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Value of the Language(s) of the Family Home in the Process of Creating Cultural Identity of Children Raised in Mixed Families

Wartość języka/języków domu rodzinnego
w procesie kreowania tożsamości kulturowej dzieci
wychowywanych w rodzinach mieszanych

KEYWORDS

language education,
mixed family,
Polish-Italian family,
cultural identity,
preschool age

ABSTRACT

The author of this article presents issues rooted in the field of family and identity research. In Poland, there is a growing number of children raised in culturally diverse environments who attend Polish educational institutions. For this reason, research into the upbringing and education of preschool children who are brought up in bi-national families and live outside the borderland area acquires particular importance for teachers and educators. The aim of this article is to show the ways in which Polish-Italian families living in Krakow construct a linguistic environment for their children.

The presented results were obtained within the framework of a research project aimed at analysing and interpreting the subjective experiences of Polish mothers raising preschool children with Italian partners. The research material was collected during individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ten mothers.

The first part of the article presents the theoretical assumptions pointing to the fundamental role of language in the creation of a person's cultural identity. This is followed by a presentation of the findings showing different types of actions taken by the adult members of the families studied to support the acquisition of Italian by their children.

The rich description of the practices of adult members of Polish–Italian families in the area of language education that emerges from the interviews provides an opportunity for those directly involved in the upbringing and education of children to gain insight into the everyday reality of the family educational environment.

The rich description of the practices of adult members of Polish-Italian families in the area of language education that emerges from the narratives of the mothers interviewed provides an opportunity for those directly involved in the upbringing and education of children to gain insight into the everyday reality of their family educational environment.

SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

wychowanie
językowe, rodzina
mieszana, rodzina
polsko-włoska,
tożsamość
kulturowa, wiek
przedszkolny

W artykule zaprezentowano zagadnienia zakorzenione w obszarze badań nad rodziną i tożsamością. W naszym kraju rośnie liczba dzieci wychowywanych w środowisku zróżnicowanym kulturowo, które uczęszczają do polskich placówek edukacyjnych. Z tego względu badania dotyczące wychowania i edukacji dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym, które wychowują się w rodzinach binacjonalnych i mieszkają poza obszarem pogranicza terytorialnego, nabierają szczególnego znaczenia dla nauczycieli i edukatorów. Celem artykułu jest ukazanie sposobów konstruowania przez rodziny polsko-włoskie mieszkające w Krakowie językowego środowiska dla wychowywanych w nich dzieci.

Prezentowane wyniki badań uzyskane zostały w ramach projektu badawczego, którego celem była analiza i interpretacja subiektywnych doświadczeń polskich matek wychowujących dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym z partnerami narodowości włoskiej. Materiał badawczy zebrano w czasie indywidualnych, pogłębionych, częściowo ustrukturyzowanych wywiadów z dziesięcioma matkami.

W pierwszej części artykułu przedstawiono założenia teoretyczne wskazujące na fundamentalną rolę języka w procesie kreowania tożsamości kulturowej przez człowieka. Następnie zaprezentowano wyniki badań ukazujące różne rodzaje działań podejmowanych przez dorosłych członków badanych rodzin, które miały na celu wspieranie aktywności języka włoskiego przez dzieci.

Bogaty opis praktyk dorosłych członków rodzin polsko-włoskich w obszarze wychowania językowego, który wyłania się z narracji badanych matek, daje możliwość osobom bezpośrednio zaangażowanym w wychowanie i edukację dzieci do poznania codzienności ich rodzinnego środowiska wychowawczego.

The role of language in human creation of cultural identity

Language is the most essential element of culture, and a key pillar of human cultural identity (Nikitorowicz, 1995, 2009, 2012; Paleczny, 2008; Sztompka, 2012). Considering language in the context of a fundamental component of ideal culture, Piotr Sztompka defines it as “a complex system of interrelated symbols that belongs to a particular community” (2012, p. 357). The sociologist lists four major functions that language performs in society. According to Sztompka, language is a “tool” through which people/communities can record their experiences and their knowledge and pass them on to future generations. Language has a communicative function and is an important element of a community’s identity. Moreover, language fulfills people’s pro-social drives, by enabling them to actively participate in their preferred social groups and providing them with a sense of belonging. Jerzy Nikitorowicz shares this view of language. According to him, “Language, besides being a tool of intragroup communication, plays an important role in the process of transmitting cultural heritage from one generation to the next, and is a factor of identification and identity” (1995, p. 102).

