



# Socially Disadvantaged Learners and Languages of Education

Piet VAN AVERMAET

*PRELIMINARY STUDY*  
*Languages of Education*

Language Policy Division, Strasbourg

[www.coe.int/lang](http://www.coe.int/lang)



# Socially Disadvantaged Learners and Languages of Education

Piet VAN AVERMAET, *Centre for Diversity and Learning, Ghent University*

Intergovernmental Conference

*Languages of Schooling: towards a Framework for Europe*

Strasbourg 16-18 October 2006

The opinions expressed in this work are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of the Council of Europe.

All correspondence concerning this publication or the reproduction or translation of all or part of the document should be addressed to the Director of School, Out of School and Higher Education of the Council of Europe (F-67075 Strasbourg Cedex).

The reproduction of extracts is authorised, except for commercial purposes, on condition that the source is quoted.

*Language Policy Division*

DG IV - Directorate of School, Out-of-School and Higher Education  
Council of Europe, F-67075 Strasbourg Cedex

## Contents

<a href="#">Introduction</a> .....	5
<a href="#">1. Equal opportunities in education?</a> .....	6
<a href="#">2. Does language play a role?</a> .....	7
<a href="#">3. Is there a (mis)match between the language used at school and language used at home?</a> .....	7
<a href="#">4. To remedy or to deal with diversity?</a> .....	8
<a href="#">5. Objectives and curricula: a two-way approach</a> .....	10
<a href="#">6. Language across the curriculum</a> .....	11
<a href="#">7. Not only language</a> .....	11
<a href="#">8. Language policy at school</a> .....	12
<a href="#">9. Multilingual policy at school</a> .....	12
<a href="#">References</a> .....	13

## Introduction

The main task of education is to provide children with the skills required to be able to function as members of society. Education accomplishes this task through imparting knowledge, skills and attitudes (competencies) to children. This is the emancipatory function of education for *all* children.

However, school is only one of the actors in this process of emancipating children. Knowledge, skills and attitudes to allow children to function fully in society are also developed in the home. More knowledge, skills and attitudes can be developed in certain social environments than in others. Compensating for this inequality is a specific emancipatory task of education. Education has to try to ensure that the position that someone achieves in society does not depend solely on the opportunities offered by the home context (Jaspaert, 2005).

‘Migrant children’ are often seen as a category that has (language) learning problems at school and thus has less chance of school success. This categorisation oversimplifies things for several reasons. First, a distinction needs to be made between ‘newcomers’ and ‘second or third generation’ immigrants. The first group are newly-arrived immigrants who often do not master the standard language of the ‘host country’. The second group was born in the host country or migrated there many years ago with their parents at an early age. They have often acquired the language of the host country when starting school. Second, the group of ‘newcomers’ comprises a wide variety of countries of origin and educational and school backgrounds: an illiterate refugee child originally from Liberia, who also lived for some years in one or more refugee camps in other African countries, can hardly be compared with a child from Ukraine with a schooling experience close to “ours”. Third, not all migrant or allochthonous children have language and/or learning problems at school, whereas some so-called autochthonous children do have language and/or learning problems at school.

Unequal opportunities in education and differences in school success cannot simply be explained in ethnic terms. Consequently, this- cannot simply be solved by prevention and language-remedy programmes. The observed unequal success of children in school is more complex and has to be explained in social terms. School success is not simply related to a level of language proficiency, but rather to the way knowledge, skills and attitudes are communicated and conceptualised at school and in different social environments.

### 1. Equal opportunities in education?

Amongst other research, the OECD-PISA results show that education is not always successful in carrying out its emancipatory task. Children who start with fewer opportunities seem to have major difficulties in using education to catch up. Often during education the gap increases instead of decreasing. We cannot ignore the relationship between children's socio-economic status (SES) and school success. Education has a reproductive and emancipatory function. However, it cannot be the task of a school to reproduce social inequality (Jaspaert, 2005).

The success or failure of children at school should be based on their talents, learning potential and their willingness to learn. Striving for equality in absolute terms makes no sense as there will always be differences. However, when success or failure in learning is systematic, i.e. a certain group of learners with the same background (sex, socio-economic context, ethnic background, etc.) systematically performs less well, there is a problem. Recent OECD research reveals that in many European countries the number of children with a low SES is over-represented in the group of low achievers in reading comprehension and mathematics.

Some research indicates that there is very little additional effect of 'Ethnicity' on SES. In other words, allochthonous children do not by definition perform less well than autochthonous children. Most research does reveal, however, that girls perform better than boys and that children with a high SES perform better than children with a low SES.

