STRUCTURAL DISCRIMINATION AGAINST MINORITY LINGUISTIC GROUPS IN THE FRENCH EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM: AN EXAMINATION OF POLICY DOCUMENTS

by

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This study examines the situation of children in French schools whose first language is not French, with particular reference to a recent (1994) document, the _contrat scolaire_ (contract of schooling), produced by the French Ministry of Education that specified the role and responsibilities of the French school towards parents, teachers and pupils. The discourses of this document are situated within the wider French political and linguistic context, with particular reference to the 1994 “Toubon law” relating to the French language and to French language planning policy, in order to demonstrate the wider structure placing children from linguistic minority groups at a disadvantage within the French educational and political system.

**Children from minority linguistic groups in French schools.**

In 1991, over 10% of children in elementary education in France were "of immigrant origin" - although many of these children would have been born in France of migrant parents (Anderson-Levitt et al, 1991). These children have a disproportionate rate of difficulties at school - 25% of those minority linguistic group children who come from families of unskilled workers repeat the first year of elementary school, and in 1984 it was reported that 93% of students who repeat this year do not manage to reach the _lycée_, the secondary educational system (Levasseur & Seibel, 1984). Some have suggested that this is linked more to their socio-economic status than their origin - Costa-Lascoux (1989) pointed out that although 25% of migrants’ children repeat the first year of education, so do 19% of non-immigrant’s children in families of unskilled workers. However children of migrant origin can have a particular problem in that they do not have access to the language of education - which in France is very clearly French, and only French (see below).

In a survey conducted in 1995 amongst second-generation migrants between 18 and 30 years old, 43% stated that while they spoke French at home their parents spoke Arabic or Berber; 35% stated that everyone spoke French; and 20% stated that everyone spoke Arabic or Berber (Mermet, 1995). This means that at least 63% of these people had come from a background where French was not the first language spoken at home.
Figures are not available for the proportion of children of school age who do not speak French at home but there is still likely to be a large proportion of children of migrant origin for whom French is not the first language studying in French schools.

This is a situation that is extremely prejudicial to the educational chances of these children. In recent years many people have demonstrated the crucial rôle of education in reproducing social differences (see particularly Bourdieu and Passeron (1970)). In direct opposition to the "blame the victim" explanations for school failure, which put the reasons for this failure within the child or within the child's family or culture, some modern social theorists suggest that this sort of failure can be seen just as much as the school failing to provide what the child needs. From seeing minority language children as a problem to be dealt with, there are now calls for teachers to recognise the value of having children of a different language and culture in the classroom - Skutnabb-Kangas (1988) calls for schools to "be adapted to the children, not vice versa" (p.33).

Becoming bilingual is a forced necessity for these children, given the power structures of the world in which they live, where any sort of democratic participation in the life of a country is, in most European societies, contingent on speaking the official language of that country, and access to the labour market at any level above that of the unskilled worker is usually also contingent on speaking the official language. Particularly in France, a good command of the French language is seen as a gateway to all higher forms of education. Anderson-Levitt et al (1991) discuss the system of examinations where "merit... is usually measured by competitive essay examinations. ... Thus standard written French, which most closely resembles the spoken language of native-born professional families, is the not-so-neutral criterion of success in most areas of French life."(p. 92). This is valid not only for jobs which in themselves demand a good command of French but for almost any post linked to the French civil service, which is the largest employer in the country. Tollefson (1991) writes: "Whenever people must learn a new language to have access to education or to understand classroom instruction, language is a factor in creating and sustaining social and economic divisions." (p.9). Where schools fail in not teaching children the languages they need, or equally in depriving children of their linguistic rights by robbing them of their first
language, these social and economic divisions will have a profound impact on their lives.