The concepts of cultural identity I have adopted, as presented by Nikitorowicz (1995, 2009, p. 417) and Paleczny (2008, p. 94), stress that a community’s thinking about how the world works and how to interpret it is rooted in its language. Knowledge of a language is not just a mechanical ability to combine single words into longer sequences according to grammar rules. It is also the knowledge of a community’s culture and the use of its communication code in a way that is consistent with its perception/view of the world. It can be said that individual concepts (words) are given specific meanings in the language of a given community. The world available to humans and learned by humans is to some degree a product of the language used by the community which they belong to. The authors’ views are related to the concept of the linguistic image of the world (JOS), which emerged in the field of linguistics. Its authors “took as their starting point the claim that language serves not only to communicate, but is also a tool for interpreting reality and in a certain (non-deterministic) way imposes a picture of the world, perpetuates certain social values and certain forms of human contact” (Bartminski, 2006, p. 17).

Nikitorowicz (2007, 2009, 2012) pays special attention to the role of maternal language, which he also calls home or first language. He believes that maternal language is an important element in the creation of a person’s cultural identity. According to the researcher, “home language is therefore the first step influencing the formation of personal and cultural identity, which takes place through natural identification” (Nikitorowicz, 2012, p. 72). He recognizes that the language in which a child is raised influences their perception (interpretation) of the world and their behavior. On the other

hand, in order to communicate effectively with another person, it is essential for a child to know both their own and their interlocutor's culture. The researcher states that:

the maternal language which we acquire from the moment we are born, the language in which we are raised from birth, has a direct bearing on our thinking, and shapes the way we perceive the world and behave. People who think in their languages mirror their communities: they perceive and actualize the world differently. Thus, effective communication with others is based on knowledge of one's own culture and the culture of the addressee of the message (Nikitorowicz, 2009, p. 418).

The cited concepts indicate the importance of knowing the language of the family home (the languages of the parents) for the establishment of a person's cultural identity.

Ways of constructing a linguistic educational environment by adult members of Polish–Italian families living in Krakow. A research report

The research findings presented later in this article were obtained as part of a research project whose goal was to analyze and interpret the subjective experiences of Polish mothers raising preschool-aged children with partners of Italian nationality (Wojnarowska, 2019). Polish specialists in pedagogy as a humanist-oriented science point to the importance of understanding the processes of upbringing through qualitative research as a consequence of ongoing social changes (e.g. Kubinowski, 2011; Nowak-Dziemianowicz, 2016). For this reason, I adopted a qualitative research approach, and used individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews as a method of data collection (Kvale, 2011). The study group consisted of ten women (mothers) and was selected through a non-random purposive selection process (Rubacha, 2008). After determining the scale of the presence of children of Polish–Italian couples in Krakow kindergartens (a survey questionnaire was sent via email to kindergarten directors), the institutions were contacted to invite the mothers to participate in the study. The method used to analyze the research material was data reduction: coding based on theory (Gibbs, 2011). Codes were created using the theoretical framework of the research project and the research questions. Field notes taken after the interviews or during the transcription of the interviews were also used. Accordingly, data-driven coding was also employed. At the data analysis stage (coding and categorization), the free computer program Weft QDA (Pressure.to, 2007) was used to facilitate data organization and management (Niedbalski, 2013). The analytical procedure was conducted using the continuous comparison method (Miles and Huberman, 2000; Gibbs, 2011).

Narrative threads in which the mothers spoke about the presence of the Italian language appeared repeatedly during the interviews. Statements on this topic were made both during the description of the family's daily practices, the description of the children and the family, as well as during the mothers' reflections on the challenges and dilemmas of raising children in a mixed family. The respondents' statements provide information on what language is used on a daily basis at home, and what language is used in the child's personal interaction with each parent. The narratives offer insight into the involvement of some mothers or both parents in their children's language development, as well as into the motivations behind the choices they make and the strategies they use. The topic of the participation of adult family members in children's language education also included the transmission of language through the products of symbolic culture, such as books (literature) and mass media, which are important tools of cultural transmission in the modern world (Kłoskowska, 2005, Nikitorowicz, 2007, 2009, 2012; Paleczny, 2008; Slany et al, 2014; Slany and Strzemecka, 2016; Slany et al, 2016). The interviewees also highlighted the vital importance of grandmothers of Italian descent in supporting their children's Italian language acquisition and their active participation in family life.

Strategies for children's language education

As the findings show, in eight families, Italian is the language of daily family communication. In these families (with one exception), the children use Polish in their one-to-one interactions with their mother, and Italian with their father. One mother described the use of the mixed strategy in children's linguistic interactions with their parents, that is, a given parent using both their native language and the language of their partner, depending on the situational context. Examples of the strategies that parents choose occur in the following narratives:

M3¹: *On the other hand, on a daily basis, as I mentioned, we speak Italian with each other at home. This is also because we want him to have daily exposure to the language, we want him to have exposure all the time, and for Italian not to be in the background.*

M7: *From the very beginning we tried to insist on speaking Italian at home. We didn't pay attention to who was speaking it, like, I don't know that I only spoke Polish, my husband only spoke Italian. Just simply, to immerse the children as much as possible in this language, which we know they have less exposure to.*

¹ The symbols refer to the order of the interviews conducted with the mothers.

