

HOW DOES A “THIRD-COUNTRY CHILD” NEGOTIATE MULTIPLE LINGUISTIC IDENTITIES IN A SCHOOL SETTING?

Khadija Hamouchi*

*Goldsmiths, University of London, United Kingdom. khadija.hamouchi@gmail.com

Abstract

This research involves the case study of a pre-teen girl of Moroccan origin, who grew up in Spain and then migrated with her family to London. The study seeks to determine how a “third-country child” – newly created concept - constructs a new linguistic identity while negotiating other previously acquired and inherited ones in the context of migration. This study also explores the influences of the family and the educational institution on a child’s identity development and management.

The literature review begins with an exploration of one of the most influential theories on identity construction, that is, the postmodernist framework (Hall, 1990, 1991). The interaction between identity and migration (Gilroy, 1997; Chambers, 1994; Castells, 1997) is explored through postmodernist lenses and is placed in the “super-diversity” context (Vertovec, 2007a,b). The links between language and identity is explored through the poststructuralist framework (Blackledge, 2004, 2005; Blackledge & Creese, 2010a,b).

The research was carried out through critical ethnography, involving structured and semi-structured life-story interviews, the production of identity-texts, and observations in the family home. The data were analysed to give an understanding of the participants’ perceptions of identity, migration, and language. The corpus of data is composed of a research journal including notes of random observations of interactions between family members and school contexts. Another major component is the scrapbook including the drawings, collages, and identity-texts of the research participant.

The results show that institutional educational, leadership, and family play a key role in the inter-subjective construction and negotiation of a child’s linguistic identities, since the school and the family’s attitudes can have both a positive and a less positive influence. The child’s intra-construction of identities demonstrates that she felt well-adjusted, which in turn reveals different possible ways in which linguistic identities can co-exist in simultaneity. This links with the theory of “simultaneous worlds” (Kenner, 2004a, b), which suggests that children may experience their linguistic worlds as affiliated rather than separate.

Furthermore, the study highlights the child’s perception of linguistic acquisition in relation to group membership and integration. The findings show that migrants’ identities may be far less predictable than one might think. The research challenges the philosophical arguments of identity contestation such as “identity crisis” (Woodward, 2002) and “critical experience” (Block, 2009) by taking a more positive standpoint and by exploring the concept of “superdiversity” (Vertotec, 2007a). The study demonstrates the benefits of taking a more open-minded approach with regard to issues of identity construction, in order to produce a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved.

The significance of the study lies in its ability to provide us with a phenomenological ground to ask two important questions: (1) How do we –as theorists, academics, and researchers cope with that unpredictability, open up to possibilities, and minimize generalised and fixed views? And how do we – as academics, policy-makers, (head) teachers, and other educators – examine and help to bring more justice in inherited multilingual practices within schools while taking into close consideration of the particularities of migrant’s experiences whether ‘identitarian’ or sociological?

Keywords: Multilingualism, Multiculturalism, Linguistic Identities, School Leadership