



# Multilingual Education in the Light of Diversity: Lessons Learned

Executive Summary

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**ABOUT THE NESET II**

**NESET II** is an advisory network of experts working on the social dimension of education and training. The European Commission's Directorate-General for Education and Culture initiated the establishment of the network as the successor to NESSE (2007-2010) and NESET (2011-2014). The Public Policy and Management Institute ([PPMI](http://www.ppmi.lt)) is responsible for the administration of the NESET II network.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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While multilingualism and diversity have always been an integral part of Europe, they have also become important characteristics of many national education systems during the past two decades. The linguistic diversity of modern classrooms is shaped by 1) the presence of historical non-dominant language groups, which are being revitalised; 2) The growing mobility between countries which results in a variety of new languages and skills in the classrooms; and 3) changing educational and labour market demands that favour multilingual and multi-literate citizens.

Consequently, more and more young learners are growing up with several cultures and languages and may experience multiple transitions between different school systems and school languages. Raised in changing multilingual and multicultural environments, individuals may no longer identify themselves with one language and culture but rather with a range of languages and cultures acquired in different situations. In the context of these social transformations, multilingualism is becoming more a way of life than a problem to be solved.

The task of education stakeholders is to create school systems that bridge these various linguistic and cultural realities and support the mobility of the pupils across Europe. Schools need to provide an education that supports the development of learners' linguistic and cultural resources, while at the same time balancing these with social, cultural and political demands. The challenge at hand is therefore to offer a multilingual schooling system that supports the inclusion of all pupils in which they can develop their full potential linguistically, cognitively and emotionally.

In light of the above, this report reviews international research to reveal how national education systems can better support multilingualism in their schools. It tries to answer the following questions:

- How is multilingualism understood in different contexts and what are the main challenges and opportunities involved in promoting multilingualism in schools?
- What specific education policies and practices appear to be inclusive approaches promoting multilingualism and continuity of language learning?
- What is the role of different stakeholders in supporting multilingualism at individual and societal level?
- What key recommendations can be made that can serve as important (first) steps to improve present policies and ensure that they are linguistically and culturally sensitive?

One of the limitations of this review was a lack of empirical evidence (in particular longitudinal research) in Europe that looks into comprehensive multilingual approaches of teaching highly diverse student population in schools. That said, there are many innovative practices and inspiring approaches that recognise linguistic capital as a resource, both emerging and being trialled, which the authors document in this review. However, most research concerning effectiveness and comparison of different instructional models is based on empirical material from North America.

### Key findings

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- **Multilingualism is associated with cognitive, social, personal, academic and professional benefits.** Contrary to popular belief, there is no negative effect of bilingual education on language development; studies have even reported a positive effect when compared to monolingual education, and even also an improvement in learning school languages. Moreover, research evidence suggests that valuing the unique language and cultural background of each pupil promotes academic success by boosting self-confidence and self-esteem. Furthermore, multilingual learners are likely to have better

critical thinking and problem solving skills from having gained multiple perspectives, and have greater cultural awareness (see section 1.1).

