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Immigrant minority languages in education

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Immigrant minority

The extent to which immigrant minority language instruction (IMLI) is a topic in government policy with European dimensions can be gathered from estimates of the number of foreign resident groups in EU countries, presented by the Statistical Office of the EU (EuroStat) in Luxembourg. These estimates are based on the conservative nationality criterion. The largest groups, each with more than two million speakers, are the Turkish and Maghreb communities. As a result of processes of migration and minorization, immigrant minority languages like Turkish and Arabic have acquired greater significance in the European context, when measured by the sizes of the respective groups, than have indigenous or regional minority languages like Basque, Welsh, or Friesian.

In all the countries in the study, there is an increase in immigrant minority pupils who speak a language at home other than the dominant school language in primary and secondary education. Education predominantly responds to this by paying more attention to the teaching of the national standard language as a second language. A great deal of energy and money is spent on developing curricula, attainment targets, teaching materials, and tests for second-language education. By contrast, IMLI is much more susceptible to an ideological debate about its legitimacy. Immigrant minority languages are commonly considered sources of problems and deficiencies, and are rarely seen as sources of knowledge and enrichment. Policy-makers, head teachers, and teachers of regular subjects often have a negative attitude towards IMLI. On the other hand, parents of immigrant minority pupils, IMLI teachers, and immigrant minority organizations often make a case for having immigrant minority languages in the school curriculum. These differences in top-down and bottom-up orientation emerge in all the countries studied.

Historically, most countries in the study show a similar chronological development in their argumentation for IMLI, which was generally introduced into primary education with a

view to family remigration. In the 1970s, this argument was abandoned as demographic developments showed instead a process of generation-forming and minorization. This caused IMLI to be aimed at combating disadvantages; it had to bridge the gap between home and school environments and encourage school achievement in regular subjects. This approach tended to undervalue ethno-cultural dimensions. In response, a number of countries emphasized the intrinsic importance of immigrant minority languages from a cultural, legal, and economic perspective:

- culturally, IMLI can contribute to maintaining and advancing a pluralist society;
- legally, IMLI can meet the internationally recognized right to language development and maintenance, given that many

Guus Extra



By Guus Extra

As part of a study on immigrant minority policies in six West European countries, a comparative study was carried out at Tilburg University by Peter Broeder and Guus Extra on the status of immigrant minority languages in primary and secondary education in Belgium, Germany, France, Great Britain, the Netherlands and Sweden.

languages in education

Immigrant minority languages are commonly considered sources of problems

immigrant minority groups in society consider their own language of key value to their cultural identity;

- economically, immigrant minority languages and cultures may be an important pool of knowledge in a society that is increasingly internationally orientated.

The historical development of arguments for IMLI in terms of remigration, combating deficiencies, and cultural policy is particularly evident in the Netherlands, Germany, and Belgium. In France and Great Britain, cultural policy is tied in with the national languages to such an extent that IMLI is only tolerated at the margins, while in Sweden cultural-political motives have taken pride of place from the start. Cultural-political arguments for IMLI have not led to an educational policy in which the status of immigrant minority languages has substantially been revalued in any of the countries involved.

The target groups of IMLI are considered deficit groups in virtually all the countries in the study; only Sweden has an explicit home language criterion for admission to IMLI. Actual enrolment in IMLI varies widely not only between countries, but also between groups. Variation is strongly determined by a combination of factors, such as the attitudes of immigrant minority parents and pupils, and indigenous majority head

teachers and teachers, and the geographical distribution of immigrant minority groups (which will decide whether or not numerical criteria can be met). Furthermore, a comparison of target groups, arguments, objectives, evaluation, enrolment restrictions, curricular status, funding, and teaching materials shows that IMLI in secondary education has gained a higher status than in primary education, largely due to the fact that instruction in one or more languages other than the national standard language is a traditional and regular component of the (optional) curriculum. However, it must compete with languages that, in their turn, have a higher status or a longer tradition. In primary education, IMLI is generally not part of the regular or national curriculum, and consequently tends to become a negotiable entity in a complex and often opaque interplay of forces.

With a view to the demographic development of the various EU member states into multicultural societies, and the similarities in facing IMLI issues, more cross-national government policy would be desirable. Language policy still takes place within the national perspectives of the EU member states. Proposals for a common EU language policy are laboriously achieved and noncommittal in character. The most important declarations, recommendations, or directives on language policy concern the recognition of the status of national EU languages, indigenous or regional minority languages and immigrant or non-territorial minority languages, in the order mentioned.

Internationalization in European schools requires a language policy for all pupils

The Treaty of Rome (1958) confers equal status on all national languages of the EU member states as working languages (with the exception of Irish and Letzeburgisch). On numerous occasions, EU education ministers have declared that the EU citizens' knowledge of languages should be promoted. Each member state should promote pupils' proficiency in at least two foreign languages, at least one of which should be the national language of an EU state. Promoting knowledge of indigenous or immigrant minority languages has been left out of consideration in these ministerial pronouncements. The protection and promotion of regional minority languages and cultures in the EU was recommended in the European Charter of regional languages and cultures. This Charter led to the establishment of the European Bureau of Lesser-used Languages and the European MERCATOR network in order to stimulate research into, and instruction in, regional minority languages. It is remarkable that the teaching of indigenous or regional minority languages is generally advocated for reasons of cultural diversity as a matter of course, whereas this is rarely a major argument in favour of teaching immigrant minority languages.

In various EU countries, the old guideline of the Council of European Communities on education for immigrant children has promoted the legitimization of IMLI and occasionally also its legislation. However, it is in need of actualization and extension to pupils from non-EU countries, and of greater binding force for the EU member states. The increasing internationalization of pupil populations in European schools, finally, requires a language policy for all pupils, in which the traditional dichotomy between foreign language instruction for indigenous majority pupils and home language instruction for immigrant minority pupils is put aside.

Professor Guus Extra works for the Research Group on Language and Minorities at Tilburg University, The Netherlands. He is an adviser to the European Cultural Foundation's The European Constellation of Languages project.