Skutnabb-Kangas (1988) analyses the relative success of programmes for bilingual learners and concludes that the programmes which manage to make the children bilingual and give them a good chance of school achievement are those in which the linguistic goal of the programme is bilingualism - a good command of both languages - and in which the societal goals are positive for the group concerned. The programmes which do not achieve bilingualism and high levels of school success are those in which the linguistic goal has been dominance in one of the languages, whether the children’s first or second language, and the (implicit) societal goal has been to keep the group in a subordinate position. (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1988, p.27)

In this study I assess a policy document released by the Ministry of Education in France in order to determine whether there is a "space" in the education system for children in France of migrant origin to be given the sort of education that is likely to lead to school success and stable bilingualism, or whether the school structure as outlined in this document actively mitigates against such an education for them. (By "space" I mean whether the framework outlined in this document makes bilingual education for migrant children a possibility or whether it does not allow for such openings. Neither of these positions is explicitly stated, but it will become clear how this document closes off the "space" while never overtly discussing the question.) A critical examination of such documents can demonstrate a great deal about the implications of these documents for the future education of children from minority groups. (See for example Boogerman (1993), an analysis of the ideology behind Catalan policy documents about the education of migrant children.)

The document I will examine here is the *contrat scolaire* released in August 1994. This document was produced after widespread anti-Government demonstrations in January, sparked off by a proposal to change the funding mechanisms of private schools, called for a re-assessment of the educational system in France. In this document (reproduced in the Appendix), François Bayrou (then Minister of Education)
attempts to set out exactly what schools should be doing, by giving precise instructions as to such things as what and how schools should be teaching, how the school day should be organised, how careers orientation should be offered, etc. I will first discuss the document itself, seeing what it shows on its own about the likely situation of migrant children in the French education system. Then I will look at it in the light of the general French language policy, looking particularly at the avowed language planning aims of the country and at a 1994 law prescribing areas where French must be used. In a country with such strongly avowed language planning goals it would be impossible to draw conclusions from such a document without considering the wider political and social context within which it is written.

The contrat scolaire.

I will begin with a brief description of the document. It is divided into 150 distinct propositions and 7 main sections - l'école primaire (primary school), le collège (elementary school), le lycée (high school), la formation professionnelle initiale et continue (initial and continued professional development), l'école et son environnement (the school and its environment), vie des établissements (daily life) and métiers de l'éducation (those working in education). (All translations are my own.) Within these sections Bayrou covers the main focus of the curriculum at the various levels, the organisation of the school day, and various other issues relevant to schools, for example the training of teachers and careers education.

Examining this contrat to find out what it can tell us about the education of children from minority linguistic groups, the first and most interesting thing about it is that these children are simply not mentioned. There is no explicit acknowledgement of the fact that there may be children in schools for whom French is not their first language. The fact that there is no explicit provision for these children within the framework - despite the fact that, as noted above, at the elementary level more than 10% of the children in education are of non-French origin (Anderson-Levitt et al, 1991) - means that these children are not allowed an explicit place within the system. The lack of definite provision for them means that, no matter what their number may be in a
particular school, on an official level they are invisible.

There is one oblique reference to the fact that in some areas a large number of the children in the classroom may not have French as the first language. This comes in proposition 6:

*L’enseignement du français notamment dans les zones d’éducation prioritaire, fait davantage appel aux méthodes d’apprentissage du français-langue étrangère. Un programme de formation continue est proposé à cet effet.*

(Teaching of French, particularly in zones with educational priority, is to make more use of the methods of teaching French as a foreign language. A programme of in-service training is proposed to this effect.)

The *zones d’éducation prioritaires* were created by the Socialist Government in the early 1980s, to designate areas characterised by a high concentration of children from low socio-economic backgrounds, and a high rate of school failure among these children. These zones have been the beneficiaries of a certain amount of positive discrimination, particularly in financial terms, since this creation. Although the defining factor in creating a ZEP was the socioeconomic profile of the area, the correlation between migrant status and low socioeconomic status is such that these are often the areas with the highest concentration of children of non-French origin. Therefore these are the areas where the need for bilingual education is at its greatest.

