

# Language Issues and Educational Change

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*With cultural diversity comes linguistic diversity. This diversity has been created by growing rates of migration since the 1960s and by greater inter-cultural contact among nations as they try to resolve ecological and diplomatic problems together. In this chapter, Jim Cummins looks at the implications of linguistic diversity for educational change*

*Cummins asks what it means to provide education in a growing number of contexts which are not merely bilingual, but which serve students from many different linguistic backgrounds in classrooms and their schools. Bilingualism, linguistic immersion, heritage languages, second language learning, and transformations in the entire organization of teaching and learning to accommodate classroom populations of great diversity are among the issues that Cummins addresses.*

*The importance of these issues is pressed home with reference to research findings which indicate that when students lag behind in first language proficiency, they also lag behind in academic achievement and intelligence test scores despite their abilities in their own language. Failing to address the issue of linguistic diversity effectively leads to failure to capitalize on children's academic potential. Cummins concludes with policy recommendations to address language issues as a focus for educational change, including changes in curriculum, teaching and learning, and the climate of the school.*

Linguistic diversity has always been characteristic of human societies. However, at no time in human history has linguistic diversity been associated with such volatile conflicts and power struggles in countries around the globe. These power struggles are evident in a variety of societal institutions and particularly so in public education systems. During much of this century, education systems in Western countries were expected to assimilate immigrants and “melt” cultural and linguistic differences into obscurity. These assimilationist policies, however, have been challenged since the 1960s as a result of the increased prominence of human rights and equity provisions in national and international policies and covenants and the dramatic growth in ethnic and linguistic diversity in Western countries.

Cross-cultural contact has never been greater in both domestic and international arenas. This increase in diversity has resulted primarily from economic migration to Northern Europe, Australia, and North America whose economies expanded rapidly during the 1960s and from efforts to resettle refugees from countries devastated by war and famine. At the same time as diversity is increasing within societies, cross-cultural and linguistic contact between countries is increasing as a result of globalization of economic activity together with international attempts to resolve ecological and diplomatic problems.

This paper considers the educational implications of this changing cultural and

linguistic landscape. In many countries, educators and policy-makers are grappling with issues such as: What programs and methods will be most effective in teaching bilingual students the primary language of schooling and of the wider society? What role, if any, should students' mother tongues have within the public education system? What initiatives are required to teach additional languages to dominant or majority language group students so that they can operate effectively in a broader European Union or global context? How can persistent patterns of educational failure among certain linguistic and cultural minority groups be overcome?

In analyzing these issues, I shall first sketch the context of linguistic diversity in two broad geographic regions: the European Union and North America. These regions have been selected not because issues of linguistic diversity are in any sense more pressing than in other regions (e.g. Africa, Asia, Australia, Central and South America) but because a considerable amount of research has been carried out in these contexts and this research potentially lays the groundwork for theoretical analysis.

## LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY IN EDUCATION WITHIN THE EUROPEAN UNION

By the early 1990s, about ten percent of the European Union (formerly European Community) school-age population came from families that had a language and/or cultural background different from that of the majority of the country in which they lived (Reid & Reich, 1992). In major metropolitan areas such as London, Amsterdam, Berlin, and Stockholm, concentrations of culturally and linguistically diverse students are much greater. For example, by the turn of the millennium, about 40 percent of school-age children in Amsterdam will have been born outside the Netherlands. In the Stockholm area, Runfors and Sjögren (1994) report that municipalities with high rates of immigrant settlement experience yearly increases in the proportion of children with parents of non-Swedish origin; for example, schools in Botkyrka have between 40 and 95 percent non-Swedish origin students (usually still referred to as "immigrant" even though most are at least second generation and born in Sweden). Sixty home languages are taught at school (usually for about 3 hours per week). At the preschool level, 75 percent of students have a foreign background.

Within Europe, the policy context for educational initiatives related to linguistic diversity issues is still defined in relation to the European Community's (EC) 1977 Directive to Member States on the education of children of migrant workers. The Directive emphasized the right of children to receive adequate teaching of the language of the receiving country and the obligation of the receiving countries to promote the teaching of the mother tongue and culture of the countries of origin, although this latter "obligation" was very much diluted by restrictive clauses (Reid & Reich, 1992).

A variety of pilot projects were initiated in member countries in response to the