When we assume that learning aptitude, talent, etc., are equally divided amongst children of all social classes at birth, we can observe that this is no longer the case when they enter the school system. For some children, the input they get during the stage of primary socialisation is not adapted to the norms, interaction patterns, communication modes, language codes and methods of knowledge acquisition that are taken for granted in schools today. In these cases, we observe a mismatch between the cognitive skills that children are assumed to acquire at school and the interaction and learning patterns they find at home (Jaspaert, 2005).

On this basis, education has two options. The first is that the norms, interaction patterns, communication modes, language codes and methods of knowledge acquisition that are taken for granted at school are beyond discussion. In that case, one can try to intervene in the home context and through preschool programmes in order to "prepare" children for school. If education opts for this solution it is actually giving its basic function back to society. Alternatively, a school can opt to take a remedial approach with these children or provide them with a prevention programme before they enter the standard programme.

The second option is that the norms, interaction patterns, communication modes, language codes and methods of knowledge acquisition that are taken for granted at school are negotiable. In that case, when education wants to provide equal chances for all children, it can acknowledge the diversity that can be observed. It will have to

adapt its teaching methods to this diversity so that they can compensate for the children's differences at the outset of their school career. In this way, the school then adapts to the students rather than the students to the school (Jaspaert, 2005).

## 2. Does language play a role?

Language is an important element in the efforts made by schools to redress social inequality and in its emancipatory function in general. Language is one of the basic instruments for societal functioning. Children who grow up in a "socially disadvantaged" context often lack the language skills required to function in society in the way that society expects them to. Low literacy skills are often observed; a lack of proficiency in the standard language makes it difficult for the children to participate in the societal debate; they avoid writing because they realise that they make a lot of spelling mistakes. The school's task is to compensate for these language arrears, not to delegate its task to society by asking it to provide these children with the necessary language skills before they enter the school (Jaspaert, 2005). All children must be given the best possible opportunity at school to acquire the language skills (more than a knowledge of the language) that are needed to function in society.

This means more than just teaching the relevant vocabulary, syntactic constructions, pronunciation and providing a lot of opportunities to practise. The acquisition of the relevant language skills is inextricably bound up with learning to carry out a set of cognitive actions that a socially disadvantaged child does not have to carry out – and thus does not acquire – in his own social environment (Jaspaert, 2005). This represents a mismatch in (language) codes or communication modes between certain social contexts and the school context. This mismatch should not be seen as a deficit or deficiency for the people belonging to that social group. It is simply a difference, one – as has already been stated – that education has to take into account in its attempt to teach the language skills that children need to function in society. Educators must be aware of the fact that the code they tend to use corresponds to that of certain societal groups only. It is important that that code is not considered the only norm for learning and transforming knowledge. Communication modes and language codes that are used in each societal group are valued and seen as valuable by the group and the members of that group. These are the cultural and social differences that education has to take into account when trying to compensate for the language skills – and in general the cognitive and other skills – that socially disadvantaged children often lack.

## 3. Is there a (mis)match between the language used at school and language used at home?

As has already been pointed out, 'migrant children' and their 'language deficit' are seen as one of the main problems in (language) education. The fact that they do not use the 'target language' at home is often seen as one of the major causal factors of their 'language problems' and their lack of success at school. The discourse is often negative and stigmatising, as if 'migrant children' have nothing - no background, no experiences, no knowledge - when it comes to 'language'.

However, it is clear that there are 'non-native speakers' who have no language deficit at school and 'native speakers' who do have such a 'deficit'. This would suggest that the relationship between "home language" and "school language" is far more complex than a simple deficit in language level and the ethnic background of a child (Jaspaert, 2005).

For some children, there is indeed a difference between the 'home language' and the 'school language'. The language used at school differs from the language used at home and for some children this gap is wider than for others. Given the fact that it is not just in the case of 'non-native speakers' or migrant children that this gap can be observed, the question arises whether this is a problem relating to the children or a problem relating to the school.

