

MULTILINGUALISM

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‘Individuals are multilingual when they have the competence to understand and produce more than one language (this can be on different levels, so not all languages have to be equally acquired), or when they use different languages on a regular base ‘ (Van den Branden, 2010)

Our world, with its growing international contacts and expanding possibilities to communicate with new media, makes it more and more important to understand and use more languages. For many students, the presence of more than one language in their lives becomes evident.

Multilingualism is present in all schools: some schools have a large number of multilingual students, while also schools with a majority of students with only one language cannot avoid multilingualism. The sources that students use for inspiration and information contain more and more languages. Students watch You-tube movies in English, they listen to music groups from Iceland and the US, they write text messages with strange abbreviations and expressions, they work in exchange projects with Polish students or they support charity-projects in Africa... A school that wants to work in a meaningful way with students uses a multilingual context to create a powerful learning environment.

All students should be able to function in a multilingual environment. Some students come with a strong multilingual base from home, others get acquainted with different languages at school. All background knowledge from students, including the home-language, can be used to expand their multilingualism.

Schools who want to work on multilingualism should have a school-specific language policy: language is the glue in our heterogenous society, language competence is a key factor for success in education and language may not reinforce the disadvantage of certain groups of students. Language should contribute to the development of the personality of each student ¹. A school with such a policy on language reflects about how to deal with the present diversity and how to stimulate multilingualism in each student. The school should also pay attention on how school language can respond to the development of other languages. A positive approach towards the home language can have a positive effect on the motivation to learn the school language and students can use knowledge in one language to learn another language.

¹ Verhelst, M. (2013). Beleidsvoerend vermogen, talenbeleid en evaluatiebeleid: hoe ze samenhangen en elkaar versterken. Handboek beleidsvoerend vermogen. Afl. 13 - augustus 2013