Educational Responses to Multilingualism: An Introduction

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Linguistic and cultural diversity is a feature of most, if not all, modern societies, whether it results from historical processes of state formation, from the aggregation of colonial possessions and their subsequent independence or from human mobility. Diversity therefore shapes the context in which education occurs and the processes through which teaching and learning happen. However, educational systems understand and respond to diversity in different ways.

This volume focuses on contemporary implications of linguistic and cultural diversity for education at school level and in higher education. It recognises that different countries and regions have experienced diversity in education at different times and in different ways. In some cases, diversity has become a new, immediate concern for education systems that are unprepared for it, while for others it is the age-old backdrop against which education has been developed. It also recognises that educational responses to diversity change over time and that different countries and regions have different histories of involvement with diversity. The recent increase of diversity in Europe, for example, has produced a sense of urgency, with European educational systems planning for some form of productive coexistence of different linguistic and cultural groups. Despite a parallel increase in diversity in Australia, a similar sense of urgency does not seem to play a role in the education system. In fact, in Australia educational responses to diversity have a longer history, but education seems to have refocused away from linguistic diversity towards a narrower monolingualism. On the other hand, while recognition of diversity in both Europe and Australia is relatively recent, countries in South Asia and Africa have been engaged with the management and mismanagement of diversity in education for centuries. Each of these contexts has a chance to learn from these different histories, trajectories and experiences of linguistic diversity in education.

The articles in this volume survey the issue of educational responses to linguistic diversity from a range of perspectives. Each examines a different aspect of education and the role for languages within education. Some engage with general issues, while others examine specific

cases. They show educational responses to linguistic diversity to be both complex and problematic and in so doing raise issues for consideration in framing debates around the relationship between linguistic and cultural diversity and education.

In their article, Liddicoat and Curnow examine the issues that influence how policy documents position non-dominant languages in schooling. They argue that the curriculum is a space constrained by prevailing ideologies and discourses about languages that consign non-dominant languages to marginalised positions in schooling. These discourses find their origins in monolingual understandings of the nation state: as nation states view schooling as an instrument of state formation, monolingual understandings of the nature of the state inevitably shape education as a monolingual, or rather monolingualising, environment. They also argue that in any society prevailing language ideologies influence the ways that particular languages are seen as being valued or valid for particular purposes and that discourses that construct non-dominant languages as being less 'useful' also limit the possibilities for these languages in education contexts. This means that ideologies about languages and ideologies about education can both work to constrain the possibilities for multilingualism in schooling.

Scarino takes up the idea of the impact of monolingualism on education as it plays out in Australia. She argues that Australia is characterised by a 'monolingual mindset' that frames literacy as literacy in English and gives this pride of place in education. It also leads to the backgrounding of students' linguistic and cultural diversity rather than recognising language and culture as constituent parts of the learning process. Scarino argues that, within the monolingual view of learning and education, knowledge and learning are understood and mediated through the lens of a single language and culture. The result is that in Australia increasing linguistic and cultural diversity among students is met by educational responses that seek to simplify this diversity by making it into an object of study rather than a constituent of learning. She sees this position as untenable and argues for a reconceptualising and knowledge and learning as plurilingual constructs in which individuals make and interpret meaning through all the linguistic and cultural resources at their disposal.

The focus then moves to the teaching and learning of languages at the tertiary level in Pauwels' article. She investigates the ways in which language educators respond to the diversity of learners in foreign language classrooms in Australia and the United Kingdom and finds that

the engagement of language educators with issues of diversity and globalisation is limited. This shows a disconnection between language classroom aims, which seek to develop students who can engage with linguistic and cultural diversity, and with language classroom practices, which pay little attention to linguistic and cultural diversity as they exist within the classroom. She argues that one of the reasons for this disconnection is the lack of professional learning among tertiary teachers of languages that limits the capacity of tertiary level teachers to engage with new ways of understanding diversity. She also argues that universities themselves contribute to this problem through their policies and practices in relation to teaching and learning. The result is that universities are often less able to incorporate research on linguistic and cultural diversity into their educational practices than other educational institutions.

