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*A monolingual state facing a multicultural and multilingual reality: The challenges of the French educational system in French Guiana*

Abstract

French Guiana, with a relatively small population (ca. 250,000), is characterized by a very complex linguistic situation. Together with French as the official language, many other languages are spoken, 12 of which meet the criteria of the European Charter for Regional or Minority languages (1992): French Guianese Creole, six Amerindian languages, four Bushinenge (Maroon) Creoles and Hmong. Furthermore, foreign immigrants make up about one third of the population, speaking languages such as South American Spanish, Brazilian Portuguese, Haitian Creole, Sranan Tongo, Lebanese Arabic, Hakka, Cantonese and Lao, among others.

The paper will focus on educational issues, and show how the monolingual norms of the French educational system, firmly rooted in a tradition of both centralism and colonialism, have proved to be inefficient and detrimental, and were eventually challenged and largely modified in the late nineties. It will report on the commitment of a team of linguists working on local languages, having in view schooling applications, and taking part in teachers' training, including the design of a new innovative plan for bilingual assistant teachers called ILM (*Intervenants en Langue Maternelle*).