

The Catalan school model

Catalonia's education system is based on bilingual education. One of its objectives is that all pupils get a good knowledge of the two official languages, Catalan and Spanish. Wallace Lambert points out that, when a society wants bilingual people, the socially weakest language needs to prevail in school education. According to his principle, public schools in Catalonia organise mainly two programmes: a programme to maintain the family language aimed at the Catalan-speaking students, and a programme of starting linguistic immersion aimed at Spanish-speaking children. Both are supported by very positive social attitudes towards the Catalan language. However, the law guarantees families the choice to decide their children's school language during the entire initiation to reading and writing learning (8 years old). In practical terms, there are some 10 Spanish-speaking families as an average number that decide to school their children in Spanish. In the following years, the Spanish language is a school subject, both for the maintenance programmes and linguistic immersion programmes. Nevertheless, especially in the linguistic immersion programme, Spanish has an important presence in the student's informal relations as well as in the relations students keep to solve academic problems in Catalan.

Since 1990, there has been a systematic evaluation of bilingual education results in Catalonia. Regarding linguistic knowledge, there are no differences between Catalan-speaking and Spanish-speaking students in their knowledge of the Spanish language. In addition, there are no differences regarding the knowledge of the Spanish language between students from Catalan schools and those from the rest of Spain. The differences exist in relation to the knowledge of the Catalan language. At the end of obligatory schooling, as it happens in the rest of linguistic immersion programmes around the world, the Spanish-speaking students have less Catalan oral skills than Catalan-speaking students. However, there are no differences regarding the writing language skills. In fact, the Spanish-speaking students have Catalan writing skills on a level with those of Catalan-speaking students along the obligatory secondary education, after nine or more years of schooling (pre-school education and primary education). The 2009 PISA evaluation on reading comprehension placed Catalonia seven points above the OCDE average and 12 points above the Spanish average. Regarding the acquisition of knowledge and skill development of other areas such as mathematics, natural sciences or social sciences, there are no differences between the Catalan-speaking students and Spanish-speaking students.

Since 2000, Catalonia has incorporated thousands and thousands of foreign students to the education system who already represent around 14% of the population. Certainly, these pupils with very different languages are schooled in a programme of linguistic submersion because, among other reasons, the education system is not designed to develop their languages. Therefore, already since the beginning of this century, there is an important movement of educational innovation around these new students under the name of 'new linguistic immersion'. It aims to eliminate the negative effects of obligatory schooling in a programme that does not contemplate the development of their own language. It is obvious that, among others, one of the characteristics of this movement consists of recognising all the languages, and their educative treatment independently of their knowledge by part of the teachers.

Dr. Jose Ignacio Vila

Professor of Education Psychology at the Universitat de Girona (UdG)