



# Multilingualism and language diversity for inclusion in education

## Brief on inclusion in education

Language is a fundamental factor for inclusion in education. From a monolingual point of view, acquiring the language of instruction has long been regarded as the key to inclusion. However, multilingualism can be a valuable resource for all: inclusive school policies and multilingual practices recognize and foster linguistic diversity, benefit learning and create cohesion.



## Introduction

### Moving beyond the binary of ‘multilingualism’ and the ‘language of instruction: An inclusive languages policy for education

Deep-rooted social inequality, increasing diversity, and the need to implement inclusive policies and classroom practices are some of the most pressing challenges facing education systems in the 21st Century. Language plays a crucial role in current attempts to address these intersecting challenges. However, the way language is instrumentalized is too often fragmented, counterproductive and non-inclusive.

Misconceptions and deeply rooted beliefs continue to frame the acquisition of the language of Instruction (LOI) as key to addressing social inequality, while the multilingual repertoire of a child is pitched in opposition or as a barrier to achieving this objective. While these ideas persist, evidence shows that policies which focus on the role of the LOI in education from a one-dimensional, monolingual perspective are less effective than an inclusive multilingual approach, i.e., an ‘inclusive languages policy for education’. A multilingual school policy thus provides the greatest guarantee to contributing to and improving equity in education.

In practice, an ‘inclusive languages policy for education’ means that the linguistic diversity of the school is integrated into the teaching and learning of the LOI. Both the LOI and other languages present in the linguistic repertoires of the students are seen as essential components of a mutually reinforcing pedagogical dynamic. This means that the whole multimodal linguistic repertoires of students are mobilized as a resource for learning and social participation.

“**Language policy**” refers to language rules, laws, beliefs, and practices.

The term “**Languages policy**” draws attention to the multitude of languages which are considered in this process and is therefore particularly suited for multilingual contexts.

The term “**repertoire**” refers to all the ways of speaking that are available to a person – like a “pool” of resources that can be used for communication.

The terms “**linguistic repertoire**” or “**multilingual repertoire**” highlight the availability of several languages within a person’s repertoire, while “**semiotic repertoire**” and “**multimodal repertoire**” focus on resources that go beyond verbal language, such as gestures and facial expressions. “**Submersion language model**” is a method of language learning in which the learner studies the target language in a formal setting, such as taking classes or using textbooks.





©UN Photo/JC Mdlwaine



## Importance of language for inclusion

**“Fostering multilingualism for inclusion in education and society recognizes that languages and multilingualism can advance inclusion and the Sustainable Development Goals’ focus on leaving no one behind.” (UNESCO 2021: 1)**

Early childhood care and education programmes can provide children with the foundational skills for language acquisition. However, even when they are accessible, these programmes may not be holistically inclusive in recognizing children’s various backgrounds and abilities – especially those with multilingual backgrounds. According to UNESCO’s report on inclusion in early childhood care and education (ECCE), “children whose mother tongue is not the language of instruction of the ECCE settings, may find it difficult to participate in teaching and learning activities, and are at a greater risk of dropout. The level of parental education, ethnicity, language, and disability status can add to children’s lower participation rates in ECCE” (Kaga, Sretenov 2021: 4).

Current research (Benson, 2017; López, 2020) clearly demonstrates the positive cognitive and non-cognitive effects of multilingualism in education and the dynamic interplay between home languages and the LOI. To not exploit the multilingual repertoire of students in school simply does not make any sense. We must now move beyond the binaries towards new inclusive models of learning at school that integrates multilingualism in education and the learning of LOI.

In doing so, it is important to address indigenous languages which have historically been marginalized and excluded from education, leading to a lack of adequate teaching materials and educators trained in teaching indigenous languages.

## Examples of practices on multilingualism and languages of instruction in pedagogy

The **'Two-way immersion'** (TWI) model is the first alternative to the exclusive submersion model and mitigates the risks posed by lengthy pull-out classes which remove LOI learners from the mainstream classroom. The TWI model integrates speakers of different languages for all or most of the day (in many cases, people who speak the dominant language and speakers of another language) in order to promote high academic achievement, first- and second-language development, and cross-cultural understanding for all students. Although the empirical evidence for a TWI multilingual model is overwhelming (Kim et al., 2015), implementation in practice is sometimes complex. Due to processes of globalization and increased mobility, schools are becoming hyper-diverse social spaces. It is more and more common to find schools in which over 20 languages are spoken. While a TWI model may be difficult to implement for all languages present in a school, there are examples and pedagogical models that policymakers can draw from, including Germany's 'Staatliche Europa-Schule Berlin', which organizes TWI programmes for up to eight different languages (Saunders, Goldenberg & Marcelletti, 2013).

