

## **Develop Minority Communities Out Of The Background Of The ‘Necessary Dream’ Of Returning To The Homeland.**

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### Summary

In this paper I examine the role of the Brussels Foyer model in contributing to local development and empowerment of minorities. I focus on the ‘bicultural education project’ for children, as a footboard to empower local minority communities. Children are educated firstly in their mother language as a starting point to integrate in the local culture and language. A central issue in this project is to convince parents to support their children. For parents the choice for a bicultural school is crucial in supporting their own Turkish, Moroccan, Algerian, etc. identity.

### **Mother tongue as the outset to integration.**

Since the ratification of the 1977 European Commission Directive on the education of children of migrant workers, Member States have introduced special measures to cater to the educational needs of ethnic minorities and migrant children (Wittek, 1991, 6). From that time on there was a generally accepted awareness of the fact that social policies in any given area were not going to succeed unless they took into account the role that ethnic minorities played in each society and the impact they had on the general developments within that society (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009, Lange & Dawson, 2010, Williams, 2010)

The Bilingual and Bicultural Education Program of the Brussels’ Regional Integration Centre Foyer originated on the basis of that finding. Their first project started in 1981 in one school where they offered bicultural education to a group of seven Italian children. This means that during the first years of their school career these children were mainly being taught in their own mother tongue rather than in Dutch. Today, after 30 years, the program reaches 520 children, dispersed across six schools. In Flanders, the Dutch-speaking northern part of Belgium, and Brussels, this Bicultural Program of the Foyer is by far the largest, most long-lasting as well as the most integrated project that offers an education to children of ethnic minorities in the ‘own-language-and-culture’. The model is explicitly integrated as a large part of the curriculum is being taught in the mother tongue, but without affecting the traditional language education. Foyer’s Bicultural Education Model (Evaluatierapport Foyer, 2002) entails that in the nursery-school classes, for six to eight teaching periods per week, daily activities (such as reception, group discussions, projects, etc.) occur in the children’s own language, as an ethnic group separate from the others. During these teaching periods explicit attention goes to the cultural origin of the children. Also in the first level of primary school six to eight teaching periods are given in the own-language-and-culture, while in the second level this is only true for four to five teaching periods. In the third level, such classes are reduced to two or three periods. During these classes specific language education is adopted, but also elements that stimulate the reflection on the own cultural background (customs, communication styles, etc.), and that enrich this background (literature, music, etc.). The ‘own-language-and-culture’ classes are taught by native-speaking teachers, who are added to the autochthonous teacher responsible for the traditional curriculum. In the Foyer Model the native-speaking teacher plays a pivotal role as he or she integrates the home climate into the school environment and as such increases the intercultural climate in the school.

In their daily work the teachers and the school are guided by the pedagogical team of the Brussels’ Regional Integration Centre Foyer. The latter is responsible for the practical organisation of the lessons and for the consultations in the school and the school environment.

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The objectives of the project are threefold: the creation of an intercultural perspective within the school, the improvement of study results of immigrant children and the education of the immigrant communities by involving them in Flemish and Brussels' cultural life (Smeekens, 1990: 137). The Foyer model seeks to bring the two communities, the allochthonous and the autochthonous, closer together. The goal of the model is to eliminate the tension between communities by working directly within children's schools. The school is in the best position to stimulate a reciprocal involvement, because education is considered as an institutional way of transferring values and culture (Smeekens, 1990: 139, Marchi, 1990: 62).