Moving to a different context, Chiatoh's article on Cameroon provides a case study of the issues confronting the use of multiple languages in education. Cameroon's linguistic situation is complex in that it has two exogenous official languages and a very large number of non-official local languages. The constitution recognises the importance of local languages and their promotion, and laws allow for the provision of education in these languages. However, this macro-level policy support does not translate into the inclusion of local languages in schooling. Chiatoh describes the governmental stance as one of neutrality to local languages in education, but points out that such neutrality in fact constitutes a barrier to the integration of these languages into schools, because such neutrality takes the form of financial non-involvement that makes it difficult to address the language needs of local communities. Moreover, Chiatoh argues that there is a lack of recognition of the value of written communication in local languages both among the powerful external elite and among people from the communities themselves that constitutes a further barrier. This article shows that that the development of multilingual education requires active rather than passive support at multiple levels in order for non-dominant languages to find a place in schooling.

Chiro takes up the theme of government policy and examines the effect of competing ideologies on multicultural policy in Australia. He argues that Australian policy has been influenced by two conflicting forces. One of these is globalisation, which provides ideologies that call for opening up to diversity and favours the inclusion of multiple languages and cultures in education. The other is nationalism, which is restrictive and focused on English monolingualism. Chiro argues that Australian multiculturalism began at a time when the

ideologies of nationalism were being challenged by increasing internal linguistic and cultural diversity resulting from post-World War II immigration and that its subsequent trajectory has been influenced by the competing demands of globalisation and nationalism. In local perceptions, globalisation came to be conflated with multiculturalism because of the superficial similarities in their focus on diversity. This meant that the problems caused locally by globalisation were seen as being associated with multiculturalism, weakening Australia's commitment to multicultural policy and reopening spaces for the articulation of a more explicit nationalism focusing on the commonality of the English language and its associated culture. Chiro's paper is a reminder that multilingual education programs, even at the most local level, are subject to influence from wider social processes and discourses.

Heugh continues the ideas introduced by Chiro and examines Australia's policies on multilingualism in the contexts of emerging debates about multilingualism in other parts of the world. She argues that early work in multiculturalism and multilingualism meant that Australia had forged a leading role in debates about diversity, but that subsequent developments have meant that Australia has lost this role. In fact, Heugh finds that Australian thinking on multilingualism is now going in different directions from thinking elsewhere. In many other contexts throughout the world, there has been a renewed focus on linguistic diversity, while in Australia there has been a retreat to more monolingual ways of thinking and acting, especially in educational contexts. She concludes that, in order to reinvigorate debate in Australia about multilingualism there is a need to engage with developments elsewhere that have engaged with the complexities of multilingual realities and their impact on education.

The articles thus far have shown that multilingualism in education is desirable but problematic, and that the problems frequently lie in ways of thinking about languages and cultures. Agnihotri's article proposes a reconceptualisation of linguistic and cultural diversity that places diversity at the centre and sees uniformity as the anomalous case. He critiques the prevailing view of a language as something which is homogeneous, pure and standardised, and the resulting rigidity that this gives to understandings of linguistic practices. In fact, Agnihotri's critique can be read as a condemnation of the standard practices of status and corpus planning with their focus on selection, codification and reduction of diversity as solutions to language problems. In place of a view of languages as compartmentalised, he argues that human linguistic

behaviour is marked by fluidity and that human language use is inherently multilingual. He believes that once the fluidity of language practices is recognised, many of the dilemmas of multilingual education cease to be dilemmas as they arise only because of assumptions that language practice is rigid and discrete.

It is striking that in a volume that seeks to investigate multilingual responses to education, many of the papers have included a focus on monolingualism. This focus demonstrates the prevailing influence of monolingualism on the ways that languages are conceptualised – what Ellis (2006) calls monolingualism as the unmarked case. Much policy thinking about multilingualism, especially in the domain of language-in-education policy, reflects a view that monolingualism is a norm from which multilingualism is seen as a departure. Academic responses therefore frequently attempt to demonstrate the flaw in such a view by examining the historical development of the normalisation of monolingualism, the realities of the linguistic practices of human beings, the educational consequences of a monolingual conceptualisation of languages, and so on. The debate about multilingual responses to education inevitably raises the idea that education itself can be seen in different ways and that education has often been understood as working to reduce diversity in order to promote something that is seen as preferable (better communication, national identity, etc.). This is a reminder that debates about multilingual education are not simply debates about the number of languages that can be used in schooling but are also more broadly concerned with issues of ideology and hegemony that shape the educational possibilities made available for individual learners.

This volume seeks to bring together discussions about multilingual education in South Asia, Africa, Australia and Europe in order to re-invigorate a sharing of expertise and debates in all four settings, and between the global south and north. It is hoped that these articles together might broaden debates on linguistic diversity, particularly in the educational contexts.

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Reference

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