A second example of a multilingual inclusive approach that departs from the increasingly common practice of 'translanguaging' (where students use their full multilingual repertoire in a hybrid way in interactions) in schools and classrooms is **'functional multilingual learning'** (FML). In FML, pupils' full linguistic repertoire is regarded as a resource, as didactic

capital for learning. FML seeks to both raise awareness and create positive attitudes towards multilingualism. It contributes to positive identity construction by focusing on well-being, self-confidence, self-esteem, and students' capacity to express their ideas, opinions and feelings. In addition, FML mobilizes and capitalizes on pupils' full linguistic multimodal repertoire for learning. It aims to create a powerful and interactive learning environment in which the linguistic repertoires of all students are exploited in meaningful ways. Above all, FML aims to enhance the acquisition of the LOI as well as students' other languages to implement deep level learning and to increase opportunities to construct and deconstruct knowledge. This pedagogical framework proposes a 'multilingual social interaction' model for learning as an alternative to traditional 'monolingual' models.

An alternative approach that echoes the above is **'translanguaging as a pedagogy'** (TP). In TP pupils are free to draw on and use their full linguistic and semiotic repertoire interchangeably in the classroom setting – i.e., they are encouraged to use all of the languages, including sign languages and other languages which are available to them. Importantly, both FML and TP require a change in mindset for educators. Rather than penalizing students for using languages simultaneously, synergies must be encouraged and fostered with the aim of increasing proficiency in both or all their languages.





## What are the challenges to multilingualism in schools?

Addressing entrenched social inequality and implementing inclusive policies and classroom practices that reflect the increasing socio-cultural diversity of schools are two of the most pressing challenges facing education systems today.

For over two decades now, the acquisition of the LOI has been considered one of the main levers to address social inequality, enhance learning and ensure student success. However, research (Erling, Adinulfi & Hultgren, 2017) shows that teachers increasingly identify the growing linguistic diversity of their classrooms as a major challenge and report they lack the professional competencies required to address it.

Compounding this issue is the ongoing debate around 'language' in education, with the acquisition of the LOI and students' linguistic diversity in opposition. Quick and successful acquisition of the LOI is seen as the key for children's academic success and a panacea for social inequality, yet their multilingual practices are conceived as hindering that success.

Policymakers must also consider the double standard surrounding the concept of multilingualism. Multilingual programmes (e.g., Content and Language Integrated Learning programmes) in so-called 'high status' languages are rapidly increasing in number, especially in schools with students from predominantly high socio-economic status backgrounds. In contrast, so-called 'low status' languages are considered to have no legitimacy in schools. These policies and programmes currently run the risk of becoming an elitist instrument where students from high socio-economic status backgrounds have greater opportunities to benefit from multilingual learning practices, compared to students with a low socio-economic status and/or immigrant or indigenous backgrounds, thus exacerbating rather than alleviating inequity.

Traditional bilingual education programmes often establish a temporal and spatial separation of the

languages taught: separate lessons take place in separate language homogenous classes. These practices do not reflect current sociolinguistic research on multilingual communication and do not fit the reality of the complex and diverse world of today. For example, 'Translanguaging' is an increasingly common practice whereby people use their full multilingual repertoire in a hybrid way in interactions.

The enduring binary thinking in language education has meant that the dominant language serves as the sole channel for learning, and it is still the norm when designing policy. In practice, this results in the multilingual abilities of students not being recognised, subjected to negative stigmatization, or sometimes even banned.

As a consequence of this binary view, making use of multilingualism is often perceived as hindering the learning in the LOI. However, research (UNESCO GEMR, 2016) shows that in the long-term, students in multilingual programmes - where acquisition of first languages and the LOI occur in the mainstream classroom - outperform their peers in monolingual programmes in multiple domains, including in reading and mathematics, school attendance and completion of higher education, and report better overall wellbeing.