The school results of the children are directly proportional to the satisfaction of the parents with the school and the trust they have in the school, as well as in its teachers and counsellors. Consequently the school results of the children within the Foyer Model are better than the average results that have been measured in Flanders and Brussels. One in seven Flemish youngsters drop out of school without a diploma, in Brussels the number climbs to one in four (Corijn, 2009). Seventy percent of the migrant children from Brussels who are being educated within the Foyer Model, that is in their own-language-and-culture, come from deprived milieus. Nonetheless 91,3 percent obtain a valuable diploma of secondary education (Evaluatierapport Foyer, 2010). Yet the chances of dropping out without achieving formal qualification are much higher for youngsters with a migration background: 30 % of the boys, compared to 13 % in the autochthonous group, and 25 % of the girls, compared to 7 %, respectively (Duquet, et.al., 2006). The roots of educational improvement lie within research on school effectiveness. When schools work in partnership with parents and the community even in disadvantaged areas, schools can improve and their pupils can succeed (Power, C.N., 2000: 156).

Education in Brussels in the own-language-and-culture is a complex matter. Brussels' population contains a high concentration of foreigners. In 2007 27,5 % of the total population was of foreign origin (FOD, 2009). However, since in the last few decades a large percentage of immigrants have been naturalized, in reality half of Brussels' population has foreign roots. Moreover, in the next fifty years, the population of Brussels will increase by 38% due to the ongoing influx of immigrants and high fertility rates within immigrant communities (Federaal Planbureau België, 2008). The majority of these migrants live in deprivation, which in many cases, is an intergenerational deprivation with an unemployment rate of 25 to 37 % (BISA, 2011). They mainly live in the central districts of Brussels, in older, traditionally working class neighbourhoods. In these areas, Moroccans and Turks constitute more than 50 % of the local population. Concurrently Kindergarten and primary schools' populations in those areas consist of 80 to 90 % of children of foreign origin.

Brussels is a complex city. It is a multilingual city, as well as the capital of two linguistic communities: Dutch speaking Flanders in the north and French speaking Wallonia in the south. The linguistic laws permit that only the two official languages, French and Dutch, are to be used in education. In Brussels French is the dominant language, by the native born residents as well as for foreigners who use a dialect originating from their home country, but that is moulded by French influences (Leman, 1990: 9). Nevertheless during the last two decades Dutch has become increasingly important for socio-economical reasons (Reid & Reich, 1992: 134-136, POWER, C.N., 2000: 159). Migrants also know that the demand for people who have knowledge of both languages has increased substantially. Moreover, the foreigners have become increasingly aware that knowledge of both national languages is crucial to get rid of the marginality of migration (Smeekens, 1990, Leman, 1990, Manço & Crutzen, 1999: 36).

The Foyer Model focuses on the Dutch educational system in Brussels. In general, classical education of native-born pupils is conducted in the mother tongue, and later on in the curriculum, foreign languages are taught. However in Brussels, Dutch is the mother tongue of only a very small group of people. As such, for the majority, education in Dutch is mostly education in a foreign language. Most migrant children speak a variation of Italian, Spanish, Turkish or Moroccan Arabian dialect, which they then link to French as the language of the street. For those who opt for the programme of education in the-own-language-and-culture, they concurrently choose for the Dutch education system and as a result the general language used throughout the school day is a foreign language.

Education in the own-language-and-culture is not as obvious in practice as it is in theory. Until the present time, many people from within the educational system and from the associated socio-political context are convinced that migrant children perform poorly in school, mainly because their mother tongue or their home language hinders them from assimilation to the school language (Padmos & Van den Berge, 2009: 68-71). In that belief, it is assumed that children from ethnic minorities are confronted with educational disadvantages since they have been holding on exclusively to their mother tongue for too long, rather than learning the new language of the outside environment (Manço & Crutzen, 1999: 43-44). Many people are convinced that the parents of these children bear responsibility for the situation. In addition, parents are seen to be in need of encouragement to learn the language of the host country and, in turn, to speak this new language at home with their children. These people completely reject the idea of education in the-own-language-and-culture in favour of additional classes in Dutch. According to Macpherson (1999) the Belgian researcher Orhan Agirdag calls the pressure on linguistic minority students to abandon their mother tongues and the lack of bilingual education an institutional racism. It is “the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin”. (Agirdag, 2010: 317).