However, in this proposition it is implicitly made clear that no form of bilingual education will be offered in these areas. Instead, the implication is that, by altering teaching methodology slightly to incorporate the methods of *français langue étrangère* (French as a foreign language) - presumably meaning the direct method of teaching, using only the French language, the children’s L2 - these children will be able to learn French and survive in a French-speaking classroom. This is but a subtle variant on the submersion method (see Skutnabb-Kangas, 1988, p.26). And not only is this the case, but this will be achieved, not by using specialist teachers trained in the
direct method, but by the in-service training of ordinary primary school teachers whose initial training did not necessarily include any language teaching at all. The problems that children may encounter as a result of not speaking French are not addressed at all.

This approach to the teaching of non-French-L1 children is doubly damaging because it will perpetuate a blame-the-victim philosophy. If, after a couple of years of having French language classes taught using *techniques de français langue étrangère*, the child is still having difficulty in following a curriculum taught in the French language, people in power within the institution of the school will be able to claim that the problem must lie within the child, who has (after all) been exposed to a second-language teaching methodology and has still not learnt French. If we agree with Skutnabb-Kangas’ claim that those programmes which will succeed for minority children are those which have as their linguistic goal bilingualism, we see that here the system does not allow for children to be bilingual, but imposes French language dominance.

And if these children fail to master French adequately by the end of the primary school, they have failed overall. It is quite clearly stated (proposition 2) that at the primary level:

*La première des priorités est de maîtriser la langue française, orale et écrite.*

(The most important priority is the mastery of written and spoken French.)

This being the case, the students for whom French is a second (or third, fourth or fifth) language will be at a significant disadvantage, with regard both to the content of the curriculum and to the language it is taught in. The use of French in the classroom is one of the fundamental precepts of French education, going back to the immediate post-Revolution years. This will be more fully discussed later but it is important to realise the fundamental importance of this concept in the French educational system, a concept that is actualised in the discourse of this document. This is one of the reasons why there is so little "space" within the framework of this document for programmes that would enable minority language learners to maintain their first languages at
school.

There is, however, a definite focus on language learning in this document. From the primary level, the objectives are clear (propositions 7 and 8):

7. Dès le cours élémentaire, tous les élèves sont initiés chaque jour pendant 15 minutes à une langue vivante étrangère en utilisant les techniques audiovisuelles. Une formation continue des enseignants du 1er degré est prévue à cet effet.

(From the elementary level onwards, all students will follow an initiation to a foreign language for 15 minutes a day, using the audio-visual method. In-service training of primary-level teachers is arranged to this effect.)

8. L'initiation simultanée à deux langues vivantes (étrangère et régionale par exemple) est expérimentée dans quelques classes.

(Simultaneous initiation to two modern languages - for example, a foreign and a regional language - is to be tried in some classes.)

This explicit focus is continued in the section discussing the collège (10-14 years) level, proposition number 42:

L'enseignement des langues vivantes s'adresse à tous. Après la première langue vivante pour tous en 6ème, une deuxième langue vivante obligatoire est enseignée en 4ème.

(Learning modern languages is for all students. After the first compulsory foreign language in [the French equivalent of] Year 7, a second obligatory modern language is taught in Year 9.)

And other languages are offered too at collège level (proposition no. 43):

De nouvelles options sont proposées partout et pour tous. Tous les élèves de 5ème peuvent choisir en option l'enseignement du latin. Ceux de 3ème peuvent choisir l'enseignement du grec ou l'approfondissement des sciences expérimentales ou de la
(New options are proposed for all students. All Year 8 students can choose to follow Latin. Year 10 students can choose to learn Greek or to take extra classes in experimental science or technology.)

So it is explicitly stated that all pupils must begin learning a foreign language at primary level, with the second foreign language being brought in at collège level, and the option of taking one or two Classical languages as well. However, nowhere in the document is it acknowledged that some pupils may already know one or more languages other than French, and nowhere is explicit space given to the concept of language maintenance programmes. Although the languages to be taught as langues étrangères are not specified, in the vast majority of French schools this means English, Spanish and German, and to change this assumption would take an explicit statement which is not found here.

