

Parental and educator attitudes towards bilingualism and multilingualism for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in Quebec

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Abstract

Multiple language learning in Quebec, such as French and English bilingualism, and heritage language maintenance, broadens societal and future opportunities on the one hand, and is important to building intergenerational family connections (Kircher et al., 2022), on the other. Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) can be withdrawn from additional language learning (Scherba de Valenzuela et al., 2016), based on misconceptions that learning more than one language hinders cognitive development. Bilingual education does not negatively impact first language development for children with SEND and instead, can benefit social interaction and identity construction (Genesee & Fortune, 2014). In Quebec, research has found that parents hold positive attitudes towards childhood multilingualism (Kircher et al., 2022). However, the presence of developmental disorders in young infants increases parental concerns for the long-term effects of multilingual child-rearing, (Quirk et al., 2023), suggesting attitudes may follow this trend for older children. Attitudes at the intersection of multilingualism and SEND have rarely been examined for children of primary school ages, among both parents and teachers.

In order to comprehend how institutions, ideologies, and cultural beliefs impact decisions made for this group of children, I conducted 12 semi-structured interviews with parents and teachers, recruited through Montreal charity organizations, special schools and a snowball sample of language teachers in specialized classes, in Quebec. Using inductive and deductive thematic coding, I am categorizing predictors and dimensions of their attitudes, (Kircher et al., 2022). I begin analysis through evaluative dimensions commonly applied in language attitude research: status, a language which holds power in the context; solidarity, a language which cements relationships; and cognitive development, (Kircher et al., 2022). Attitudes are generally positive towards multilingualism for children with SEND, among both groups. Nevertheless, these attitudes are qualified when facing decisions, influenced by systemic inequities, familial and institutional pressures and the unequal allocation of resources and support. Findings from this study will be applied to raise parent and educators' awareness of systemic disadvantages for children with SEND in a multilingual setting. An enhanced awareness of parent and teacher attitudes will generate knowledge to better support them in the multilingual context.