It is clear that the importance lies in posing those actions that stimulate integration to the greatest extent. According to Loredana Marchi, a real integration process can only occur if it involves the school. Integration means that the concerned groups are actively and appropriately included in the dominant group’s goals and activities. The immigrant parents of the Foyer Model accept that the schooling process is a process of better integration (Marchi, 1990: 62).

Language is the bearer of culture. If, from an intercultural perspective, respect is shown for a culture and for cultural diversity in the educational system, the language of the ethnic minorities needs to be assigned a valuable role (POWER, C.N., 2000: 160, 162). The Foyer Model assumes that support for a subjective cultural identity is by no means detrimental to the social adaptation of the subjects concerned, or to their loyalty towards the host country and its inhabitants. On the contrary, the ability to make ethnic reference to their own ‘roots’ will be more tranquil and more realistic, at least when it does not hinder the normal integration channels within the autochthonous society. Non-recognition of this subjective identity increases the possibilities of the concerned subjects to create irrational social meanings later, such as of the type of ethnic groups, which is disintegrative to a society (Reich & Reid, 1992: 136-138, Marchi & De Smedt, 1999, Cummins 1979: 241-246, Cummins, 2001: 17).

### **Bicultural education and the creation of a cultural identity.**

The Foyer Model assumes that language is the symbolic form that embodies culture (Byram, 1990: 127, Bourdieu, 1991, 2000). Ethnic minorities in our society who present themselves as such will mainly distinguish themselves from the dominant group through their usage of language. Leman points to the fact that a government that aims for maximal participation of migrants to public and social life should not eliminate the desire to distinguish oneself just yet

(Cummins, 1979: 227, Leman, 1999: 50-51). As long as education in the own-language-and-culture does not significantly interfere with the normal course of the curriculum in the school, there is no pedagogic or social reason to eliminate the mother tongue from the educational system. On the contrary, within the Foyer Model bilingual education has proven to be solid ground for bicultural realities in daily life. It offers a structural recognition of 'the otherness' of children of minority groups. On the one hand it acts as proof of equal rights (Leman, 1999: 51), and offers content in a structural way to intercultural education for autochthonous children. Children gradually learn to deal with different lifestyles, other languages and new experiences.

One of the first findings of the Canadian researcher Marcel Danesi in his research on the role of the mother tongue in the schooling process of the Foyer Model in Brussels was that the migrant children involved in the programme enjoyed going to school. The children formed close ties with everyone present at the school and 'they have found their overall school experience to have been an extremely positive one' (Danesi, 1990: 72). They liked their school and their teachers and enjoyed coming to school, both to learn and to play. This conclusion is remarkable, especially when we realise that these migrant children to a large extent live in the sink estates in the metropolis.

Mother tongue literacy constitutes a crucial factor in giving the children the necessary autonomous cognitive status needed for the efficient acquisition of knowledge (Cummins, 1979: 233-236). Danesi in his research started from the hypothesis that the level of proficiency in the mother tongue was proportionally determinant for the acquisition of a global language proficiency and ultimately, of academic achievement (Danesi, 1990: 66). Children automatically transfer their literacy and cultural skills to the development of proficiency in other languages and the whole school curriculum. The mother tongue is established as a basic fact, although children are able to produce the same thought in several linguistic codes. The linguistic mobility is made possible by a basic accessible code that suits the situation and the speaker (Marchi, 1990: 59, Danesi, 1990: 73-74). However, it is the pupil who holds the key and who will be aware of his or her abilities. Therefore the passage through the mother tongue is possibly the most natural one (Marchi, 1990: 62)