Further, this same model assumes that the acquisition of the LOI will be better and faster when immigrant students, for example, are separated from the mainstream classroom for significant periods of time, e.g., via full-time pull-out classes. In this regard, research (Lasagabaster, Garcia, 2014) shows that these types of policies often have no real bearing on children's second language acquisition and can even have a negative effect in some cases. For example, it is well-documented (Lasagabaster, Garcia, 2014) that pull-out classes impact pupils' transition into mainstream classes due to the increased risk of stigmatization and weakened social ties with teachers and other students along with potentially undermining academic performance due to the reduced focus on the main curriculum.



## Policy recommendations

UNESCO encourages policy makers and schools to adopt a five-pillar inclusive languages school policy that transcends the current, ideologized and binary discussions about exclusive LOI submersion and moves towards new models of learning that integrate multilingualism and the learning of the LOI.

- ▶ **Invest in an inclusive languages school wide policy that is developed and supported by the whole school community.**

An inclusive languages school policy that is discussed, developed, and implemented by the whole school community will ensure shared ownership and sustainability. This should include students, parents and the education community as equal partners who are enabled to become actively involved in this process.

- ▶ **Focus on enhancing students' knowledge and skills in the language of instruction, based on scientific research about language learning. Reflect carefully on the most meaningful and effective path to achieve this.**

Newcomers are sometimes placed in separate classrooms or pull-out classes for long periods of time; however, research indicates that this is not the best route for success and does not contribute to equitable educational practice. Studies show (World Bank, 2021) that the most effective route is a mix of targeted LOI lessons for shorter periods of the day, preferably within the mainstream classroom, via co-teaching with interaction in heterogeneous groups. Key factors include language-sensitive teaching in all subjects in the mainstream classroom, high-quality interaction, a powerful learning environment, rich language input from the teacher generating meaningful interaction and maximum opportunities for language production, and formative direct feedback.

- ▶ **Value and respect the language diversity present in the school and make this visible in the school environment.**

All schools must have a strong, inclusive diversity policy, within which language diversity is a key component. This diversity must be valued, respected, represented and made visible in the school and classroom. The school lives and breathes (language) diversity. Here, it is important that schools do not fall into the trap of a multilingual double standard, whereby so-called 'high status' languages are seen as an asset and so-called 'low-status' languages as a problem. Schools must be conscious of and avoid developing an elitist multilingual policy.

- ▶ **Exploit students' multilingual repertoire in the (language) learning processes.**

We encourage policymakers and schools to develop and implement an inclusive languages policy that facilitates inclusive multilingual practices in the mainstream classroom, whereby the linguistic repertoire of each person (including students, parents, teachers and school personnel) is exploited as a strength and as an asset in itself and for learning. Thus, in the pursuit of greater equity in education, we overcome the binary of multilingualism versus LOI, and the linguistic repertoire of children are seen as a powerful resource for learning and social participation.

- ▶ **Ensure the inclusion of indigenous languages in education.**

Countries should support the development of indigenous languages which have historically been excluded from education in favour of the development of the LOIs. This involves the creation of bi/multilingual learning resources and investment in teacher education.





## Conclusion

The implementation of these policy recommendations builds on the recognition and appreciation of linguistic diversity in educational institutions. First and foremost, it requires systemic change whereby educators are empowered to move beyond the current binary thinking of 'multilingualism' and the 'language of instruction' which considers multilingualism as a barrier that must be overcome, to seeing multilingualism as both an asset and resource for learning and being.

