Plural Pedagogies and Inclusion in French Primary Schools: Building Teacher Self-Efficacy

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Abstract

The domain-specific nature, and the organisational, instructional and emotional components of teacher self-efficacy have been widely explored in research in education for over 40 years. This presentation examines teacher self-efficacy in relation to the use of plural approaches to the inclusion of plurilingual and pluricultural pupils in French primary schools. Navigating the mismatch between the values, rules, beliefs and linguistic expectations of home and school can be challenging for this group of pupils, who require high levels of self-efficacy, which positively impacts resilience, persistence and willingness to try hard, if they are to succeed. Recent research highlights links between high teacher self-efficacy, the development of high pupil self-efficacy, and the use of inclusive classroom practices. This paper investigates the extent to which the experiences of future primary-school teachers in France during their periods of teaching practice are likely to contribute to the development of high levels of self-efficacy in relation to the use of plural pedagogical practices. Data was collected from 300 student-teachers enrolled in a two-year pre-service teacher education programme using an online questionnaire and follow-up interviews which examined their self-efficacy feelings in relation to plural classroom practices, and their enactive and vicarious experiences of these practices during teaching practice. The results suggest that despite some positive points, overall exposure to language awareness activities during teaching practice is not systematic enough to really impact the evolution of high TSE in this domain. The findings have important implications for the content of the pre-service teacher education programme.

Keywords: teacher education, primary school, plurilinguism, plural pedagogies, language teaching

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Introduction

UNESCO statistics concerning the French school system reveal a significant level of linguistic and cultural diversity within the pupil population. In 2024 a third of school pupils surveyed, so about four million children, claimed they spoke a language other than French, (the language of schooling), at home. Statistics published by the French government show that 88,500 allophone children were registered in the school system in the year 2023–2024. France has a republican school system born with the education reforms of Jules Ferry in 1881 and 1882. The underlying motivation for these reforms was a vision of education as a tool for reenforcing nationhood, and creating social justice and equality. This was to be done through rigorous, moral, civic education in one shared language for all future citizens. At the heart of the project was the desire to create a more unified society and within this view, having a shared language and culture was seen as being particularly important. Therefore, a clear division between the public and private spheres, so here school and home, was promoted. In order to achieve this, socio-culturally specific characteristics, such as signs of religious affiliations, or languages other than French, were to be left at the door, thus ensuring a level playing field for all pupils. The consequences of these reforms and the vision of society and education which underpinned them can still be felt in today's schools. The education system is highly centralized, secular, places a very high value on mastery of the French language, and has an additive approach to the acquisition of languages other than French. Foreign languages are seen as school subjects and not as tools for life and living, and heritage languages are viewed as belonging to the private sphere and therefore not as needing a place in schools.

However, nowadays, this vision, created to promote equality, seems to be at odds with modern scientific research in plurilinguism and identity construction. Research in plurilinguism (Choi & Ollerhead, 2018; Coste et al., 2009; Garcia & Li, 2014; Piccardo, 2019), views a person's repertoire of languages as a single, composite competence within which languages are in constant interaction. Research into identity (Lau, 2020; Norton, 2013), views language and culture as being intrinsic to, and inseparable from, a person's ongoing process of identity construction. How then can a child be expected to be able to leave their linguistic and cultural diversity at the door of the school and still have the same school experience as a pupil who does not experience any linguistic or cultural dissonance between home and school? This research project investigates this apparent tension between the republican school system and the linguistic and cultural reality of the current pupil population from the perspective of future teachers within the system – student teachers, currently engaged in initial teacher education in France, who were for the most part themselves educated within this same school system. How do they feel about their capacity to manage the possible conflicts they may find between their own education, the cultural history of the school system, current research in plurilinguism and the situation they find in their own classrooms? Has does managing this complexity effect their feelings of self-efficacy concerning the use of plural approaches to linguistic and cultural diversity in the classroom?

Literature Review

Bandura (1977, 1997), defined self-efficacy in terms of an individual's own perception of their ability to act effectively in a given situation. Despite not being directly based on actual capacity, self-efficacy beliefs have consistently been shown to have a positive impact on a person's persistence when confronted with difficulties, their readiness to make an effort, their resilience, and their confidence when confronted with challenges that demand creative

solutions (Pajares & Schunk, 2001; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001; Woodcock et al., 2022). Bandura identified four main aspects which contribute to the evolution of a person's self-efficacy beliefs - previous experiences of mastery, enactive experiences, social interactions such as criticism, advice, or praise, and previous emotional reactions such as feelings of inadequacy or incompetence. Teacher self-efficacy (TSE) has attracted much attention in research in education over the last forty years (Zee & Koomen, 2016). The challenging and constantly-evolving nature of teaching and learning situations means that effective teachers need high levels of adaptability, willingness to try new solutions, and persistence in the face of challenges. Research has shown however that TSE is task-specific, a particularly important point for teacher educators to bear in mind. A teacher may have a high level of TSE in one domain, with one age-group, with a certain type of pupil population, or with certain methodologies, but not with others. Teacher educators therefore need to identify specific areas within which teachers experience low TSE and accompany them in working on the instructional, organisational and emotional competences (Woolfolk-Hoy et al., 2009) needed in those areas.

