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LANGUAGES AND MULTILINGUALISM IN THE FUTURES OF EDUCATION

A Scottish Perspective

INTRODUCTION

This report, ‘Languages and Multilingualism in the Futures of Education’ was prepared by Bilingualism Matters in response to UNESCO’s Futures of Education consultation. Through this initiative, UNESCO proposes to consider the role of education as a common good in 2050 and beyond. In other words, education is key to building a more sustainable planet and equal societies. In this report, our focus will be on the role of languages in education and the crucial role they can play in responding to the multiple challenges the world is currently facing.

This is a pivotal time to promote an understanding of the role of languages in education. The national academies of the United States, Canada, UK and Australia have issued an unprecedented joint statement highlighting the key role of languages and calling on societies to take coordinated action to increase capacity for accessible language education and to normalise language learning. Fostering multilingualism and language learning is explicitly mentioned as a priority in the 2020 European Commission document on the European Education Area and is the theme of the 2021 International Mother Language Day.

The specific context of this response is Scotland, and the vision is created by Scottish stakeholders involved in language policy and language education.

VISIONS FOR THE FUTURE: LANGUAGE LEARNING IN EDUCATION

The next generation will live in an increasingly interconnected world, where change becomes normal. People will have to become adaptable to change: this is why *learning to change* will become essential. One of the positive effects for research, and for education in general, will be more connected with society and to enable people to make informed decisions about their lives, becoming increasingly adaptable to change in their personal and professional lives. Publicly engaged research will cross disciplinary boundaries and establish mutually beneficial communication channels with society.

In the ideal world for future generations, the importance of languages will gain increasing recognition, especially in countries where English is the national or official language spoken by the majority of the population. This requires coordinated action to increase capacity for accessible language education and to normalise language learning.¹

In the ideal changing world of the future, language learning and teaching would become a core element of education, and awareness of linguistic diversity in education would be regarded as beneficial to all areas of school curricula and beyond. More people would be educated from an early age to understand the importance of multilingualism. There would be widespread understanding that languages of migrant communities should be welcome and encouraged to be maintained, and that indigenous languages are a cultural and social asset to be passed on across generations.

Communication in different languages is vital for cooperation and solidarity. Governments and policy makers would make provisions and establish frameworks for language education in schools and communities. Moreover, advances in technology and health would allow for more equity, giving everyone across the lifespan a right to learn, and the possibility of accessing learning, irrespective of age, gender, status, ability and location. This will be enabled and enhanced by strengthening positive attitudes towards language diversity.

Such a world would be largely supported by attitudes and awareness in young people, many of whom are already engaging with social justice issues across borders and are showing a willingness to learn and adapt to change. More can be done to empower future generations with flexibility, adaptability and resilience to deal with challenges in current society.

¹ <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/the-importance-of-languages-in-global-context-an-international-call-to-action/>

CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS

A growing area of concern is social and economic inequalities, which are magnified by disease outbreaks, wars, and challenges to democracies. Education gaps and disruption to education systems create large attainment gaps and disparity in learning provision, including language learning. Restricted education pathways that lead to little tangible recognition and few prospects of change generate further frustration.

Increasing isolationism and xenophobia fuelled by populist political movements are leading to inward-looking policies and generating further divisions and further inequity.

Important achievements in knowledge about language learning and bilingualism are not shared or understood widely enough. Recognition of the importance of languages often still stays in an echo chamber of those who have already invested in languages and the message is not successfully delivered to the wider public.

The rise in use of technology in learning has been successful as a complement to – and, when necessary, a temporary substitute for – human-driven learning and teaching. The risk is that it is adopted more widely and replaces human interaction, which is crucial in education in general and particularly in language learning and maintenance.

COLLECTIVE PURPOSES OF MULTILINGUALISM IN EDUCATION

○ UNDERSTANDING THE VALUE OF LANGUAGE DIVERSITY

Education should prepare young people to make choices within a global world, giving them information and support to make these choices. These choices concern what we need to learn in global terms, beyond the narrow needs of one country or society. Multilingualism has been found to be an element that can foster awareness of broader and more empathetic views.

Education should be accessible to everyone at all life stages, beyond the pathways offered by schools and universities. Lifelong learning involves creating opportunities for vocational skills in young people but also more broadly over the lifespan.

The general purpose of education should be to benefit the global community, creating strong, stable, cohesive societies which allow individuals to find their place and happiness within them. Respecting language diversity and fostering language learning is a fundamental element of this vision. Research shows that multilinguals have an earlier and easier understanding of other people's perspectives: this can contribute to making the world a more accessible and cohesive place that values diverse cultures and identities. Multilinguals often also have more mental flexibility in dealing with complex situations, seeing both sides of an argument, and flexibly adapting to changing circumstances: all of these attributes facilitate learning to change and support civic participation and engagement in societies.

