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Chronic ambivalence in class: managing ideological dilemmas in monolingual schools populated by multilingual pupils

Much research paints a grim picture of Flemish teachers because of their negative attitudes towards the use of other languages than Dutch at school. Such attitudes are generally taken to illustrate teachers' support of "the ideology of linguistic uniformity" (Hélot 2012: 214) or their "monolingual habitus" (Gogolin 2002), and they are seen to harm pupils' well-being and to preclude the use of home languages as a didactic resource in class. Thus there are regular calls to raise Flemish teachers' awareness, to change their attitudes, to reform teacher training, or to adapt language education policy to the reality of the 21st century.

In this presentation I report on ethnographically collected data from four secondary schools to illustrate that although Flemish teachers were generally loyal to the idea of monolingual education and regularly imposed the use of Dutch, in actual practice there was more tolerance for language variation and even investment in home languages than studies on teacher attitudes would indicate. The data moreover show that these conflicting findings did not reflect the behaviour of opposing groups of teachers (progressive vs conservative ones) but that singular teachers often engaged in both types of conduct.

I will relate this outcome to the fact that teachers are faced with contradictory values about language and education. Consequently, this presents dilemmas in class and invites contradictory responses and ambivalence. While reports on teachers' attitudes thus accurately reflect teachers' explicit adherence to one of these values (linguistic uniformity), they are incomplete in failing to reveal teachers' practical orientation to the opposite one. In this context, I suggest that instead of heightening the dilemma by promoting one side of the value spectrum, policy recommendations may be more effective if they engage with conflicting values about language and education.