The significance for migrant children of the usage of the mother tongue, but foremost for their parents, lies in the culture to which they identify. This does not necessarily mean that the mother tongue from the Foyer Model coincides with the language spoken at home. Many second generation migrants in Brussels speak French at home and in intimate environments. They are nonetheless Italian, Spanish, Turkish or Moroccan, which means that there exists an adherence to Italy, Spain, Turkey or Morocco. It is this connection that constitutes their identity, of which language is the symbolic signifier. When children do not know this language because they grow up in an exclusively French speaking environment, then this means they no longer possess the same identity as their parents. Michael Byram investigated the effectiveness of bicultural education in the Brussels' Foyer Model. Through his interviews he found that Italian parents take on an Italian identity, as long as they are in contact with other Italians with whom they speak Italian (Byram, 1990: 80-81). The physical experience of commonality, of which the language is the ultimate symbol, is essential. This is Bourdieu's notion of 'habitus' as the system of bodily dispositions, where people incorporate the same culture as members of the group. The community needs a kind of physical mechanism through which the principles of social organization are embodied such that humans are capable of spontaneously generating an infinite array of appropriate actions (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 96). For Byram, there exists the peculiar case of well-educated migrant

parents, who possess a thorough knowledge of the language and culture of the homeland, which they also want to pass on to their children. Strangely enough though, they do not speak or speak at only a basic level the language of the host country, despite their intellectual capacity. For Byram, it is exactly this 'unwillingness' that indicates the strength of their affiliation with the homeland and their identity being nestled in that bond. Obviously not all parents are connected to their home language and culture to the same extent, but all parents want their children to have a basic knowledge of their mother tongue. In first instance they praise this knowledge because it is useful within the family circle in the homeland. This is the most obvious case for the maintenance of parents' mother tongue in the next generation. However, there is another underlying and more important motive for parents to stress the knowledge of the mother tongue and its cultural background vis-à-vis their children: as support and assistance in understanding their own selves and their identity (Byram, 1990: 84). Through the speaking of the language children and parents, whom they identify with, feel connected. Language provides the ability for children to subscribe to the ethnic category (Leman, 1987: 130-131).

But the contours of this category are never fixed. Instead, they continuously evolve through time. Barth points to the fact that ethnicity is not determined by specific and constant characteristics. Conversely ethnic identity is created from within the context of other identities (Barth, 2000: 12-13). Ethnic groups do not exclusively create images of themselves from within. In this respect Barth emphasizes reciprocity: a person is a member of a group as a consequence of self-ascription in relation to the other members of the group, but it is simultaneously reinforced by other-ascription, by being categorised by others as a member of a group (Barth, 1969). Identity to a subject is the experience of an identity by which conflicts between one and the other are the pre-eminent constitutive element. (Verkuyten, 1999: 172). It is in the exchange and in the confrontation with its limits that identities become real. Language, especially the mother tongue, marks the boundaries between one and another identity. Whether someone knows the language symbolises his or her connection with the group. Therefore when the institutionalised frame of the school partially takes over the responsibility to keep the mother tongue alive with the children, parents feel deeply supported in the recognition of their identity (Byram, 1990: 85). Language is the strength and the school is the source of this strength, a prospective proficiency for the children to inscribe themselves in the ethnic category and for the parents to re-recognize themselves in this category.

By speaking a language, the reality to which that language refers becomes affirmed. Though at the same time reality is being exchanged, reformed and shared with others by means of that same language. Language constitutes the community in reality, just as reality makes up the community in the language. In the Foyer Model children are encouraged to use their native speech in the elementary exchange process with their native-speaking teachers. Precisely in the 'language game' of the children, parents project their expectations as part of a past that is threatened to be lost. In this respect, language is not merely an instrument, as it is in the language that the exchange of the past, present and future takes place (Byram, 1990: 127). Language is the bearer of the culture; it connects people in a common life experience. Therefore the mother tongue is not that which coincides with the official language, as viewed in the Foyer Model. Many parents who officially belong to the same language group mostly speak divergent dialects. They feel nonetheless connected as an ethnic community in the official language or national language, which they no longer or were never able to speak (Marchi, 1990: 59, Byram, 1990: 81). It is clear that parents' choice for bicultural education is not merely motivated by increasing their children's language knowledge. It specifically offers them support and help in the understanding of the self and their loss of identity (Byram, 1990: 84). Parents are extremely aware of the latter in confrontation with their children growing up