School language (or cognitive academic language proficiency) differs considerably from home language (more informal communicative skills) (Cummins, 1984). School language is cognitively more complex and the context is that of the school. The school deals with different topics than the home and there is often no link between them. At school, the purpose of language is different. Language is mostly used to transform knowledge. A child needs to understand the language in order to gather or accumulate knowledge. Interaction at school and in the classroom is organised in a different way. Unlike the home context, in the classroom, the teacher is usually the central person. Most of the time the teacher talks and the children listen. Grammatical complexity and vocabulary is usually different at school. And finally the relationship between the interaction partners in school is less symmetric than in a home context. The teacher is traditionally the one who possesses the knowledge, the one who knows everything, the one who teaches that knowledge and who evaluates whether the children have acquired that knowledge. The children are on the outside of that process. They are often confronted with knowledge that has no link with their socio-cultural background.

Consequently, children have to acquire a 'new language'. The results from language tests at school generally reveal that the main reason why children have 'problems' with the 'school language' is their socio-economic background. The gap between 'home language' and 'school language' is mainly socio-cultural rather than ethnically determined.

It is also clear from the above that the so-called 'language problem' of immigrant children is not a problem of 'level of language proficiency'. It is the socio-cultural determined differences in communication that explain school success. These different ways of communication/interaction need to be taken into account at school and in the classroom (Jaspaert, 2005).

#### 4. To remedy or to deal with diversity?

If we see the gap between home and school language as a problem of the individual child, as a deficit, we shall have to provide remediation for that child. Before entering the classroom, the child will have to learn the 'new school language'. In that case, we do not question the language norms that prevail at school. We do not question the way knowledge is transformed, constructed or opened up. We do not question the (language) aims that are set by the school or the way it tries to reach those aims.

If, however, we see this gap not as a problem of the individual child, but as a difference in codes, a socially determined difference, the problem needs to be tackled at school level. In that case, the school has to consider how it should organise teaching and which goals should be central. The school needs to ask how it will deal with this diversity of socio-cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. The challenge for the school, then, is to organise teaching in such a way that all children can acquire the school language that is needed to be able to function at school and in society (Jaspaert, 2005).

The author is in favour of the second option, partly on the basis of the arguments given in the previous paragraphs. But from a learning perspective there is another



argument that may be even more important. Research shows that schools with poor results do not always opt for goals and actions aimed at increasing the quality of education or the professionalisation of teachers. A frequent response or 'education reform' involves the (re)homogenisation of groups or preschool and home prevention programmes. The objective of the latter, then, is to 'prepare' children for school without asking schools to reflect upon their own practice. In (re)homogenisation processes it is the intention to put children with a certain 'level' together and to provide adapted education.

However, substantial research has already revealed that homogenisation can potentially lead to negative effects in terms of equal opportunities for learning. (Re)homogenisation of groups of children often goes hand in hand with a lowering of teachers expectations towards the so-called 'weaker' group. This then often leads to curriculum and input reduction. De Fraine et al. (2002) say the following about this: "Teachers tailor their instructional practices to the academic level of the group of students. This refers to the concept of 'didactic fit': adjustment of curriculum, learning materials, method of instruction, effective learning time, assessment, etc. to the ability level of the class (Dar & Resh, 1986, 1994). In most classes, the content and pace of teaching are geared to the middle level of ability in that class. In lower classes, there is a more limited academic focus, poor use of instructional time and a reduced opportunity to learn.". A final problem of (re)homogenization processes is that the potential effects of heterogeneity cannot be exploited. Both socially disadvantaged children with a 'lower' level and children with a 'higher' level of school language proficiency benefit from heterogeneous classes (Van den Branden, 2000).

Dealing with socially disadvantaged learners essentially means being able to deal with diversity and heterogeneity in mainstream classrooms. When we see (language) learning as a process of social construction, diversity and heterogeneity is an advantage rather than a disadvantage. Putting socially disadvantaged children in "pull-out classes" and providing separate curricula and tests reverts to a purely psychological approach to (language) learning: the individual child who has a language deficit and who will be better off if we treat him separately in a homogeneous group of children with the same "problem". We then neglect the social aspect and want them to adapt to norms and values set by representatives of a specific social background.

According to the OECD (PISA-results) school effectiveness depends on the professionalism of school teams, having high expectations of children and being able to deal with the diverse composition of groups of learners.

Instead of stigmatising a certain group of children and their (home) environment by putting them in separate classrooms and providing separate 'prevention' programmes, schools need to constantly reflect upon the quality of their language teaching for heterogeneous groups. Rather than homogeneous pull-out classes we advocate additional pupil support within the mainstream classroom through: co-operative learning in mixed-ability groups; relating knowledge, content and topics with different socio-cultural background; contextualised language learning; a more interaction based approach where the teacher is no longer the central person who knows everything but a mediator for children who bring in experiences, knowledge from their social background; and finally, a more constructivist instead of a transmission or instruction-driven model, where children can express their own meaning, can make links between their own knowledge and that of other children in order to acquire new knowledge.