## References

- Benson, C., Wong, K. 2017. Effectiveness of policy development and implementation of L1-based multilingual education in Cambodia. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, Vol. 22, No. 2, 250-265.
- Collier, V.P., Thomas, W.P. 2017. Validating the power of bilingual schooling: Thirty-two years of large-scale, longitudinal research. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, Vol. 37, 1-15.
- Erling, E., Adinolfi, L., Hultgren, A. 2017. Multilingual classrooms: Opportunities and challenges for English medium instruction in low and middle income contexts. London: Milton Keynes and Reading, British Council, the Open University and Education Development Trust.
- Garcia, O. 2009. Bilingual education in the 21st Century: a global perspective. Malden/Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Kaga, Y., Sretenov, D. 2021. Inclusion in early childhood care and education. Brief on inclusion in education. Paris: UNESCO.
- Kim, Y. K., Hutchinson, L. A., Winsler, A. 2015. Bilingual education in the United States: An historical overview and examination of two-way immersion. *Educational Review*, Vol. 67, No. 2, 236-252.
- Lasagabaster, D., Garcia, O. 2014. Translanguaging: towards a dynamic model of bilingualism at school/ Translanguaging: hacia un modelo dinámico de bilingüismo en la escuela, *Culture and Education/ Cultura y Educación*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 557-572.
- Lincoln, V. 2022. Teaching and learning indigenous languages: Inspiring practices from the UNESCO Associated Schools Network. Paris: UNESCO.
- López, L. 2020. What is educación intercultural bilingüe in Latin America nowadays: Results and challenges. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, Vol. 42, No.10, 955-968.
- Mallet, J.C. 2022. Technology-enabled multilingual education: Challenges and opportunities. paper commissioned for the UNESCO International Mother Language Day 2022. Paris: UNESCO.
- Saunders, W., Goldenberg, C., Marcelletti, D. 2013. English language development: Guidelines for instruction. *American Educator*, Vol. 37, No. 2, 13-25, 38-39.
- Sierens, S., Van Avermaet, P. 2014. Language diversity in education: Evolving from multilingual education to functional multilingual learning. In Little, D., Leung, C. & Van Avermaet, P., (Eds.), *Managing diversity in education: languages, policies, pedagogies*, 204-222. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Trudell, B. 2023. Early-exit language transition programming: The rationale, the benefits and the limitations. Paper commissioned for UNESCO International Mother Language Day 2023. Paris: UNESCO.
- UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO GEMR). 2016. If you don't understand, how can you learn? Paris, UNESCO GEMR.
- UNESCO. 2021. Fostering multilingualism for inclusion in education and society. Webinar report on the occasion of the 2021 International Mother Language Day's celebration, 19 February 2021. Paris: UNESCO.
- World Bank. (2021). Loud and clear: Effective language of instruction policies for learning. Washington, D.C.: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank.



Published in 2024 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization,  
7, place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP, France

© UNESCO 2024



This document is available in Open Access under the Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 IGO (CC-BY-SA 3.0 IGO) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/igo/>). By using the content of this document, the users accept to be bound by the terms of use of the UNESCO Open Access Repository (<http://www.unesco.org/open-access/terms-use-ccbysa-en>).

The designations employed and the presentation of material throughout this document do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UNESCO concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

The ideas and opinions expressed in this document are those of the authors; they are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organization.

This Brief was written by Piet Van Avermart and UNESCO.

Cover photo: Storm Is Me/Shutterstock.com  
Designed and printed by UNESCO

*Printed in France*

ED-2024/WS/1 (PAO: 201\_24)

The **UNESCO Briefs on Inclusion in Education** is a series of short notes that seek to answer various questions that policy-makers and key stakeholders have about the planning and implementation of inclusive education policies and practices. The Briefs are a follow-up to the UNESCO International Forum on Inclusion and Equity in Education held in Cali, Colombia in September 2019.

This Brief, *Multilingualism and language diversity for inclusion in education*, was written by Piet Van Avermaet.

The electronic version can be accessed at: <https://on.unesco.org/InclusionInED>

**For further information, please contact:**

UNESCO, Section of Education for Inclusion and Gender Equality  
Email: [inclusion@unesco.org](mailto:inclusion@unesco.org)

### UNESCO – a global leader in education

Education is UNESCO's top priority because it is a basic human right and the foundation for peace and sustainable development. UNESCO is the United Nations' specialized agency for education, providing global and regional leadership to drive progress, strengthening the resilience and capacity of national systems to serve all learners. UNESCO also leads efforts to respond to contemporary global challenges through transformative learning, with special focus on gender equality and Africa across all actions.



### The Global Education 2030 Agenda

UNESCO, as the United Nations' specialized agency for education, is entrusted to lead and coordinate the Education 2030 Agenda, which is part of a global movement to eradicate poverty through 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Education, essential to achieve all of these goals, has its own dedicated Goal 4, which aims to *"ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."* The Education 2030 Framework for Action provides guidance for the implementation of this ambitious goal and commitments.



## Contact

Section of Education for Inclusion  
and Gender Equality

UNESCO  
7, place de Fontenoy  
75352 Paris France

 [inclusion@unesco.org](mailto:inclusion@unesco.org)

 @UNESCO

 UNESCO

 [on.unesco.org/InclusionInED](http://on.unesco.org/InclusionInED)