Interestingly, in an interview relating to the contrat scolaire in Le Monde (10 May 1994), François Bayrou does address the question of children from minority linguistic groups learning new languages in the classroom, with reference to this document. However instead of talking about bilingual education or language maintenance programmes, he claims that the Latin and Greek programmes offered at collège level would be useful for these children in particular, since an understanding of the structures of the Classical languages helps to develop an understanding of the basic structures of the French language. This statement, based on a theory of language learning through the grammar-translation method, has profound flaws. Firstly, if children are having difficulties with the French language they are likely to have enormous problems learning another language when the language of instruction of these languages is itself French. Secondly, if these children are already in a language learning situation that is causing them problems, adding extra new languages in every year will surely add to these problems rather than help them. Thirdly, even if through these methods the children did learn more about the structure of the French language, this in no way suggests that this will help them understand French better in the classroom or feel more at ease speaking French themselves.
A significant number of the propositions in this document deal with the problem of élèves en difficulté (students with problems). A particularly interesting proposition in this regard is number 25, the first in the collège section:

La nouvelle organisation du collège répond à un double impératif: proposer à tous les élèves, jusqu'à la classe de 3ème, des parcours de réussite et apporter des réponses adaptées aux élèves en difficulté.

(The elementary school is to be reorganised with a dual goal: to offer all students up to Year 10 pathways to educational success, and to provide the specific help for students with problems.)

The idea that all children should be offered parcours de réussite demonstrates a discourse of equality of opportunity that prevails throughout this document. Each child educated in the French system is assumed to be offered the same opportunities within the system. If they fail to take advantage of them then the problem lies within the child, and des réponses adaptées (specific help) needs to be offered to each child. What these réponses should be are specified more fully in proposition 14:

La prévention de la difficulté scolaire est une mission fondamentale de l'école. Psychologues, rééducateurs, assistants sociaux et enseignants ont pour mission d'assurer la détection précoce, le dépistage et le suivi des enfants en difficulté. Pour chaque élève concerné, ils proposent des réponses individualisées, en liaison avec les familles et les enseignants. Ils interviennent dès la maternelle et peuvent suivre le cheminement des élèves durant toute leur scolarité.

(Prevention of difficulty at school is one of the school’s fundamental goals. Psychologists, re-educators, social workers and teachers have the mission of ensuring prompt detection, diagnosis and follow-up of students with problems. For each student concerned, they are to propose individualised help, liaising with families and teachers. They are to intervene from kindergarten onwards, and can follow students’ progress throughout their school years.)
The whole focus of this way of dealing with educational difficulties is to deal with the child. There is absolutely no acknowledgement that some or all of the causes of this difficulty might lie outside the child. Each individual child is constructed as having individual difficulties, which need to be treated in a different and specific manner. The fact that particular socioeconomic or linguistic groups may have particular difficulties that could be seen as the school failing that particular group is completely ignored.

This has serious implications for the education of children from minority groups who are in a system which is loaded against them from the very beginning. When they encounter the inevitable difficulties they are set apart from other children by being given individualised assistance. This may lead to the child being monitored throughout their time at school, marked for the entirety of their school life as a ‘student with problems’, while some of the key reasons behind these problems may never be analysed.

Therefore in the document itself it appears that there is very little “space” for any sort of bilingual education for migrant children, and that any school difficulties they encounter will be dealt with on an individual level that perpetuates a blame-the-victim philosophy and precludes any examination of the system. Analysing this document using Skutnabb-Kangas’ (1988) framework, this is a programme designed to make children dominant in French regardless of their L1, which will reproduce the dominated situation of the migrant groups by not addressing the fundamental reasons behind their school difficulties. Therefore migrant children educated within this system would be likely to experience a low degree of success.

One of the most significant factors in this system, which I have already mentioned, is the fact that learning the French language is the principle goal of French primary education. Throughout the document French is cited as the fundamental element of the curriculum at all levels. This focus on the French language dates back to the introduction of universal schooling after the Revolution, in the 19th century.