M5: *We speak Italian at home, because... I only speak Italian with my husband actually ... I don't know how it works in other families, I don't know what examples you have, but I guess the way it works is that one chooses this main language. As I communicated with my husband in Italian, well my children know that one speaks Polish with me, Italian with my husband, right?*

M6: *In general, I only speak Polish with the boys now. And when dad comes home, we speak Italian, because he hasn't quite mastered Polish yet.*

Five families speak Italian because the father does not speak Polish. In this case, it can be considered a favorable coincidence, as the situation forces family members to use Italian in everyday communication. The mothers (with the exception of one) know Italian and speak it with ease.

Two mothers represented families where Italian is not used in daily communication between family members. In these families, the children do not experience the Italian language context on a daily basis. In one family, the father speaks Polish in his interactions with the children and the mother. In the other case, this is a family in which the parents are no longer together, and the child has very sporadic contact with the father.

In a family where only Polish is spoken on a daily basis and is the language of communication at home, these circumstances cause the mother a lot of frustration and dilemmas. Several times during the interview, she emphasized her dissatisfaction and failure to understand the father's attitude. At the same time, she admitted that she herself does not speak Italian either in her communication with her husband or in her dealings with her Italian family. According to the mother, her behavior may affect the children's attitude, i.e. their reluctance to speak Italian.

M10: *Our children speak Italian very seldom, but that is because my husband speaks to them in Polish. He rarely speaks Italian to them. ... Well, for me, it's kind of the biggest problem is precisely that they hardly ever speak Italian.*

In the family where the parents are no longer together and the child rarely spends time with the father, the Italian language is also absent. The mother, while talking about the situation at home, floated reflections on the child's level of proficiency in Italian and her reluctance to use Italian due to the family situation. She also recalled the times when she and the child's father were a family, and Italian culture was a natural part of their child's educational environment. With the father no longer present, these elements have ceased to exist and are no longer relevant to the child. At the same time, the child does not want the mother to use Italian when communicating with him.

M4: *When he is at home, we talk in Italian. I wish that, you know, that it were more often, for the reason that I see that she, you know, is attentive to what is being said, how it's being said, and it, you know, absorbs it? She absorbs it then. It's just that there are not enough of these moments simply. I think in general, when we lived, we were together, we spoke only in Italian and we still had only Italian TV, and that's where most of the language development happened.*

Mothers also point to the father's lack of interest and involvement in transmitting the mother tongue to his children.

Researchers of bilingualism and multilingualism cite various strategies for raising bilingual children (Kurcz, 2007; Wróblewska-Pawlak, 2013; Otwinowska-Kasztelanica, 2018). These are, according to the classification of Ida Kurcz (2007, p. 21), the strategies of person, place, time and alternate strategy. The person strategy (OPOL – one parent/person one language) involves each parent speaking to the child only in his or her language. The place strategy means that one language is spoken in a specific place, for example, one language at home and another at school. The literature also describes the strategy of speaking the minority language at home when the child is learning the majority language outside the home (mL@H – Minority Language at Home) or the reverse strategy, that is, using the majority language at home (ML@H – Majority Language at Home). The time strategy involves using one language on certain days or at a certain time of day, and then another. The alternating strategy is similar to the time strategy, but the periods of use of one language are longer and may even cover an entire year.

Kurcz (2007) notes that studies of bilingual skills of young children indicate that children learn languages in their surroundings without much difficulty and apply them to people and places as appropriate. Krystyna Wróblewska-Pawlak (2013) points out that the most frequently cited and advised strategy is the person strategy (OPOL). It is also the most recommended strategy for bilingual upbringing in mixed families, where one parent is an immigrant in the family's country of residence. The researcher also adds that no strategy is ever applied exclusively because there are so many different situations in which the family finds itself and because a restrictive application of a particular principle can cause difficulties.

If we relate the presented analysis of the mothers' statements to scholarly research on the strategy of language education of children from mixed families, it turns out that the strategy of mL@H is implemented in eight families. The strategy of using the minority language at home is, in most families, a conscious choice of the mother/parents. They want the child to know and speak the native language of the foreign parent as it is an integral part of the child's identity and their natural communication space.