Given the mismatch between the cultural and linguistic make-up of the current pupil population in French schools and the traditions on which the republican school system is founded, it seems likely that the domain of classroom practices which promote the inclusion of linguistic and cultural diversity within the teaching would be one in which student-teacher feelings of self-efficacy are not highly evolved. Quite a body of research nonetheless points to the importance and positive impact of high TSE in relation to inclusive teaching practices in areas such as attitudes to pedagogical innovation (Eun & Heining-Boynton, 2007; Lidner & Schwab, 2020; Woodcock, 2022), willingness to differentiate and provide scaffolding for struggling students (Hamre & Pianta, 2010), ability to connect to students' lives (Thoonen et al., 2011), willingness to provide emotional support (Hamre & Pianta, 2010), and attention to building a supportive classroom climate (Buric & Kim, 2020).

Research also suggests that teacher self-efficacy and pupil self-efficacy are linked. Plurilingual and pluricultural pupils dealing with a mismatch between the rules, behaviours, and language use expected at home and at school (Chapellon & Gontier, 2015) and the frustrations this can bring also need high levels of self-efficacy (Peetsma et al., 2005). Teachers who support the development of plurilingual competences, consider the relationships between pupils' interior lives and their felt sense of access to the learning, and who work on creating a social environment which optimises linguistic and cultural inclusion, are likely to positively impact the self-efficacy feelings of plurilingual and pluricultural pupils (Ross et al., 2001; Thoonen et al., 2011; Usher et al., 2023).

Methodology

The 301 participants in the current study were all enrolled in a two-year pre-service teacher education degree at masters' level, in a French university. This first phase of data collection involved completion of an online questionnaire which the participants completed at the beginning of the academic year. The questionnaire included open questions and statements to which the participants were asked to mark their level of agreement using a *Likert* scale. The questions focused on the student-teachers' perceptions of plurilinguism, their own and their pupils, and on their experiences with, and confidence to employ, plural pedagogies in the primary school classroom. As a second step, follow up interviews were conducted at the end of the academic year. In the current article we examine responses to four questions related to the participants' estimations of their self-efficacy in reference to plural classroom practices.

Results

Using a *Likert* scale from 10 (high level of confidence) to 1 (low level of confidence), the participants indicated their level of confidence in relation to the four following statements: "I could explore languages I know with my pupils", "I could explore languages I don't know with my pupils", "I could accompany a pupil in making comparisons between French and another language which the pupil knows, but which I don't know myself", and "I would feel at ease listening to a song in Mandarin with my pupils". Their responses were used to calculate their level of TSE from a maximum of 40 to a minimum of 1. The following graph relates the self-efficacy feelings of the most confident 25% of the cohort and the least confident 25% of the cohort in relation to each of the four statements.

Figure 1
Student-Teacher Responses to Four Questions Concerning Self-Efficacy Feelings in Relation to Plural Classroom Practices
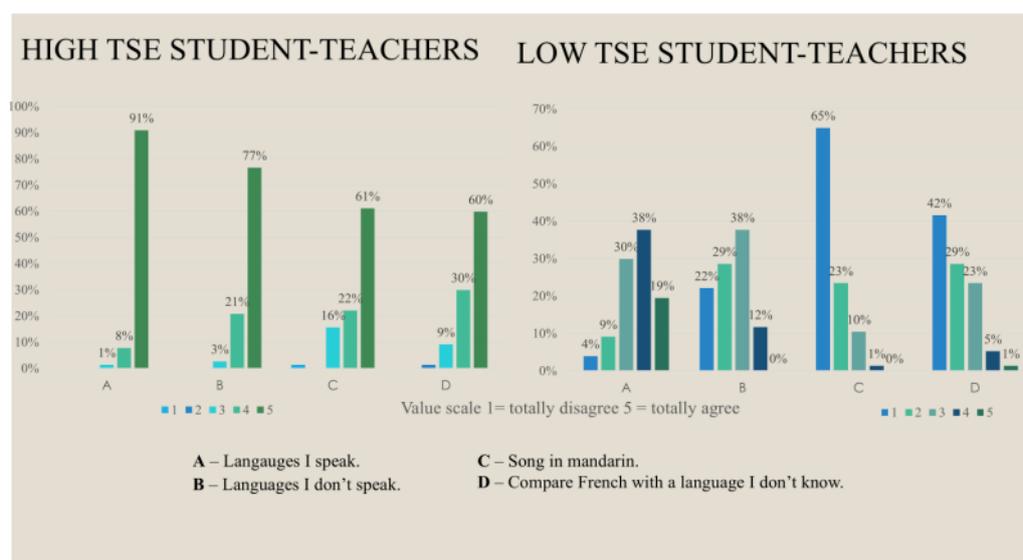
The first two statements, concerning the participants' level of confidence in exploring languages generally with their pupils, already reveal the probable impact of self-efficacy feelings on classroom practices. Those in the high TSE group would feel confident working with both known (99% give a score of 7 to 10 to this proposal) and unknown (98% give a score of 7 to 10 to this proposal) languages with their pupils – even though only 77% feel fully confident (score or 9–10) where unknown languages are concerned, as opposed to 91% for known languages. These figures contrast with the situation for the low TSE group. Here just over half (57%) feel confident where known languages are concerned and only 12% when it comes to unknown languages. Of the remaining participants in this group, 22% feel a total lack of confidence in this domain and a further 29% feel unsure of their capacity. The high TSE group remain confident when asked to think about more specific classroom situations, such as exploring a song in Mandarin (where 61% feel fully confident and a further 22% quite confident), or helping a child to compare French with a language which the child knows but which the student-teacher doesn't know (60% feel fully confident and a further 30% quite confident). In contrast the low TSE group do not see themselves as capable of managing this kind of task effectively. Only 12% feel quite confident (score of 7–8) about listening to a song in Mandarin with their pupils and 6% feel fully confident (1%), or quite confident (5%) in leading comparisons between French and other unknown languages.

