

Pre-school multilingualism: Experiences from a national project in Norway

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Abstract

I will refer to a national project in Norway; initiated by NAFO, the National Center of Multicultural Education. In the period of 2007-2010 I was supervisor for 20 pre-schools in 5 different municipalities in the county of Troms, Norway. These pre-schools all had bilingual immigrant children, and were interested in learning more about both cultural diversity and multilingualism. This presentation will point out some of the development that took place in the staff of these pre-schools, and also focus on my work at the teacher education. How do my knowledge about pre-school and the theme multilingualism infect my teaching, and how can I prepare students working with bilingual children and improving their language skills?

In this project, bilingual immigrant children are recognized as children with other first languages than Norwegian, Sami, Swedish, Danish or English. These children will learn Norwegian as their second language, and the pre-school teachers will play an important role in their language development. According to Kindergarten Act this group of children has the right to extra support, aiming to improve their Norwegian skills. The pre-school is required to encourage bilingual children's use of their mother tongue, and simultaneously actively promote children's development of Norwegian language skills (KD 2006) [1].

During this project period I mean to have seen a pattern and a development in the preschools work with bilingual children. This could help other preschools focusing on the same challenges. I will also focus on the role of the preschool teacher education preparing their students to their work with bilingual immigrant children.

1. Introduction

In 2007 the the National Center of Multicultural Education in Norway initiated the project *Pre-school multilingualism*. Pre-schools in 5 different counties were invited, and in my county, Troms, 20 pre-schools from 5 municipalities attended. In the third year of the project all 19 counties in Norway joined the project. My assignment in this paper is to explain what I experienced as a supervisor in this project, and how this has affected my teaching at the pre-school teacher education at the University of Tromsø.

1.1 Norwegian pre-schools

The children in Norwegian pre-schools are from 0/1 to 5 years old. The size of the group is organized according to the age of the children. The size of a group of children 0-3 years old would be 9-10, and for children aged 3-5 it would be 18-20. A pre-school could have 1-6 groups, all supervised by a head teacher.

The staff working with each group is normally one educated pre-school teacher and two assistants. In my project 37 % of the staff attending were pre-school teachers, 55% were assistants with no education after secondary or high school and 8 % were child care and youth workers. To become a

educated child care and youth worker you have to attend upper secondary school and to have completed a training period with a final exam. The pre-school teachers study three years at a university or university college.

2. Bilingual children in Norwegian pre-schools

In this project, bilingual immigrant children are recognized as children with other first languages than Norwegian, Sami, Swedish, Danish or English. Children with other first languages than this have according to Kindergarten Act the right of extra support, aiming to improve their Norwegian skills. Government funds are given to each municipality, where they decide how to use the money in the best interest of these children. They will all learn Norwegian as their second language, and the pre-school teachers will play an important role in the language development of these children.

The National Curriculum contains explicit demands for educational work in pre-schools. Most interesting in this context is the chapters describing the learning area *Communication, language and text*. According to this, the pre-school is required to encourage bilingual children's use of their mother tongue, and simultaneously actively promote children's development of Norwegian language skills (KD 2006) [2]. How do pre-school teachers interpret this, and how do they plan both content and methods to achieve good language skills for these children? What is their understanding of good language skills? Cummins (2000) [3] speaks about language proficiency as both conversational and academic. He points out that we need to make a fundamental distinction between the *basic interpersonal communicative skills* (BICS) and the *cognitive academic language proficiency* (CALP). The academic language proficiency is the ability to make complex meanings explicit by means of language itself rather than by means of contextual or paralinguistic cues such as gestures or intonation (Cummins2000:69). If pre-school teachers are going to achieve this on behalf of the children, they will have to meet the requirements of The National Curriculum, and focus on both the first and the secondary language of the children. It is important that they encourage the use of context reduced language in the first language, if the Norwegian language skills of the children are not efficient enough to do so. In the following I will explain how we worked in the project to be able to achieve good language skills for multilingual children.

3. The project Pre-school multilingualism

During the three years of the project I observed a development both in themes and content in the work of the pre-schools. The first year of the project we started with making cultural diversity and multilingualism visible. This was among others made through posters presenting "word of the week" in all languages presented and pictures from the different cultures, through use of world maps, songs and stories. All information was collected with help from the parents of the multilingual children. This led to a better understanding and respect for other cultures and languages, both among the staff, the children and Norwegian speaking parents.

As supervisor I met with a project group from each pre-school 4 times a year. In between these meetings they also met in professional networking groups, where they discussed own challenges working with multilingual children. I also gave lectures about language diversity to the entire staff. In that way both pre-school teachers and assistants were able to participate in professional discussions about cultural diversity. In particular, the assistants expressed that it was easier for them to participate in the professional work with multilingual children after such lectures.

In the second year of the project the main topic was *multilingualism*. We then focused on *how children learn language*. This was done through educational lectures to the staff and parents, and with continuous discussions during everyday life in the pre-schools. We also still focused on making cultural diversity and multilingualism visible. At this point we accepted 5 new participants into the

project. They started out working with visualization of the cultural diversity. This year the pre-schools also focused on quality assurance and information given to immigrant parents. Some information was translated into English and Arabic, and they had separate meetings for immigrant parents to provide information that was relevant only to this group.

In the third year of the project I saw that the pre-schools chose different themes in their work, and this choice reflected their previous work that had been done. They all succeeded with step one, the visualization of cultural diversity. This was not so difficult to carry out, and several members of the staff could be responsible for small parts of the project. During the process we called it *development through small steps*. This work initiated interesting discussions and made the staff aware of their own attitudes to cultural diversity, and it also improved the communication between staff and immigrant parents. The staff pointed out that it was easier to make contact with the parents to ask them concrete questions or for approval to the posters made about their language and culture, especially those who could not use English in their communication, but had to use body language.

4. Evaluation of the project Pre-school multilingualism

4.1 Official evaluation

At the end of the project in 2010 the Norwegian Government ordered a project report from the Ramboll Group [4]. Their main findings in the report are as follows: There is an enhanced degree of cooperation on the competence areas of language stimulation, cultural diversity and multilingualism, with participants as the National Center of Multicultural Education (NAFO), the UUC sector, the counties, the municipalities and the pre-schools. The evaluation also states that the UUC sector has been strengthened in its role as a provider of competence. Most important, it shows that it is useful for pre-schools to participate in professional networks, and this project has had an effect on competence and pedagogical practice in the pre-schools.

4.2 What did I learn about pre-school

First of all I want to state that pre-school multilingualism is an important theme. In Norwegian pre-schools there is a large demand of more competence. Through this project I learned that giving responsibility to all the members of the staff leads to both the staff feeling related to the project, and better communication with immigrant parents. Furthermore it is important to increase the staff's knowledge of second language learning and language stimulation, because they then know what activities to use when they shall stimulate the second language through the use of everyday activities. What words do the children need to be able to participate in activities with other children? How can this be taught through everyday activities like dressing, meals and playing indoor and outdoor? This competence is important to have constantly in mind.

5. How did the project infect my teaching?

My job as a supervisor for the pre-schools in the project has given me an increased competence on the theme cultural diversity and multilingualism, both theoretical and in practice. I now know better which challenges the pre-schools face in their everyday life. Working with this project has given me many stories of practice.

My focus on the theme cultural diversity and multilingualism has increased in all of my lectures. No matter what the main subject is I try to discuss what it would mean if we see it from a multilingual point of view. Networking with other universities and university colleges has also been useful. I now have



worked out new research questions, and I have just started the work on my PhD degree, Pre-school multilingualism: educational challenges and opportunities.

References

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