Plurilingual pre-service teachers

‘What’s your nash, miss?’ Plurilingual pre-service teachers preparing to teach in Sydney schools

What is it like to be a plurilingual pre-service teacher, training to teach in Australian schools?

Recently, 15 primary and secondary pre-service (trainee) teachers who had a range of languages other than English, were interviewed about the relationship between their multiple languages, their tertiary teacher education, and their future teaching career. The question explored was whether these pre-service teachers are able to use their ‘plurilingual’ abilities in their own education, and in their Australian school teaching context? ‘Plurilingual’ describes an ability to use languages flexibly across different contexts, where languages interrelate and interact, with the ability to use them to critique and improve communication.

The linguistic and educational profiles of the interview participants were rich and varied. Of the 15 interviewees, eight were training to be primary teachers, and seven were training to be secondary teachers (of History, English, Society & Culture, Mathematics, Computing and ESL). They spoke 23 languages between them, acquired through immigration, family heritage, or study. While ten of the 15 participants spoke just one language in addition to English, five participants spoke more than one. For example, one participant spoke Malay, Mandarin, Indonesian, Spanish and Korean, and was keen to learn more. Two examples illustrate their personal commitment to plurilingualism:

Victor, in addition to knowledge of French and German, daily uses Russian, Serbian and English. He speaks Serbian with his wife, and is trying to raise his children multilingually by using several languages with them. His children attend Russian community school on Saturdays and Serbian community school on Sundays.

Jacinta speaks with her family in Dari and her husband in Pashtun, Dari and English. Jacinta owns her linguistic profile as somewhat ‘unique’ and became proud of her language knowledge when she realised that not everyone in Australia spoke multiple languages.

For all participants, linguistic ability was aligned closely with family and community. Their languages were used regularly within their homes and communities in child-rearing, family communication, shopping, media, and broader social interaction. Some expressed the linguistic contrast between their ‘private sphere’ and the

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‘outside’ world of their city, described as ‘walking between two cultures’. They negotiate being a member of a community, finding an intercultural space between cultures, and studying in a public sphere defined exclusively in English.

Today it is considered educationally very important in schools to engage children’s identities in their learning. The participants reported, however, that they had not seen this practised, as their language abilities had received little or no recognition within tutorials or lectures during their Education degree. They would have liked to experience inclusion of their language skills and cultural perspectives in tutorials. Without such recognition in teacher preparation courses, how can pre-service teachers bring their linguistic and cultural identities into their professional identities as beginner teachers?

Pre-service teachers also complete school practicum teaching experience. The impressions they gain on school practicum are pivotal in their early perceptions of their role and sense of membership in their professional community. Around half of the group reported that they had used language or language-related skills in some small way during their practicum, and this had been a validating and positive experience. One achieved a ‘good outcome’ for a Pakistani student after working with him for a day. Another helped a recent arrival Iranian student in the playground, and was asked by the school to communicate with his parents. They were also frequently asked by students, in linguistically diverse schools, ‘what’s your nash, sir/miss?’ (nationality). Participants felt that this interaction implied the students’ enthusiasm for teachers to be equally a member of the plurilingual transnational nature of their school, exemplifying the rapport and cultural bridges which can be built through linguistic diversity. Practicum served as a trigger to think about ways to use their linguistic capital to provide a richer educational environment for all students, and opportunity, for some, to see themselves as multi-dimensional educators.

Some ‘barrier factors’ however were also experienced on practicum. Three reported that they actually concealed their multilingual ability – while in a monolingual school alongside monolingual teachers – in order to fit in. One commented that ‘not being like everyone else’ made her feel as if there was an ‘invisible wall’ between her and the school community. One was subject to an incident of verbal abuse from a group of students regarding his nationality. Several participants felt insecure about their English speaking and writing abilities. One stated: ‘I feel people judge me because I know other languages. I feel I would be more sought after if I only spoke English’. The monolingual mindset of such schools is an impediment to these pre-service teachers’ plurilingual potential. Their experiences show the patchy development of inclusive practice in Australian schools, and ambivalent attitudes towards languages generally.

When asked how they saw their languages in their future teaching career, a number answered ‘never thought about it’. At this point in their development, their principal concern is, rightly, their acquisition of classroom content knowledge, survival skills, and high standards of English literacy competence. Nevertheless, many felt they had four areas of ability, particularly connected with their language knowledge, which would be useful to them in their teaching careers:

1. They believed that they would bring a capacity for empathy to their career. Several participants spoke of an enhanced cultural awareness through their language knowledge, and an appreciation of different values held by students. This was a generic intercultural skill, not confined to students from the same cultural background. Many also mentioned empathy for English language-learners.
2. Many hoped for future practical opportunities to speak to students and parents in their languages, to be useful in building good communication across effective school communities.

3. Generic meta-linguistic ability. Four spoke of increased awareness of grammar structures and more versatile and simplified communication options.

4. Three participants spoke enthusiastically about the possibility of showing students how plurilingualism and language learning represented an exciting engagement with the world and intercultural learning. One believed that ‘new languages teach new values and understandings’ and that it was her responsibility to teach about humanity and difference. Another believed she must ‘teach that having another language is okay’, so that children could celebrate and share theirs.

These four positive projections of their teaching futures appear to have been shaped largely by two sources of input: their own plurilingual identity, and small positive experiences on practicum. They suggest no input from their experience as learners at university. Tertiary study has of course constructed their theoretical knowledge, skills, and pedagogy used during practicum, but has done so in isolation from their private identities. How, then, are these talented plurilingual pre-service teachers to conceive and develop an integrated professional identity in an Australian school context?

The opportunities for these pre-service teachers to employ their plurilingual capacity in Australia are limited. The monolingual subtext to multicultural Australia has shaped the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers which fail to recognise linguistic competence as a positive attribute for teachers in this era of international teacher mobility. University pedagogy, which is shaped by demands of the Standards, ignores the potential of linguistic diversity amongst its undergraduate cohort. Monolingual schools and teachers continue to be unaware of their devaluation of plurilingual pre-service teachers.

The cohort of plurilingual teachers entering the profession possesses linguistic and intercultural skills that must be both visible and valued; they are indispensable agents and advocates that can engineer reform regarding attitudes to language in Australian education. Unlike many of their monolingual peers, plurilingual pre-service teachers can move with flexibility across languages and cultures, crossing boundaries between their homes, communities and networks. They know they can contribute to student well-being and success through empathy and consideration of communication issues, and by playing a positive role in supporting student learning. They need professional opportunities, both at university and in schools, to demonstrate and develop their intercultural capital, in order to bring their personal identities forward into their professional futures, to the benefit of both their peers and their students.

A more detailed account of this research project will be published later in 2015, as Moloney, R., & Giles, A. (2015). Plurilingual pre-service teachers in a multicultural society: insightful, invaluable, invisible. Special Issue (Fall, 2015) of the Australian Review of Applied Linguistics (ARAL).