Discussion

Since research has repeatedly shown clear links between teachers' felt sense of self-efficacy and their actual classroom action in terms of goal-setting, willingness to experiment with new pedagogies, persistence in the face of challenging teaching situations, and willingness to recognize the links between pupils' interior worlds and their outward learning capacities, these results give food for thought for teacher educators. For example, within the group with lower TSE, 22% feel very unconfident and 29% unsure, when it comes to exploring languages which are unknown to them, with their pupils. However, in the majority of cases, pupils' heritage languages are unknown to their classroom teachers. Furthermore, research in the field of identity construction clearly underlines the key role of languages in this process. In order for plurilingual children to feel fully accepted in the classroom their languages need to be valorized and authorized and given a role within the learning. The results show that even within the group of student-teachers with a higher level of TSE, their level of confidence decreases in response to the questions which make more concrete pedagogical propositions. Whilst 77% feel very confident exploring unknown languages and only 3% unsure about doing this, only 60% actually feel fully confident when it comes to helping a pupil to compare a language which the teacher doesn't know with French, and 9% actually feel unsure about doing this. Similarly, listening to a song in Mandarin would leave 65% of those with low TSE feeling uncomfortable, and 16% of those with high TSE feeling unsure. Yet songs are a key teaching tool at primary level and a relatively simple way to introduce cultural diversity into the classroom, since they marry the more universal and recognizable language of the music with the less comprehensible linguistic aspect. Songs which come from the heritage cultures of the pupils are an effective way of opening positive debate and sharing around pupils' cultural diversity. According to this brief presentation of student-teacher responses to these four questions, how far can these student-teachers be expected to give heritage languages and cultures a place in the learning in their classrooms when they become qualified teachers?

Conclusion

Despite the limits of the study as presented here, since only the responses to four the questionnaire questions are analyzed in detail, nonetheless, this study has clear implications for teacher education. Managing linguistic and cultural diversity in the classroom is always going to be challenging for both teachers and pupils. From the pupil perspective, not being able to follow the content of the classes due to difficulties with the language of schooling, which come not from a lack of linguistic competence, but rather from having competences in a language or languages which are not recognized in the classroom is bound to be frustrating. For teachers, trying to help children competent in languages of which the teachers themselves have no knowledge, is likely to be daunting and demands new approaches and specific tools. High levels of teacher and pupil self-efficacy, which lead to increased persistence, resilience, and willingness to expend effort and to experiment with creative solutions, seem key to overcoming the challenges inherent in the situation, leading to a transformation of obstacle-oriented perceptions of classroom diversity, to perceptions of classroom diversity as a rich resource of learning for all pupils. If this is to happen, both initial teacher education programs and ongoing professional development programs have an important role to play in providing future teachers with positive experiences of plural pedagogies both as enactive and vicarious experiences. This can be achieved through work to familiarize both student-teachers and classroom professionals with a range of resources concerning plural approaches to languages in the classroom, accompanied by reflection as to the role these activities can play in

increasing pupil self-efficacy, school readiness and reducing home-school dissonance. Student-teachers also need opportunities to observe effective plural practices in the classrooms of expert teachers during their periods of teaching practice in order for them to feel prepared to meet the linguistic and cultural diversity in their own classrooms with confidence.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that no AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate, refine, or correct the content in the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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