- **Multilingualism needs to be supported.** When pupils move from one country to another, and therefore from one language to another, they develop different sets of knowledge in their different languages. When moving to a new school (language) environment, such pupils require support to successfully transfer their existing knowledge from one language to another. They also need support to learn how to successfully communicate and develop cognitively on different subjects through the medium of new languages. This requires an articulated language learning approach, which unfortunately is not yet in place in the majority of countries (see section 2.1).
- **Multilingual education is not yet a reality in most countries in Europe.** Although there is evidence on the benefits of multilingualism, very few European countries presently support multilingualism at school and thereby miss an opportunity to capitalise on the advantages it brings to the learning process. Clearly, in many countries multilingualism poses entirely new challenges to the educational system. Oftentimes, a greater resistance to an articulated multilingual policy is encountered in geographical areas where less diversity is present than in highly diverse urban environments (see section 2.2 and 3.2).
- **The level of policy support and recognition of linguistic diversity and its benefits influences** the way it is further operationalized into curricula and availability of support programmes for schools. Therefore, strategies, pedagogical concepts and organisational models for such language learning approaches are manifold depending on circumstances (e.g. demographic facts, professional qualification of staff), official language policies (assimilationist vs. pluralistic), and tacit attitudes towards linguistic and cultural diversity (see section 3.2).
- **Inclusive multilingualism curricula integrate the language dimension comprehensively** and go beyond a simple opposition between monolingual and bilingual educational models or mother tongue versus foreign language. The Multilingualism Curriculum by Krumm and Reich (2013), for instance, explicitly focuses on the development of linguistic awareness, the ability to reflect on one's own linguistic situation and to analyse others' situation, the knowledge about languages and their significance for people and groups, the linguistic knowledge necessary for the comparison of languages, a varied range of learning strategies, and self-confidence as far as the pupils' languages are concerned (see section 3.3).
- **Re-thinking teacher initial education and continuous professional development programmes is necessary to equip teachers with knowledge and competences to support multilingual education.** Teachers report that they are expected to rely on their own resources regarding multilingualism, and often report that they lack support and relevant training. Research shows that simply relying on the accumulation of experience does not help to improve the situation (see section 3.4).
- **Inclusive school culture and leadership is an important component of multilingual education.** Whole-school development is advantageous, if not necessary, to successfully implement a pluralistic approach to language learning. When implementing a whole school language curricula concept, a positive attitude towards all languages is a necessary precondition (see section 4.1).
- **Families and community are an important source of pedagogical experience and a part of the learning continuity.** Research demonstrates that, for multilingual education to be successful, parents' support is necessary, and consequently the way schools cooperate with the parents is crucial for success (see section 4.2).
- **There exist a number of inspiring pedagogical practices that can support multilingualism in schools.** Building on a general approach of linguistically and culturally responsive schooling, language portfolios, translanguaging and the opportunity to grow meta-linguistic competences, cooperative learning, dialogic reading, content and language integrated learning, as well as information and communication technologies, all contribute to positive results for language learners (see chapter 5).

- **There is a need to improve evidence base.** Without rigorous empirical research on the key elements of multilingual policies, it is challenging to give a straightforward answer on successful strategies in terms of academic achievement and social inclusion in order to inform effective policy making. The availability of a strong evidence base on this topic becomes even more important in light of the political sensitivity and ideological debates emerging around the concept of diversity in the wider society.

## Key policy implications and recommendations

Our review recommends several steps, the implementation of which can help improve current education policies and ensure that they are culturally and linguistically sensitive. Building on the existing experience of (bi-/multi-)lingual teaching and learning strategies, combined with policy experimentation, is advised.

The main conclusions and recommendations of this report are:

### *For policy-makers at the EU and national level*

- The profound societal change caused by new migration patterns and increased mobility of EU citizens has created a need to re-think the key competence framework for lifelong learning in the 21st century. In particular, the notions of communication in one's mother tongue, and communication in languages other than what is used in school, are increasingly becoming topics of discussion. There is an on-going revision process of the key competence framework in order to bring it in line with the economic and social transformations that have occurred in Europe for the past ten years.

#### *Recommendations*

**There is a need to re-define key competences in relation to multilingualism at the EU level** to reflect the changing European reality.

**Multilingual competences need to be clearly operationalized and explained** at the national level.

- Deficit-based views on linguistic diversity are prevailing among education policy-makers, and languages that are not included into the general curriculum are often seen as a barrier rather than as a resource. The analysis also shows that a favourable policy discourse and commitment of education stakeholders, starting from political authorities to community organisations, facilitate the implementation of multilingual programmes.

#### *Recommendations*

There is a need to **re-conceptualise linguistic and cultural diversity at a policy level**, and to change public perceptions so that a plurality of languages is valued as a resource rather than approached as a problem.

Therefore, there is a need to **rethink school systems in terms of 'multilingualism for all'**, not just as part of a narrower agenda of a new migration and learning the language of instruction. Rather, a holistic approach is needed at all levels.