Multilingualism and understanding of cultural diversity enhances a wider understanding of what mutual respect looks like as a feature of a harmonious community. Wellbeing and collective and individual happiness and contentment are increasingly important aspects of cohesive societies. These are complex issues for which many governments are seeking solutions. Appreciation and respect for multilingualism are important elements in any strategy seeking to deliver a harmonious, contented and happy society.

The combination of individual cognitive benefits and the educational benefits of multilingualism has the potential to increase the economic wellbeing of societies.

- **PLACING LANGUAGES AT THE CORE OF EDUCATION**

Language learning should be placed at the core of education, creating and making available opportunities to develop useful and realistic levels of proficiency in more than one language within everyone's reach. Linguistic diversity should be recognised internationally as a public good affecting the benefit and wellbeing of our societies world-wide. Multilingualism should become the accepted norm in all areas of life.

Collaboration between mainstream schools and community schools can facilitate the normalisation of multilingualism, both in terms of recognising the value of community languages and encouraging learning a wider range of languages – not only the most prestigious or instrumentally useful ones - through blended learning and complementary use of technology. Language instruction should be supplemented, wherever possible, by promoting opportunities for immersion in countries and communities where the languages are spoken.

Education should be an enjoyable experience leading to personal happiness, satisfaction and positive attitudes in communities. This is particularly important for multilingualism: research shows that effective language learning and language maintenance, as well as the beneficial consequences of these experiences - are closely related to positive cultural identity and perception of multilingualism as a social asset.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LANGUAGES IN EDUCATION

- **CHANGING THE SOCIAL PERCEPTION OF LANGUAGE LEARNING**

Collective efforts should be made to change the social perception of language diversity by providing information, tailored to specific communities and sectors of society, which 'normalises' multilingualism and language learning. Too often languages are still seen as a measurable commodity available to some but not all, related to quantifiable economic benefits but stripped of more general cultural and societal values. Part of changing the perception of languages is giving people the awareness that knowledge of more than one language not only brings advantages to employability and professional mobility but also brings wider social and cultural benefits to the quality of life in civil society more generally.

- **ENABLING LANGUAGE LEARNING ACROSS THE LIFESPAN**

Appropriately tailored information should be disseminated on the possibility of learning languages at all ages – from pre-school to post-retirement - and to different levels of proficiency, counteracting the perception of languages as ‘difficult’, which is common in English-speaking countries, and increasing people’s confidence in using different languages. An important step in this direction involves ensuring that languages are not marginalised in the school curriculum as something ‘extra’ but they are regarded as a core element as important as other subjects such as sciences, technology and mathematics. It is also crucial that language education is perceived as enjoyable and gratifying and tries to connect challenges with rewards, temporary obstacles with longer-term satisfaction.

- **ADAPTING LANGUAGE EDUCATION TO DIFFERENT PEOPLE**

Enjoyable and gratifying language education is more likely to be achieved if language provision is tailored to a variety of learners, considering how people learn languages in different ways at different ages, and relying on research that can objectively evaluate what works well and what works less well in particular contexts. Language education needs to be accessible, particularly to people in areas of geographical or economic disadvantage who may need access to learning platforms, through pathways guided by mentors who share expertise across borders.

Public perception of the value of all languages should be enhanced, together with the validation of the multilingual human being. This can start in pre-school and school education, leading to classrooms that celebrate linguistic diversity and communities that value both indigenous and immigrant languages, together with their cultures. Promoting the core concept of multilingualism for all can pave the way for critical reflection on a range of issues such as class, gender, race and ethnicity.

- **LINK RESEARCH, TEACHER TRAINING AND LANGUAGE POLICY**

Languages, and information on language learning, should become integral part of teacher training programmes. Language policy should benefit from research insights and from objective evaluations of language learning and teaching initiatives.

Language learning policies in Scotland are an example worth sharing. The current Scottish ‘1+2’ language policy, officially started in 2014, is already having an impact on students, leading to an ever-growing sense of pride in languages and a desire to celebrate different cultures and languages with peers and teachers. The policy relies more generally on a move away from regarding education as a mechanical process to develop the workforce, demarcated by exam results and with an exit point, towards seeing it instead as an opportunity for breadth and depth of learning which responds to the needs and desires of communities.

