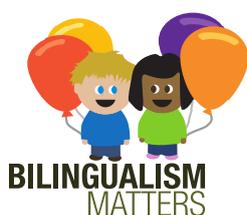


FEEDBACK TO THE CONSULTATION ON INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION'S PROGRESS UPDATE (MARCH 2021)

by Bilingualism Matters



In partnership with
UNESCO

Prepared by Bilingualism Matters
in response to UNESCO's Future of
Education initiative: Consultation on
International Commission's Progress
Update (March 2021)

1. General summary

This feedback report has been produced in consultation with the Bilingualism Matters network. In general, we find the Futures of Education progress report inspiring: the concept of ‘regenerative education’ aiming to repair social injustice and leading towards a more sustainable world is a powerful one. We also like the use of the plural ‘futures’ to denote the wide diversity of contexts and possible approaches, as well as the unpredictability of what the worlds will look like in 2050; we fully subscribe to the idea of ‘collective engagement’ and ‘interdependence’ of different stakeholders; and we appreciate the warning about the limits of education and the dangers of fostering illusions about what education can achieve.

What we think is missing from the report are more explicit references to the crucial importance of languages, linguistic diversity and multilingualism within the laudable aim of ‘reframing humanism’ and ‘building inclusive educational ecosystems’, and generally rethinking the global role of education. This report could benefit from links to contemporary research on the contribution of multilingualism to the wellbeing of individuals and societies, and on the dangers of the ongoing drastic reduction of linguistic diversity in societies.

More specific comments on the report will follow the suggested feedback structure by focusing on:

- coherence
- aspects which are missing, requiring attention or further development
- aspects which are promising

2. Coherence

While the report is generally coherent in maintaining a clear focus on ‘common plural futures’ that respect cultural diversity, it comes across as a little repetitive, returning to the same concepts across the report in way that is makes it difficult at times to distinguish between parts 1 and 2 and to clearly separate the future that is likely from the future that is desired.

3. Aspects that are missing, require attention or further development

We think that reference to the **importance of languages and language diversity** is conspicuously missing in the report: it could be highlighted in a more explicit way throughout the narrative, as a prominent thread that links all aspects of education and underlines all the major objectives of the Futures of Education vision. Linguistic diversity promotes innovative thought, enables reflections on contrasts and comparisons and enriches dialogue. These skills and abilities will be crucial in forthcoming decades. The challenge to conformity which is inherent in multilingualism will be an ever more essential element in how humanity develops and prospers this century.

Below we provide examples of where this could be done most effectively

- **Indigenous but also minoritised and migrant languages**

The report refers to UNESCO’s longstanding support to **indigenous languages** (p. 10), which is very important. At the same time, however, it leaves out the non-indigenous

multilingualism introduced by migration as well as the growing importance of language learning in different modalities. Mentioning all types of languages in the report would acknowledge their importance on a global scale.

- **Language as a tool for intellectual decolonization and epistemic diversity**

The report refers to 'intellectual decolonization and epistemic diversity' (p. 4) and the 'valorization of cultures and epistemologies that are so often marginalised' (p. 6). Given that cultural diversity often implies linguistic diversity, we think that the diversity of languages – and the need to maintain this diversity - should be mentioned more explicitly and more prominently. Let's remember that languages are disappearing at a phenomenally fast rate: by the end of this century about half of the world's languages will be dead because they will have stopped being learned by children across generations. Many languages survive in a situation of bi-multilingualism with majority languages, which are the languages of economic and political power. Social injustice and marginalization/oppression of minority languages often go hand-in-hand. A proper understanding of the value of languages and multilingualism for humanity should be at the core of education from the very start.

It is known the lack of formal acknowledgement of students' home languages in multilingual classrooms is not only a missed opportunity, but also reinforces the 'deficit view' of not having something - the majority language or culture - rather than the 'resource view' of bringing something new and valuable. It also reinforces the dominant, postcolonial power dynamics. We urge the commission to consider making a stronger vision statement that the healing, decolonising and regenerative power of education can commence with acknowledging and including the languages of both indigenous and migrant communities as an asset for education. This would in turn facilitate the "**commoning**" of educational opportunities and would involve multilingual families and communities in the construction of '**plural futures**' from their own linguistic and cultural perspectives, as well as encouraging inter-generational learning: in the report's words, it would contribute to the '**strengthening of a common public education**' (p. 12) as a place where we '**encounter differences**' (p. 13).