in another country than the homeland. This alienation occurs from the various influences the children undergo in school and broader society. 'The change in ethnic identity is part of a complex change of educational traditions', states Byram. As children gain awareness of other modes of living, they gain a sense of freedom, and for this reason it is no longer feasible to raise them the manner in which parents themselves experienced in their homeland. Moreover, the emotional solidarity parents possess vis-à-vis that land is the polar opposite of that of their children, as was witnessed by Byram in an interview with Italian parents: «...à la fin des vacances, surtout la petite [fille] elle demande aussi: quand est-ce qu'on retourne en Belgique?... pour eux aussi, la nostalgie du pays de leur naissance règne,...c'est l'envers... » (Byram, 1990: 85).

Those children – despite the connection to their parents – already have another identity derived from the very different living conditions in which they are growing up. To the parents this implies a considerable threat. They feel as if they are losing their roots under the domination of the changed living conditions, and are already considered as potential 'adults of silence' (Marchi, 1990: 61). Migrants who do not repudiate their heritage, but to the contrary find a way to pass it on to their children, will safeguard themselves against that zone of silence. Therefore it is of the utmost importance that schools, through the possibility of bicultural education, recognise the authentic identity of the parents. As an outcome of this recognition parents in turn are capable of lending the necessary support to the school. Apparently that support is determined by the firmness of parents' own identity and that of their home environment. The school recognises the home culture so that the parents will recognise the school culture.

Children incorporate their parents' longings in the ambivalent relation between the country of residence and the country of origin, to where the children the former has become 'home'. The country of their parents is the place where they spend most of their summer holidays. Those visits support the children in the connection with their relatives and the children's affective perception of identity. This has an affective influence on their awareness of the importance of the language. They covet the language, which therefore is no longer merely functional.

Within the Foyer Model it is the teachers who launch the process of exchange. In his Danish study, Byram has proven that teachers from the same linguistic and cultural origin strongly promote the ethnic identity of their pupils (Byram, 1986). From this perspective, learning the language is only a superficial aim. The mutual involvement of teachers and pupils in the language and culture of the home land creates a certain school culture, a 'school ethos' that shapes the cultural and ethnic identity of the pupils (Byram, 1986: 184-188). The school is the 'carrier' of that cultural and ethnic identity, mediated by native speakers, who concurrently introduce foreign cultural traditions and customs into the Belgian school system. They connect the culture of the school to that of the home, as from within the school they connect the influences of the host country to those of the migrant parents. Ethnic rearing principles are being adapted to the Belgian procedures, just as well as the ethnic living habits are being introduced into the curriculum of the school. It appears that only native teachers are able to accomplish this task. Autochthonous teachers struggle considerably more with foreign living habits. According to Hilde De Smedt within the Foyer Model all the existing difficulties between the school and the home environment can be reduced to conflicts between parents and autochthonous teachers, where the latter have too little touch with the daily living conditions of the concerned migrant families in the metropolis. Autochthonous teachers live in areas where daily life has little in common with that of the home environment of the migrants (De Smedt, 2010).

Loredana Marchi emphasizes the enormous impact school life has on parents. Parents do believe that schooling contributes to a better integration, for example, that knowledge of languages can be important to once find a suitable job. However, as the language and culture of the school are extraneous to the culture of the mother tongue, parents are concerned and insecure about what happens to their child in the school. This is even more the case when the parents involved are themselves poorly educated. According to Marchi, what happens through the children with the parents in this instance is 'a second immigration': 'They try to achieve a more profound integration through their children' (Marchi, 1990: 62). Parents expect their children to realise what they themselves have not been able to do. But these expectations towards their children are nevertheless ambivalent. Parents also have doubts about their child's ability to fulfil those expectations. This is even more apparent for migrant parents who are confronted with an unstable social position. At the same time the pressure on them is immense, precisely because of their migrant status. Coming from elsewhere, leaving everything behind to settle down in a new country, is a project that by necessity must be successful. Migrants are always determined to succeed (Byram, 1990: 79). By no means can they allow themselves to go back to their home country.