## 5. Objectives and curricula: a two-way approach

As stated above, separate outcomes, curricula and group setting are unlikely to benefit socially disadvantaged learners. Both low SES migrants and non-migrants need to be able to function at school and in society. In that, they do not differ from non-migrants with a high SES. This implies that every individual needs to be able to meet/acquire the same final objectives of the language(s) of education. The final objectives for the language(s) of education are minimum goals in relation to knowledge, skills and attitudes, preferably for societal domains based on needs analysis. Minimum is understood here as the minimum (i.e. essential) requirements, for which a societal consensus exists, to guarantee participation in school and society. Final objectives can be contextualised (content, (inter)cultural aspects, and so on) in a curriculum that is relevant for the local situation. Differences in outcomes and curriculum can occur according to the contextual needs (i.e. the kind of programme one follows). For instance, a stronger focus may be placed on vocational language in a vocational learning context, whereas there may be a stronger focus on academic language in an academic learning context. This is not a difference in level but only in context.

When setting final outcomes and developing curricula we should reflect upon who determines curriculum and final objectives or competencies. These are constructed and thus socially determined. As a consequence the effectiveness of education is socially determined. In this process, differences in the socio-cultural and socio-economic backgrounds of the children should be central to all reflection.

It is not disputed that heterogeneity of groups has its limits. A child who does not master a certain language at all will hardly benefit from sitting in a classroom with native and near-native speakers of that language. We therefore opt for a two-way approach. Socially disadvantaged learners who are behind in the language of education follow the standard curriculum from the start of compulsory education. They attend classes in heterogeneous settings. Teachers strive to reach the same objectives with these children as for learners who are not socially disadvantaged. A 'priority policy', with extra funds and other supporting mechanisms for schools which opt for an integrated approach, is of vital importance. As already stated, separate classrooms and separate curricula can lead to the stigmatisation of a group, are counter productive and, in the end, can lead to a dual society.

Children who do not master the language of education at all – sometimes called 'newcomers' – first follow a programme with 'adapted' objectives and curriculum. After a certain period of teaching in a special language programme, which is limited in time, they join the ordinary class. In the special language programme, 'newcomers' get as far as they can depending on different factors. Immigrant children coming from countries that have a similar education policy will learn faster than illiterate children or children who had never been to school before entering the host country. This and other factors will determine the pace of learning. For those children who learn at a slower pace, the time spent in a special language programme cannot be unlimited. They also need to integrate into the regular classroom as quickly as possible. Therefore, the goals developed for the special language programme cannot be seen as final objectives that a child needs to meet before joining the ordinary class, but rather as 'developmental goals'. After a certain period of time, every child attends to the ordinary class. Further support is then provided in those classes where these 'newcomers' are integrated.

## 6. Language across the curriculum

Giving children maximum opportunities for acquiring the 'school language' not only depends on the 'language teacher'. Given the fact that languages are better acquired in context, every teacher of subjects other than language (e.g. maths, geography, etc.) should pay attention to the language acquisition processes of children. This is no extra lumber; it is an integral part of the teaching profession. We cannot adopt the position that socially disadvantaged learners first need to have a near-native level of language proficiency before participating in other subject classes. Every teacher is a language teacher. He or she uses language to explain physical things, to organise the classroom, to unravel history with children, etc. In the case of socially disadvantaged children for whom the gap between the 'home language' and the 'school language' is wide, closing that gap is not the responsibility of the 'language teacher' alone. That responsibility lies with every teacher and the whole school team. As already indicated, maximising the possibilities for acquiring the 'school language' can be achieved through a process-oriented and active didactical approach. Teaching can be organised in such a way that more children have more opportunities to interact with one another. The 'non-language teacher' mediates amongst the students while they are doing a task in, for example, 'history'. He or she gives support during the reading process of a text about 'ancient Egypt'. The teacher provides a task where students have to solve a problem in groups or in pair work. This stimulates interaction among students. It will oblige students to ask the teacher questions in order to be able to carry out the task. This process makes students more actively involved in what is going on in the classroom. They are not just passive consumers of knowledge. Cognition and language are intertwined in a more natural way. Higher involvement increases information processing and language proficiency. The teacher can influence these processes positively through the type of questions he or she asks, the feedback given, the way in which it is given and the extent to which the learners are encouraged to use the language actively. And students with a lower level of language proficiency, as well as students with a higher level, will draw maximum benefit from heterogeneous pair or group work.