Let us remember that placing languages at the core of education can in principle benefit many aspects of school curricula, as research on multilingualism shows. Multilingualism opens the mind and makes it more receptive to the views of others, which in turn can directly contribute to '**new cooperative and inclusive educational ecosystems**' (p. 14) where people cooperate with others and become better at both learning and at being taught. In other words, multilingualism and language learning have positive effects on empathy, which the report mentions as a '**fundamental element of education**' (p. 15): this is precisely where recognition of the value of language diversity, multilingualism and language learning could be made explicit. Multilingualism and language learning can also contribute significantly to adaptability to change – or 'learning to become' - which is an essential element of regenerative education in tomorrow's societies (as the report acknowledges on p. 8).

- **Shifting demographics and human mobility**

Languages are mentioned in the sections "Shifting demographics and human mobility" (p. 9)" however, the role of languages is presented in a vague way as a hypothetical question. Again, the report could be more explicit in stating that human mobility and forced migration

impose a rethinking of the need to maintain linguistic diversity in education. Children need to gain an awareness of the importance of maintaining minority and minoritized languages from the earliest stages of schooling; families need sufficient information about the value of these languages for education in general; policy makers need to face the challenge of creating the most favourable context for both majority and minority languages to thrive and be recognised as public assets. While there is still a great number of unanswered questions – and much more work need to be done - we are in a position to join efforts between research and society to provide viable paths for these endeavours.

The report could also explicitly recognise the value of language diversity in language learning in schools: this means highlighting that not only the internationally prestigious or instrumentally useful languages are worth learning, but also recognising that classrooms are increasingly multilingual and therefore pedagogies oriented to monolingual learners are neither appropriate nor effective.

- **Healing and reparative justice**

“Healing and reparative justice ... through the valorization of cultures and epistemologies that are so often marginalized” (p. 6): languages and linguistic diversity could be mentioned here, together with an acknowledgement that peaceful and inclusive societies need a change in attitudes towards different languages and cultures, as well as linguistically inclusive pedagogies in education.

- **Pedagogical communing (p. 15)**

: student-driven learning to complement teacher-led contents can be enriched by multilingualism and cultural diversity. Similarly, cultural diversity can be embedded in communing spaces created as an essential element of language learning. Recognition and appreciation of language diversity in pedagogical communing can help children to feel valued in their identity and contribute elements of their culture.

Finally, while we agree with the report that a common public education requires “intentionality, planning and systematization” (p. 12), we would not use statements such as “there is nothing spontaneous about education”: the success of pedagogical communing in an educational ecosystem can also be measured by its capacity to generate diverse approaches to language learning, including those that rely on implicit learning that – by definition – happens below the level of consciousness and is therefore inherently difficult to measure with objective metrics. Teachers should be seen as ‘scaffolders’ who create multiple educational spaces where learners can thrive at their own pace.

4. Aspects which are promising

We appreciate and applaud the challenge of linking academic research with real world needs. As Bilingualism Matters, we are committed to make knowledge based on research evidence accessible and usable to communities and stakeholders in different sectors of society.

We appreciate the ambition to make education a common human right and recognize the importance of multiple ways of knowing and learning.

Effective collaborative teaching is a central aim of regenerative education: educated professionals dedicated to common values should lead education developments rather than political agendas or commercial market trends. Here, as mentioned above, we would like to advise caution regarding statement using words “rejecting” or “resisting” with regards to new trends and technologies. It would be more productive to focus on how those new resources in education can be harnessed by teachers, leaders in education, and learners to build inclusive educational ecosystems. Language teachers, in particular, could assume new roles and new responsibilities as agents not only of effective language learning, but also of cultural enrichment and increased empathy.

We are in complete agreement with the final statements on the role of universities and higher education in general in building education as a global common good. We particularly like the point about the “decisive significance of universities in producing research and enabling the circulation of knowledge”. This collaboration directly feeds the idea of ‘a public education that brings us into dialogue with the unknown’ (p. 12) because we need more research on the many poorly understood aspects of education and learning in very different contexts, and an evaluation of what works well and what works less well.

Publicly engaged research on multilingualism can contribute to creating effective communication channels with different communities for vital information about globally relevant topics, such as pandemics and climate change: communication which is successfully adapted to diverse needs of populations can contribute to changing behaviour and life patterns but is also key to the aim of ‘regenerative education’ envisaged in the report.

The circulation of knowledge generated at universities is precisely the aim of Bilingualism Matters, which facilitates connections among researchers in different countries and social settings, and knowledge exchange between researchers and society. The achievement of this aim requires training researchers in clear communication, which is indispensable for public action and regenerative education in order to make “thinking together to act together” possible.