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Minorities and Minority Languages in a Changing Europe

Conference on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages

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When you think of the system(s) for minority language education you know best, what would you consider good practices that work well? Which aspects of this system are more problematic or currently pose challenges?

Bilingual programmes. Educational systems that provide room for both the minority and majority or state language work best because these do justice to the children's identity and provide them with the possibility to develop multiple languages that are all valuable for their development and future.

For children with a minority language background, ignoring the minority language in education can put them at a disadvantage. If the minority language is their stronger language, learning (at least in part) in this language supports their learning process and their academic achievements. Moreover, minority language education can create a safe learning environment, foster self-confidence and provide minority language children with a sense of belonging and inclusion. However, we also know that good skills in the state language are important, as this enhances children's chances at societal success. Therefore, being taught in only the minority language can be detrimental as it will fail to prepare children for optimal functioning in society.

Example Friesland. An example of bilingual programmes can be found, for example, in the Netherlands in the province of Friesland. Friesland is a bilingual province where both Frisian, a regional language, and Dutch, the nation's dominant language, are official languages. In preschool and nurseries use of Frisian is common and supported by the local government. In elementary school, most teaching is done in Dutch but elementary schools are also obliged to achieve a set of main goals regarding Frisian: a positive attitude regarding use of Frisian by themselves and others, ability to understand spoken and written Frisian, ability to produce and write Frisian themselves, as well as acquiring a substantial Frisian vocabulary. Note that there are also about 70 trilingual elementary schools in Friesland where Frisian, Dutch and English are used and taught. In secondary school, Dutch is clearly predominant. There are about 5 secondary school locations where Frisian is a language of instruction. Sometimes specific modules (e.g. focused on education and care) are in Frisian.

Challenges. It is a challenge to guarantee good high-quality minority language education. For example, recently, it turned out that a particular challenge is to find teachers who have sufficient command of Frisian or are sufficiently confident to use Frisian in education. Often, teachers are not native speakers themselves and it can happen that the children's Frisian is better than the teacher's Frisian. It can be concluded that teacher training in the minority language is focal point. A second challenge concerns superdiversity contexts in which there are children from a wide range of language background in one classroom.

Having heard about a number of different systems of minority language education, let us take a step back and focus on the most persons in this system: children. Ms Blom, you are a linguist focussing on language acquisition starting from the very early age. What do we know, from a linguistic point of view, about the acquisition of multiple languages during childhood? For example, how does the learning of a minority language affect the knowledge of the state language? Which lessons should policy makers draw from these research findings?

Prerequisites. First of all, healthy language development has two prerequisites: 1) strong internal learning mechanisms, and 2) receiving language input that feeds into the language learning mechanisms. The vast majority of the children have surprisingly robust language learning mechanisms and are extremely good language learners. Regarding the input to children, there are vast differences across children with some children receiving a lot of high quality language input in multiple languages and other children receiving little and low-quality input in only one language. Input quality, variation and quantity are all determinants children's language levels. Input quality refers to factors such as native speaker input, variation refers to input from different speakers and during different activities, whereas quantity refers to the amount of input.

Bilingual development. Young children's brains are very well equipped to learn multiple language. Children who learn two languages in parallel reach various milestones at the same time as their monolingual peers. This has been observed for instance learning the sound system as well as the grammar. Bilingual children may have somewhat smaller vocabularies than monolinguals in one language, but if you sum up bilingual children's two vocabulary (i.e., sum up the words they know in language A and language B), their vocabularies are of the same size as those of monolinguals and sometimes even larger. It has moreover been found that bilingual children do not get confused, even if their language input is mixed, and they are able to separate the languages, and that growing up bilingually enhances children's metalinguistic awareness and cognitive skills.

Age. Age is the most important predictor of successful language learning. For learning a second language successfully, it is important to start within childhood. It is however not simply the sooner the better, as it does not seem to matter much if a child's starts at age 0 or 6. What is relevant is to start within childhood.

Minority language development. For learning a minority language besides the state language, the same holds as for bilingual language development in general. Learning a minority language does not affect the state language, provided that children are exposed to the state language as well. If they are solely exposed to the minority language, they will of course only learn the minority language.

Lessons. 1) learning both the minority and state language are important for children from minority language backgrounds and might also benefit children from majority language backgrounds, 2) children are very well able to learn multiple languages and do so naturally, in fact it is estimated that world-wide there are more multilingual than monolingual learners, 3) in order to learn multiple language successfully, it is important to receive qualitatively good input, varied input and a sufficient amount of input in the two languages.