### **No return? It's a necessary dream.**

Two reasons persist as to why parents want their children to participate in the bicultural education model of the Foyer. Firstly, an increasing number of migrants have already acknowledged the importance of the Dutch language in the context of Brussels. If their children, besides their mother tongue, also know French as well as Dutch, then their chance of finding a job on the regular job market increases considerably. Secondly, in the bicultural school children primarily learn their mother tongue, the language that makes them a part of the same ethnic family. The advantage of this exists in that children can truly connect to their grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins during their summer holidays.

The latter seems utterly important since it leaves the future completely open to a plethora of possibilities. Within migrant families there are frequent conversations about the possibility for parents and their children to make an eventual return to the homeland. Since the Foyer Model has had the explicit aim of providing pupils with an adequate linguistic and cultural experience for them to return to the country of origin, for parents there is instead more discussion on whether they 'would' return. In other words, returning one day is something always talked about, but it is doubtful if it will ever happen. For parents the dream of 'return' supports their own desire. It is a dream that will not be realised because most parents know that their children will not return. But the Foyer Model aims to provide children with the tools of language and culture, which would give them the opportunity to return, and this is seen as an advantage by parents.

Nearly all migrants who came to Belgium did so seeking job opportunities. They left their parents, family, friends and their native region behind and broke their ties to all of these connections. If parents, at the end of their career, decide to return to the homeland and thus leave their children behind, then they would be reversely repeating the same emigration of the past, in that they would displace themselves for the second time. But migrants never acquiesce in this 'impossible' conclusion. From his interviews with first generation migrant parents, Byram concludes that they continually live on a boundary, they belong nowhere. The pressure of the past and the attraction of the place connected to that past, never ends: ethnic identity is past-oriented and interdependent with the future of the next generation (Byram, 1990: 90-91). The children on the other hand do not share the same nostalgia; they do not have these memories. This 'tension', between the urge to go back to the homeland and the resistance against it because of the children, becomes bearable by reserving the possibility to

go back, yet without acting it out. The place and the country seem subsidiary to these basic family relations: migrants are strangers in the host country, but equally so in the country of origin where they are addressed to by their relatives as migrants. Their identity is defined by two opposite places, there home is nowhere (Byram, 2003: 52-56).

The Foyer Model maintains a fiction that appears to be constructive for so many migrants who live in this paradoxical situation. Parents seem to hold mutually conflicting views: that their children will not return to their country of origin and that they should learn their mother tongue in order to be able to return. The Foyer Model is helping to maintain a necessary fiction: parents hold mutually contradictory views as a means of coping with difficulties in their lives.

Dreams and fictions are part of people's daily lives, though it is particular dreams that mark groups of people or generations within those groups. Moreover it is these dreams and fictions that make out the core of what we call identity. It is in this core that we can observe the difference between one group and another, between minorities and the autochthonous community, between minorities that have been part of the autochthonous community for decades and the newcomers (Bredella, 2003: 35-36, Sen Gupta, A. 2003: 155). In his fascinating work on the Foyer Model in Brussels, Byram finds out that 'the dream of return' is linked to the supposed 'objective' elements of ethnic identity, such as the country in which one resides or, where one's parents are still living, or where one was born. Differences arise from these objective elements. As such 'the dream of return' does not bear the same weight for children in the bicultural classes as it does for the parents, though they are aware of its importance in the emotional experiences of their parents. These children learn the mother tongue to find recognition and appreciation during their holiday visits. According to Byram, though, this is also a dream, the dream of the holiday in the homeland of their parents (Byram, 1990: 93). It is this dream for adults and their children which the Foyer Model helps to maintain. Bicultural education for their children is a paradoxical construction that helps parents to participate in a community of dubious membership.

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