistic capital' amongst peers.
In return, native speakers helped new arrivals with their English language learning. The arrangement was seen as reciprocal.

Languages and Identity Simulation

These concepts were interlinked. Language was used as a performance in some of the children's play at KS2.

Children saw language and multilingualism as something that could provide a person with a variety of identities. They could take on different 'characters' in their play.

"...teachers and the host education system as a whole need to be sensitive to the individual pupil's sense of their perceived status..."

Conclusions:

Pupils felt excluded by unfamiliar contexts and the reactions of their peers. Secondary pupils in particular were alienated through a lack of English.

Primary pupils expressed greater agency during free time - playing with different identities and trading language capital. Language was a focus of friendship.