Chapter 13
Negotiating and Navigating Plurilingual Classroom Citizenship:
Social Cohesion and Functional Multilingual Learning

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ABSTRACT

This chapter adopts the lens of social cohesion to explore the practices and perspectives of primary school pupils in Brussels, Belgium, when they were allowed to use their home languages in the classroom for the first time. Drawing on ethnographic data, the authors document how the pupils and teachers negotiated and navigated new sociolinguistic norms, generating novel forms of inclusive practice that reached across difference. Nonetheless, the introduction of a multilingual approach also destabilised feelings of class cohesion as the perceived benefits were unevenly spread across the group. The data highlights the complex terrain of multilingual insults, which fuelled pupil scepticism about an open language policy in the playground. This suggests that plurilingual classroom cohesion is best supported by approaches which openly embrace the potentially disruptive elements of a multilingual community, thereby enabling meaningful social learning.

INTRODUCTION

In common with many education systems across Europe, schools in Belgium often require pupils to only use the language-of-schooling when they are on school grounds (Géraldine et al., 2018; Pulinx et al., 2015). Many policy makers consider a monolingual school environment to be an essential condition to ensure that pupils from immigrant backgrounds master the dominant societal language, despite there being little empirical research to support such a position. It is furthermore conceived by some to be a key foundation of a harmonious and cohesive school community (Mampaey & Zanoni, 2013). However, increasingly, many scholars now advocate a plurilingual teaching approach that allows pupils to use their home languages in mainstream classroom environments; such approaches have been found to promote more successful content and language learning (Auger, 2013; Sierens & Van Avermaet, 2014) and to bring benefits associated with individual well-being and cohesion within the classroom and school community (Meier, 2014).

Yet the introduction of a plurilingual approach is not without its challenges; it entails teachers and pupils reframing their notions of valid language as well as negotiating new norms and expectations around what is means to be a plurilingual learner. This chapter describes the experiences and attitudes of late-primary pupils in a highly linguistically diverse school in Brussels, Belgium, when their teachers introduced *Functional Multilingual Learning (FML)* (Sierens & Van Avermaet, 2014) and they began to use their home language(s) in school for the first time. Using the lens of social cohesion, the authors seek to unravel how a plurilingual approach impacted on the dynamics of socio-linguistic organisation, both horizontally (i.e. across peer groups), and vertically (i.e. in relation to the school hierarchy). The chapter addresses the following research questions:

- How did the introduction of *FML* impact on feelings of social cohesion between peers?
- What kinds of language norms and restrictions emerged with the introduction of FML?
- How did the pupils frame the rules for this new linguistic functioning?

These questions entail reflections on how the pupils perceived and enacted plurilingual classroom citizenship and how this needs to underpin school and classroom language policy. This chapter answers to Dooly and Vallejo's (2019) call for further research about pupil perspectives of transformative practices in education, whilst also deepening our understanding of children's perceptions of social cohesion, hitherto relatively understudied (see UNICEF, 2019). It begins with an overview of how scholars have hitherto conceptualised social cohesion in general, and specifically how it can be adapted and applied as a heuristic at a micro/meso primary classroom level. This is followed by reflection on the disjunct between existing monolingual policies in schools and the multilingual realities of learners, and how new plurilingual approaches such as *FML* embody an alternative form of classroom citizenship. The school setting and pupils participants are then presented, along with a description of the research methodology and the analytical framework used to examine the horizontal and vertical dynamics of the pupils' perspectives and experiences. The Findings section shows how the pupils experienced FML in diverse ways, and that despite many positive dimensions, tensions remained around multilingual social interaction. Finally, in the Discussion and Conclusion, the authors reflect firstly on how the data in the study suggest the need for a more active, multilingual conceptualisation of citizenship education and on the associated implications this has for multilingual pedagogies.

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