The work of Bilingualism Matters (BM) – based in Scotland but active in many countries all over the world - is an example of successful connection between research on multilingualism and language learning and society. The aim of BM is to ensure that people in different community sectors realise the importance of languages and make informed decisions; this involves effective communication of scientific results but also the opportunity to benefit from continuous interactions with communities.

BM provides advice, expertise and professional research-based support for a range of agencies in Scotland and – through its international network – across the world

Ultimately, this broader view of language education aims to give people a voice, to allow people to get on with each other, and to make communities fairer, smarter, stronger, healthier and greener. Language learning is part of giving children advanced speaking and literacy skills that allow them to communicate effectively; it enables them to both better understand their personal situation and to step outside of their own culture, comparing and contrasting their own lives with the lives of others. Education that includes language learning at its core, without restrictions to a single cultural norm, empowers individuals and communities and gives them agency and dignity, ensuring that values can be shared and greater social justice attained.

A SCOTTISH CONTEXT FOR LANGUAGES AND MULTILINGUALISM

Scotland has been engaged in responding to the challenge posed by the decline and lack of motivation in language learning among young people. A tangible result is the ambitious agenda for language learning in schools set by the Scottish Government in 2011, which became operative in 2014 as ‘Language Learning in Scotland: A 1+2 Approach’², according to which every child learns two languages in addition to their mother tongue.

As the national agency for education, Education Scotland (ES) provides the curricular structure, guidance and advice on the implementation of the 1+2 policy across all local authorities. Evaluation of how effectively languages are delivered in schools is provided by Her Majesty’s Inspectors of Education (HMI). Scotland’s National Centre for Languages (SCILT) focuses on encouraging language learning and language diversity as a fundamental characteristic for Scotland as a successful and inclusive country. Agencies such as Languages Network Group Scotland (LANGS) are supported by government and local authorities as a point of contact for dissemination of information among language networks in Scotland. The Scotland China Education Network (SCEN) exists to promote the learning of Chinese and Chinese culture in Scottish schools.

Scotland also stands out for its positive and effective policies for minority languages. The Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005³ was passed by the Scottish Parliament to ensure the status of the Gaelic language as an official language of Scotland with a sustainable future. Scotland has a successful Gaelic Medium Education (GME) system, which allows students to be taught subjects through the medium of Scottish Gaelic, with English being gradually introduced into the curriculum after a period of immersion in Scottish Gaelic.

GME programmes are of high academic standards. They also aim to address the decline of Gaelic as an indigenous minority language, by equipping students coming from both Gaelic-speaking and

² <https://www.gov.scot/publications/language-learning-scotland-12-approach/>

³ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/gaelic-language-plan/pages/3/>

English-speaking homes with bilingual abilities that may increase the number of Gaelic speakers and facilitate the transmission of Gaelic to the next generations.

The British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015⁴ also came into force in October 2015. It promotes the use of British Sign Language (BSL) in Scotland, primarily by requiring certain authorities to develop BSL plans that outline how they will promote and raise awareness of the language. The BSL National Plan 2017-2023 is a direct result of The British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015 and has now been embedded in many organisations across Scotland e.g. the BSL plan at the University of Edinburgh.

A Scots Language Policy⁵ was issued in 2015, aiming at raising the profile and maintenance prospects of Scots as a minority language only spoken in Scotland.

Moreover, Scotland is renowned for its welcoming attitude towards migration and towards speakers for whom English is an additional language. Government agencies such as Education Scotland and English as an Additional Language (EAL) services at local councils explicitly support all learners to reach their fullest potential, regardless of their first language.

The special attention given to language learning in Scotland has been recognised by the recent document “Towards a national language strategy: education and skills”⁶ issued in 2020 by the British Academy, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Association of School and College Leaders, the British Council and Universities UK.

⁴ <http://bslscotlandact2015.scot/>

⁵ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scots-language-policy-english/>

⁶ https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/2597/Towards-a-national-languages-strategy-July-2020_R0FHmzB.pdf

BILINGUALISM MATTERS

Bilingualism Matters (www.bilingualism-matters.org) is a research and public engagement centre, founded by Professor Antonella Sorace in 2008 at the University of Edinburgh, that aims to bridge the gap between research and different sectors of society, enabling people to make informed professional or personal decisions on bilingualism and language learning across the lifespan. Bilingualism Matters heads a growing network of 27 active branches spread across 18 countries in 3 continents. All branches exist in order to provide the general public with research-based information about multilingualism and language learning, enabling informed decisions and responding to the specific needs of their local communities.

The Bilingualism Matters headquarters in Scotland provides advice, expertise and professional research-based support for a range of agencies and stakeholders in their efforts to promote multilingualism in society.

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