**French language purism in the educational system.**
The advent of universal schooling in the 19th century was an explicit part of the French nation-building programme, to try to eradicate the regional indigenous languages and to make everyone speak French. A single language was seen as a fundamental necessity for the creation of a single nation. In 1790 an enquiry conducted by the Abbé Grégoire concluded that it was necessary to universalise the use of French in order that the new Republic succeed, and that therefore the use of all other languages in the country should as far as possible be eliminated. In 1794 therefore a decree was passed demanding that a French-speaking primary school teacher be installed in each village in France. This was not fully implemented at the time, but the political consensus remained the same - that schooling in French was necessary to universalise French in France, and that the use of other languages in the classroom was anti-Republican. Throughout the 19th century this was gradually implemented, particularly between 1833 and 1843 when 60,000 schools were opened. In these schools speaking any language other than French was forbidden, with special punishments being reserved for children breaking this rule. This was seen as essential to the development of French national unity. (A fuller exposition is to be found in Tusting 1993.)

It is therefore unsurprising that in 1994, when French national identity was widely felt to be threatened by economic difficulties, immigration and membership of the European Union, political discourse about the French language should continue in this vein. In particular, mother-tongue teaching using Arabic or other languages spoken in North Africa began to be seen as dangerous for France. In recent years a fear of Islamic fundamentalism has swept the country, particularly given the violent political situation in Algeria. A short-lived course of maintenance classes in children's "languages and cultures of origin" in the late 1980s was stopped due to fears of promoting Islamic fundamentalism via these classes (Anderson-Levitt et al, 1991). It can be seen therefore that the use of French as the sole language of instruction is deeply rooted in the French educational ideology, and wider political issues mitigate against any sort of change within this system.

A particular issue in the wider political sphere is that of French language purism. In
recent years in particular, explicit policy statements and legislation have been enacted which articulate with the discourse of the educational system to mitigate even further against any sort of bilingual education or language maintenance programmes for minority linguistic groups, and which devalue all languages other than French spoken within France.

**The wider political sphere.**

The discourses of the educational system of a country cannot be examined in isolation. They need to be seen in the context of the wider institutional and political discourses of the dominant groups of the country. In this particular context a key document is the 1994 law relating to the use of the French language (No. 94-665, 4 August 1994). This law was passed as a direct response to the perennial worry that English is usurping French as an international language of political and economic power. Anglicisms are held to be insidiously creeping into the French language. Scientific conferences held in France were coming to be held normally in English. As a result of these concerns, Jacques Toubon, the then Minister of Culture and Francophonie, created this law, which demands that French be used in five key areas of public life: in trade, for informing the consumer; in the world of work; in the education system; in the *audiovisuel*, that is to say the media and electronic information services; and in seminars, conferences and the like.

The main part of the law that concerns us here is the section on education, Article 11 section 1, which reads as follows:

*La langue de l'enseignement, des examens et concours, ainsi que des thèses et mémoires dans les établissements publics et privés d'enseignement est le français, sauf exceptions justifiées par les nécessités de l'enseignement des langues et cultures régionales ou étrangères ou lorsque les enseignants sont des professeurs associés ou invités étrangers.*

(The language of teaching, of examinations and competitions, and of theses and dissertations in public and private teaching establishments is French, apart from exceptions which can be justified by the need to teach regional or foreign languages
and cultures, or in the case of foreign associate teachers or visitors.)

*Les écoles étrangères ou spécialement ouvertes pour accueillir des élèves de nationalité étrangère, ainsi que les établissements dispensant un enseignement à caractère international, ne sont pas soumis à cette obligation.*

(Foreign schools, schools for foreign students, and international schools are not bound by this obligation.)

This states very clearly that all teaching in schools, except that related to modern languages, must be done in French; that all examinations must be held in French; that all theses must be written in French. The exceptions to this ruling are schools expressly opened for children of non-French nationality, and the International schools. Neither of these exceptions is relevant to minority linguistic group children within the State educational system, for whom the rule of law is clearly that they shall be taught in French.