- Continuity is crucial for the academic language development of pupils in a multilingual environment. This means that language learning needs to be smooth and uninterrupted vertically - from early childhood up to entering the labour market - as well as horizontally - ensuring that in formal and non-formal education actors work together as partners to develop a comprehensive learning approach.

#### *Recommendations*

It is necessary to address inequalities within the system from the earliest stage, **starting with Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)**, ensuring vertical continuity.

To ensure multilingual continuity, education policy-makers need to invest in curriculum development. **Learning outcomes in all subjects have to reflect the language dimension**; on the one hand, aiming at the academic language development, and on the other, building on the multilingual resources of the classroom.

**Sustained political engagement needs to be ensured at the national level**, it should not be subject to on-off initiatives, and should be coupled with effective partnerships including grass-root education stakeholders.

- There are very few comprehensive teacher preparation programmes that deal with linguistic diversity. As it stands, teachers who teach pupils of different linguistic backgrounds are expected to simply rely on their private engagement regarding multilingualism.

#### *Recommendations*

There is a priority to **re-examine teacher education** – from initial teacher education and teachers’ continuing professional development – to **support all teachers in gaining linguistic awareness and acquiring strategies for supporting learners in super-diverse settings**. Teacher induction is critical in this respect, as is ensuring access to a suitably qualified pool of teacher educators and the diversification of the teacher workforce.

**A formal recognition of multilingual competencies within quality assurance systems would be very helpful.**

- There is, to date, little empirical evidence in Europe that looks into comprehensive multilingual approaches to teach highly diverse student population in schools.

#### *Recommendations*

**EU-level mechanisms to support knowledge transfer between Member States should be maximised.**

It is necessary to **ensure systematic evaluation and monitoring processes** of multilingual education policies and initiatives, to contribute to the evidence base and ensure the greatest benefit for all children and the wider society.

#### *For school communities*

- Implementing multilingual learning and teaching strategies requires the commitment and collaboration of all education stakeholders. Many of the existing initiatives can create a foundation for elaborating multilingual approaches and linguistically sensitive practices, provided that an enabling policy environment is created.

#### *Recommendations*

Even if multilingual strategies are not yet in place, improving school tolerance with regard to multilingualism can be a valuable asset in comparison to restrictive language policies. **Positive attitudes of teachers and school leaders regarding the languages of the pupils increase motivation and feeling of school belonging**, while language rejection may possibly affect pupils’ wellbeing and academic results.

**Non-dominant languages need to be included into school contexts**, either through formal or non-formal learning.

- Parents and the wider community are an important part of the learning continuity and can therefore help support multilingual education.

#### *Recommendations*

Schools and teachers should build **partnerships with families and local communities** for effective multilingual teaching and learning strategies.

The **involvement of families and communities in the education** of children requires **interactive teaching strategies and active acknowledgment (and valuing) of cultural differences in and outside of the classroom**, in order to foster skills and transfer knowledge between the languages.

*For practitioners*

- Language teaching methodology has seen diverse singular, and even more pluralistic, approaches emerging over the past decades. It would be a wasted opportunity not to find ways to transfer and mainstream the new forms of flexible and inclusive learning provisions that have emerged in the process.

*Recommendations*

**All teachers need to have a profound knowledge about language and language learning, diagnosis and support.** This includes scaffolding on the individual micro-level of each student and on the macro-level of planning of instruction for the classroom.

**The proactive and strategic use of learners' family languages** and the use of cultural embedded tasks make it easier for pupils to access higher conceptual and cognitive tasks.

Teachers and pupils need to **monitor and evaluate the results of the factual language development** using language portfolios to keep track of the progress.

Pedagogical approaches such as **translanguaging and metacomprehension, cooperative learning, and content and language integrated learning**, are important tools that capitalise on linguistic diversity and should be integrated into teaching strategies.

**Information and communication technologies can facilitate teaching in multilingual contexts substantially.** Therefore, it is important to provide access to the necessary infrastructure in schools and ideally also at home.



