Linguistic Diversity in Scotland: Issues for Education

Moray House School of Education Election Briefings

Education from early years to 18
Research and Practice Contributing to Policy

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In the last five years, there has been a marked increase in the cultural and linguistic diversity within Scottish schools. One element of such increased diversity relates to the growing number of pupils in Scottish schools who speak a language other than English at home. Another aspect of diversity relates to the Scottish Government’s pledge, that by 2020, all pupils in Scotland will be required to learn at least two languages in addition to their home language in primary and early secondary school, in accordance with 1+2 Languages Strategy. This initiative is to be commended and the diverse nature of schools celebrated. However, our research also raises aspects that need to be addressed if Scotland is to realise its aspirations of inclusion, personalisation and choice. This briefing considers how the language learning opportunities of all children and young people in Scottish schools can be encouraged and strengthened.

Key points for consideration

- The Scottish Government’s 1+2 Languages Strategy complements existing areas of effective provision and practice in the acquisition of multilingualism in education in Scotland. These areas of strength include Gaelic-medium education (GME), British Sign Language (BSL), recognition of Scots as a language in its own right, English as an additional language (EAL), and heritage language/complementary schools.
- Research across Scotland has shown that teachers feel under-prepared and have an insufficient professional knowledge base to support the English-language development of children and young people learning English as an additional language (EAL) (Anderson et al, 2016; Foley et al, 2013).
- With the exception of Urdu and Chinese there are almost no opportunities in mainstream schools to learn the heritage languages in use among Scottish school children and young people. Research shows that developing children’s first languages is integral to their identity, home literacy practices and cultural heritage (Hancock, 2015) but in the absence of policy it is left to the efforts and resourcefulness of minority communities and concerned parents to establish and organise their own community schools to provide this.

Policy and practice: moving forward

The approach outlined in Language Learning in Scotland: A 1+2 Approach is highly commendable. It demonstrates strong commitment to language learning and recognition that languages are both part of community identity and also a path to being global citizens. The development of Gaelic-medium education provides clear examples of how successful immersion education can develop bilingual competency and raise the educational achievement of learners (O’Hanlon et al. 2013). In addition, there is evidence of isolated pockets of good practice in teaching community languages in schools under the 1+2 languages strategy; e.g. British Sign Language (BSL) in Falkirk schools and Polish in schools in Edinburgh. An earlier inspectorate report (HMIe 2009) examining practice and provision for
newly arrived children and young people in educational settings revealed that schools make good use of the scarce resource of specialist language support teachers and bilingual support assistants.

Recent research has shown there to be broad support from the public, parents, teachers and pupils for the 1+2 Languages Strategy (Christie et al. 2016; Scottish Government, 2016). However, there is a need to continue to develop the knowledge base of teachers to enable them to feel sufficiently prepared to implement the strategy successfully (Christie et al. 2016).

Furthermore, despite the introduction of the 1+2 Languages Strategy, the narratives for language policy formation in Scotland are still articulated separately for different languages leading to language hierarchies and differentiated provision. There is a clear need for a more inclusive and integrated national policy for languages, and for schools to be encouraged to think creatively in order to validate and build on existing linguistic resources that children and young people already possess. This policy direction will support the aspirations of a multilingual society in an increasingly globalised world.

Conclusions / recommendations
Research indicates there are key questions for schools and education policy makers that need to be addressed:

- Provision should be enhanced to offer opportunities for Gaelic-medium primary-educated pupils to continue to use their Gaelic for educational purposes throughout the secondary school stage.
- Provision of language support should be enhanced for the increasing numbers of children and young people with English as an additional language in Scottish schools.
- An audit is required of the attitudes that exist towards BSL in the wider community, and in schools where BSL is taught. The levels of BSL for staff working with deaf children need to be increased.
- Provision should be enhanced for the teaching of community languages for all learners in mainstream schools.
- Mechanisms need to be put in place to generate collaboration between mainstream and complementary schools to allow children's multilingual learning to become more visible.

References
Further information

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