

## **Foreword**

*... for Language Issues in Comparative Education II: Policy and Practice in Multilingual Education Based on Non-Dominant Languages, Edited by Carol Benson and Kimmo Kosonen, 2021, Brill/Sense.*

*By Jessica Ball*

*Our language has words not just to name all the things in the forest but also words that mean the processes and connections that create the forest and keep it always alive. If we send our children to school instead of taking them with us when we work in the forest we are afraid they will lose our language and not learn the knowledge and love for the forest that is passed along within our community.*

This view, expressed by an Indigenous parent in Southeast Asia, is often voiced by children and their family members where schooling is only offered in an unfamiliar language and cultural ideology. In some countries where I have engaged with language-in-education issues, teachers and education officers close to minority language communities sometimes admit they can empathize when some parents decide to take their children with them to the forests and farms, rather than sending them to school. They explain that children who have little or no knowledge of the language of schooling can learn so much more from land-based, experiential learning alongside adult members of their own language community, and they can develop advanced skills in their home language and the culture it expresses.

With renewed calls for 'education for all', it may seem hard to grasp the losses that ethnolinguistic minority children and families may face at the prospect of formal schooling. Yet, subtractive education is experienced by children the world over when teaching is in a dominant language they barely understand. Their 'sink or swim' predicament increases their likelihood of failure and reduces their opportunity to develop proficiency in the languages they were born into. Language-in-education policies and practices typically inculcate a preference for the language of instruction and its attendant culturally-based worldview. While advocating greater access to education, what do children, families and their ethnolinguistic communities stand to gain and lose? This second volume of *Language Issues in Comparative Education* responds to this question and speaks to the possibilities of creating and implementing language-in-education policies that value ethnolinguistic minority (or less dominant) languages in formal education systems.

The authors begin with the premise, well-established through research, that children have a right and a need to understand the language(s) of schooling in order to succeed. Several authors describe how decision-makers' dawning realization that education should be inclusive and additive has prompted language-in-education policy reforms that authorize and support non-dominant language of instruction within a multilingual curriculum. The editors of the volume offer a path-finding new theoretical framework to examine systems change. They discuss potential enabling and detracting contributions of various stakeholders with different levels of influence over change in their education system. The utility of applying this framework is illustrated in chapters examining language-in-education policy and practice changes in the Philippines, Bolivia, Ethiopia and Mozambique. These chapters, among others, exemplify one of the outstanding features of the collection: it works towards elaboration and testing of theories of

change in language-in-education, closely examining research and practice-based evidence from comparative case studies by authors who have worked directly in the contexts about which they write.

Some of the chapters document how aspirational multilingual education policies are experienced on the ground, by teachers, parents, children, and other actors. They address presumed obstacles to the use of non-dominant languages in education often raised in community gatherings, government ministries, and regional meetings. Questions include how to manage and make use of multiple languages in a school population, how to prepare more teachers who are proficient in local languages for multilingual education classrooms, how to respond to parent demand for education in the lingua franca or national language, and how to overcome government reticence about empowering ethnolinguistic minority communities with education in their own language and with their own knowledge systems. Education authorities whose purported agenda is to 'unite the nation' by compelling homogeneity typically seize upon these challenges to bolster their resistance to authorizing or adequately funding non-dominant languages in education. Several chapters in this volume, as in the first volume, offer a look inside communities and classrooms where anticipated obstacles have not materialized or innovative strategies have effectively dealt with them. While authors agree on sound language planning as a prerequisite, the chapters variously highlight community consultation, strategic teacher recruitment and training, culturally appropriate curriculum resources, and meaningful assessment of learners' achievements. The final chapter adds advocacy and societal mobilization to a multi-pronged approach. Public campaigns celebrate language diversity as a means to ensure inclusion of all citizens, bringing a country together. Meaningful 'education for all' means all children's languages in education.

Far from a doctrinaire assertion that 'one size fits all' in every situation, several authors are frank in reporting tensions and trade-offs experienced by decision-makers, teachers, parents and students when deciding on the languages of instruction and introducing non-dominant languages in classrooms. Most authors describe solutions that take a both/and rather than either/or approach: while children need to start school and build literacy skills in their first language, multilingual pedagogy ensures that they also acquire one or more dominant languages that will enable their participation in civil society, the economy and, for refugees, enrolment in host country schools. Two chapters focus on language in education needs of refugee children – a population that is minoritized along several ways and rarely considered in discourse about the use of non-dominant languages in education. These chapters especially underscore the need to consider context and the needs of particular populations at particular points in their education trajectory.

Can a language be a key to ensuring the future of the world? The future of humanity depends on protection of diversity in every aspect of life. Diversity supports flexibility, complexity, and resilience. Though half the world's wealth of languages is nearing extinction over the past half century of globalization and 'education for all', a rich repository of language remains. Protecting diverse languages is one of the responsibilities of governments and educators, just as parents and elders must be encouraged and given support to transmit their home languages to the youngest generation. As the chapters in this volume convey, keys to linguistic sustainability are language-in-education policies and teaching practices that recognize children's first languages as valued resources for their communities, nations and the world.

Linguistic diversity is linked to the protection of diverse cultures. In turn, as the parent quoted at the beginning of this Forward understands, culturally-based knowledges embodied in diverse languages can

contribute to sustaining biological diversity. This volume and its predecessor contribute a timely, authoritative argument for the use of non-dominant languages in education as essential components of a strategy to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals for education, equitable access to resources and opportunities, social justice and peace.

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