

Migrant children at school: A critical analysis of educational language policies and practices in the south of Brazil

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Abstract

The reception and integration policy for immigrants and refugees in Brazil (Law No. 13,445/2017) is broadly recognized as one of the most open and integrative laws in the world, since it gives them the same access rights to public policies as other Brazilians (Marques, 2018). In theory, this perspective would mean a facilitated school integration for migrant children, such as the children of Haitians, Senegalese, Syrians and Venezuelans who have been arriving in large numbers in Brazil since 2014. Based on Language Policy (Shohamy, 2006; Spolsky, 2016) and Applied Linguistics studies on plurilingualism and linguistic diversity (Maher, 2007; García, Johnson, & Seltzer, 2017), we discuss current constraints and challenges regarding migrant children education mainly in the south of Brazil. Drawing from qualitative analysis of data generated in 2016 through our educational action research at a public school in Porto Alegre, Brazil, with mostly Haitian immigrants (Bulla et al., 2017; Bulla et al., 2019), articulated with research undertaken in different parts of the country (Neves, 2018; Bergamasco, 2018), we highlight some breaking points urging for educational planning in order to envision the lively incarnation of the open and integrative law discourse in our education system. The first problem we identified in 2016 was the school's difficulty in referring students to adequate grades, considering the absence of an institutional equivalence between the Haitian and Brazilian education systems. The solution found by the school was to take as a general principle the entry of immigrants in the initial stages of the school year, even though some had completed more advanced levels of education in their country of origin, and regardless of their age. Furthermore, non-proficiency in Portuguese was taken as equivalent to low schooling, although the initial stages of the basic school in Brazil are not aimed at additional language learning, but literacy. Considering the area of Portuguese as an Additional Language (PAL) teaching, it is understood that students that speak Spanish will be able to establish intersubjectivity with those who speak Portuguese, due to the proximity between both languages (Almeida Filho, 1995), which is unlikely to happen with students that speak Creole, French or Arabic, contributing then to exclusion at school. Each case requires different PAL teaching approaches to promote language learning for all. Thus, for the inclusion of migrant children at schools in Brazil, it is important for teachers to be educated on at least the basics of PAL teaching, once Portuguese is the language of broad citizenship and most teachers

at our focus school do not speak other languages. However, we consider it to be crucial for educators to promote linguistic and cultural diversity, by critically overcoming the myth of a monolingual country that hover our society (Oliveira, 2008; Morello, 2012), and by undertaking educational practices that value collaboration among students and challenge both native and migrant children that share the same class.

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