The wider implications of this law also have implications for these children. It has become illegal to use languages other than French in many domains, including in the retail trade and in the world of work. This devalues all the other languages spoken in the country, and gives a legal justification for linguicism - discrimination against someone on the basis of the language they speak. This legal domination of the French language will also have implications for the maintenance of these children's low socio-economic status once they reach the world of work. Where once, even if they could not speak French, they could possibly have found a job where they could speak their L1 within their own language community, this has now become illegal.

The provisions of this law are a manifestation of the wider French language planning policy. The French State has always very explicitly tried to "protect" the language. The existence of a Minister for Culture and *"Francophonie"*, a word referring both to French-speaking communities and to the general usage of French throughout the world, demonstrates the importance of the French language in the country. One of the key functions of this ministry is to protect the use of French in France and the French-
speaking world. And in 1995 the French Constitution, the document on which France as a nation-state is symbolically based, was altered to include the explicit claim that the language of the Republic is French.

In 1989, the Délégation Générale à la Langue Française was created, a governmental body with the explicit mission de promouvoir et de coordonner les actions des administrations et des organismes publics et privés qui concourent à la diffusion et au bon usage de la langue française (to promote and co-ordinate the actions of those government agencies and public and private bodies which aim to promote and protect the correct usage of the French language) (DGLF, no date). This group is the main policy-maker for the French language. The explicit policies of this body are D'assurer le rayonnement du français, langue de la République; de conserver au français son rôle de communication internationale; et de respecter la diversité linguistique et culturelle et promouvoir le plurilinguisme (to ensure that French, the language of the Republic, flourishes; to preserve the role of French as a language of international communication; and to respect linguistic and cultural diversity and promote plurilingualism) (DGLF, nd). In order to achieve the first two aims the DGLF is not only involved in work to enrich the French language (by, for example, producing new scientific vocabulary); they are also empowered to police the use of French: since the passing of the Loi Toubon they are able to prosecute people who infringe the law on the use of the language.

But surely, since one of the aims is to promote plurilingualism, this should at least be positive for those people living in France who do not speak French? Not if one examines the detail of this policy statement. The main points are that the diversity of languages within the European Union should be respected and protected, and that within all European Union policy plurilingualism should be protected. This plurilingualism only relates to national languages of EU member states.

In this document too there is a reference to language teaching in schools, with France appealing for two foreign languages to be taught in all schools in the European Union. Although again the document does not specify which languages these should be, the
immediate context of the rest of the document suggests that European languages are the ones targeted. There is no acknowledgement of the plurilingualism within European countries, including speakers of non-European languages. And there is no acknowledgement of the language rights of non-European language speakers. The underlying aim of this particular document seems to be to protect all European languages from the spread of English as the super-dominant language, without recognising that these European languages themselves dominate the other languages used by different groups of people within Europe.

**Conclusions.**

It can be seen from the above that the educational situation of children from minority linguistic groups within the French state is threatened both by the French educational system and by a wider ideology throughout all French language policy which is explicitly designed to give the French language dominance in France. From the discussion of the *contrat scolaire* itself we have seen that there is little or no space within the official French educational structure for the bilingual education that these children need in order to be able to participate fully in the democratic processes and labour market of the country. A blame-the-victim philosophy which runs through the document also suggests that the school difficulties of these children will be addressed as individual difficulties, rather than addressing the system which contributes to these difficulties. Placing these ideologies within the wider context of French language planning policy, it can be seen that the dominance of French is not only part of French educational ideology, but runs throughout French language legislation; the situation within education is designed to reflect and reproduce the wider situation.

The conclusions that can be drawn from this sort of policy analysis however need to be supplemented by research in the field. Ethnographic work is necessary in order to see how official discourses are articulated in social practice. The picture we have here of overall French dominance may not be reflected in actual practices in the classroom, where unofficial practices of resistance to the dominating structures of the institution may be challenging the system. However it is possible to conclude that the place of
children from minority linguistic groups within the educational institutional structure is a very disempowered one, and that the likelihood of them achieving success within a discriminatory system is fairly low.
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