## 7. Not only language

It is clear that a limited proficiency in the 'school language' leads to a falling behind or disadvantage at school. It is also clear from the above that providing maximum opportunities for acquiring this 'school language' is the responsibility of the whole school team. It is also clear that socially disadvantaged learners benefit more from an integrated, interactive and heterogeneous approach than from prevention or remedial programmes or (re) homogenisation procedures.

However, giving socially disadvantaged learners maximum opportunities for learning, through the realisation of emancipatory education, is not only a question of increasing children's 'school language proficiency'. School success and effective education cannot only be defined in terms of cognitive outcomes (i.e. language and maths). Other, non-cognitive outcomes contribute to the school success of children. When the focus on language is too strong and too exclusive, the relationship with and the importance of other factors for realising high-quality education and for reducing educational disadvantage is in danger of being overlooked (Blommaert & Van Avermaet, 2006).

## 8. Language policy at school

OECD (PISA) suggests that “students and schools will perform better in a climate of high expectations, the readiness to invest effort, the enjoyment of learning, good teacher-student relations, access to best practice, quality professional development, ...” (Schleicher 2006).

In order to be able to achieve this a school must have the willingness, the possibility, the capacity and the ability to develop a school policy. Such a policy is not the responsibility of just one teacher or the principal or school management. It is the responsibility of the whole school team.

The school team equally needs to pursue a coherent policy concerning language. This implies the systematic and strategic development of a clear view of language education and the role of language at school with the aim of increasing the success of all children in school.

Language has two major functions. On the one hand it has a communicative function: people use language to get in touch with one another, to share ideas, etc. Language also has a conceptual function: people use language to get a grip on reality by giving things a name and classifying them. They also use language to construct knowledge. In concrete language-use situations these two functions are often intertwined. Both functions occur constantly at school. The teacher and the children use language to communicate with each other in the classroom, in the playground, etc. They also use language to construct knowledge.

Almost every school must deal with the fact that children from very different backgrounds (social, cultural, ethnic, etc.) attend classes. The way people communicate and the way knowledge is constructed is socially determined. This needs to be reflected in a school language policy, in the way the school deals with these different backgrounds, in the language(s) used in the classroom and in a policy on language use in the playground. It also needs to be reflected in the way the school communicates with parents and the neighbourhood.

## 9. Multilingual policy at school

One of the topics that occupy the minds of schoolteachers and principals – and society at large – is the multilingual context of the school/class. Many schools seem to struggle with the multicultural and multilingual nature of their establishment on the one hand, and societal pressure for teaching the standard language of the country on the other.

Schools teach foreign languages. European policies of plurilingualism and plurilingualism are strongly promoted at most schools. Multilingualism is seen as an asset, as something good, as having added value. When it comes to the languages of immigrant children at school, however, their plurilingualism is seen as a handicap, as something bad or non-existent. Monolingualism is the norm.

However, in classrooms we observe a diversity of languages and language varieties. Education is about the development of competencies. Language is a major tool for this purpose. If we restrict ourselves to the standard language only as a medium of communication, or only allow children to use the standard language to solve problems, to fulfil tasks in the classroom, and do not make use of different communication modes and codes, we miss many kinds of opportunities for the development of children's competencies.

## References

- Blommaert, J. & P. Van Avermaet, (2006). Wiens Nederlands? Over taalnaïviteit in het beleid. In: *Sampol*, 13.
- Cummins, J., (1984). Wanted: a theoretical framework for relating language proficiency to academic achievement among bilingual students. In: C. Rivera (ed.), *Language proficiency and academic achievement*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2-19.
- Dar, Y. & N. Resh, (1994). Separating and mixing students for learning: concepts and research. In: *Pedagogisch Tijdschrift*, 19. 109-126.
- De Fraine, B., J. Van Damme, & P. Onghena, (2002). Accountability of schools and teachers: what should be taken into account? In: *European Educational Research Journal*, 1. 403-428.
- Jaspaert, K., (2005). *Onderwijs Nederlands tussen gisteren en morgen*. Den Haag: Nederlandse Taalunie, 1-69.
- Schleicher, A., (2006). *School factors related to quality and equity*. VLOR Doorstartdag. Brussel.
- Van den Branden, K., (2000). Does negotiation of meaning promote reading comprehension? A study of primary school classes. In: *Reading Research Quarterly*, 35. 426-443.