For mothers/parents, it is important that the child experience, live and be immersed in the language (and culture) of both parents. In the families surveyed (with one exception), the children speak Polish with their mother and Italian with their father in one-on-one interactions, which is consistent with the OPOL model. It should be emphasized that these families use the person-to-person strategy, which is most often recommended by specialists in bilingualism.

As Wróblewska-Pawlak (2013) argues, the most important factor in the process of a child's acquisition of two languages is the conscious and committed attitude of the parents. The author points out that it is more difficult for a child raised in a mixed family (in which one parent is an immigrant and lives in a linguistic reality that is foreign to them on a daily basis) to learn two languages than for a child to master a second language when a monolingual family migrates to a foreign country. In order for children from a mixed family to become bilingual, it takes determination on the part of the parents and consistency in their actions.

In this study, the mothers sometimes described the involvement (or lack thereof) of adult family members in their children's language education. According to the mothers, this involvement translates into the children's level of proficiency in Italian, which is confirmed by the researchers' findings cited above. The mothers also pointed out that their efforts are not successful when there is no support from their partner, who is a native speaker of a minority language. The expectations of these mothers and their awareness of the mechanisms of their children's bilingualism acquisition process caused them much frustration and dissatisfaction.

Family social capital

The mothers' narratives contain information about the presence of Italian grandparents (especially grandmothers) in the life of the family and their participation in supporting the children's linguistic development. According to the mothers, there is a correlation between the active presence of Italian grandparents in the child's life and the child's level of proficiency and acquisition of the Italian language. Italian grandmothers play a considerable role in this regard. The following excerpts are examples of this influence:

M7: *We are in touch quite a lot with the Italian side of the family, because my grandmother visits once every two months. So there is a lot of support, too, when it comes to language learning. Here the grandmother plays a big role ..., she spends every free moment with us, well, and practically, when she visits, she comes to see her grandchildren, right? So she spends all her free time with them, they talk a lot, read, play.*

M1: *My mother-in-law is the most resourceful in this regard, well, and I actually hear her telling him stories sometimes. How she tries to teach him something in Italian. She just taught him all the colors, numbers and so on. So that he learns Italian. So that he learns not only by listening, but she actually tries to teach him. Or the mother-in-law teaches him to write in Italian.*

In the cited narratives, mothers describe the activities that grandmothers of Italian nationality undertake to support their grandchildren's language skills. They are eager to spend time with the children, and play educational games with them. Mothers point out the value and invaluable importance of these relationships for children.

It is worthwhile, once again, to situate the analysis of the mothers' statements in scientific theory. Researchers emphasize the importance of social relationships and ties (social networks), especially family social capital and friendship and social ties, for the positive experience of the living situation of mixed families (Ogrodzka-Mazur, 2011; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2013; Slany et al, 2014; Slany and Strzemecka, 2016; Slany et al, 2016). Krystyna Slany and Stella Strzemecka assign a special role to the grandmother, who they describe as "a kind of family satellite in a transnational orbit" (2016, p. 275). Grandmothers have a special role in supporting children in internalizing their living and social space. Researchers note the phenomenon of "flying grandmothers," who travel to family living abroad for varying lengths of time to care for their grandchildren.

Conclusion

The research findings reported in this article answer the question of how adult members of Polish-Italian families living in Krakow construct a linguistic educational environment for their children. This issue is especially important because of the fundamental role of language in the creation of cultural identity. In binational families, the language, or rather the languages of the child's family home, is the language of both mother and father. The women surveyed described the types of activities undertaken to help children learn Italian, the language of the foreign parent, which is referred to in the literature as the child's "inherited language" (Lipińska & Seretny, 2018). The respondents described the language education strategies that they and their partners employed in the family, as well as in one-on-one interactions. They mentioned their children's linguistic interactions with family members of Italian nationality or Italian-speaking acquaintances. Some of them talked about the role of the Italian grandmother. The mothers also mentioned the products of symbolic culture through which the transmission of the Italian language is carried out in their families. It is noteworthy that Italian television or cartoons that children watch on the

computer, as well as Italian books (including Italian children's literature) are the media through which the Italian language and Italian culture are transmitted to children, according to the respondents.

The interviewees assigned considerable importance to their children's language education. They emphasized the value of immersing their children in the languages, and consequently experiencing and becoming rooted in the cultures of their parents and grandparents of both nationalities. The women's statements revealed that language is one of the pillars of human identity and the key to understanding it.

The discussion presented in the article allows those directly involved in the upbringing and education of children (teachers, educators, and educational authorities) to learn about the family upbringing environment. It also stimulates in-depth reflection on the educational situation of a child raised in a mixed family. Due to the small study group (the size of which resulted from the research approach), it is reasonable to continue research on the upbringing and education of pre-school children who are raised in binational families and live in Poland outside the borderland area.

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