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Promoting Linguistic Diversity in School

Schools are important institutions where linguistic diversity can, and should be, valued and promoted. There are myriad ways of moving closer to achieving this goal. Here we present three sets of simple guidelines that the school can use to assess and improve its stance in line with this goal: (1) Gather all the information relevant to linguistic and cultural diversity in and

around the school (School Profile); (2) Assess and look for possibilities for staff development; and (3) Prepare a priority list of initiatives that enhance the school's ethos (Products and Processes).

1 School Profile

There has to be a school vision that embraces the community and one that views its partners as resources. Here are some suggestions about the type of information that is relevant in putting together a school language profile. This is a way of taking stock of a school's linguistic assets and challenges.

Learners	• Number of students enrolled in the school • Average number of students per grade • Average number of students per class • Student-Teacher ratio • Details about the linguistic and cultural background of students (e.g. number or % of which background, and in which classes) • Details about the social background of students (e.g. new immigrants, social class, foreign temporary residents, nationals) • Relevant information about parents (e.g. languages spoken and level of competence, attitudes toward languages and schooling, literacy practices in the home, needs, career path,) • Parental involvement in school (e.g. in curriculum planning, pupil guidance, homework and discipline, representation on school boards) • Distinctive features of the school community (e.g. urban, industrial, mobile, close-knit) • Leadership and community networks (e.g. church-centred, isolationist, home nuclei) • Number of languages spoken, and their status in the community • Any other relevant cultural information (e.g. historical, attitudinal, recent developments) • A description of the linguistic strengths and weaknesses of the student population (also in the traditional sense of exam grades) • Information regarding learners' interests, self-concept, motivation, attitudes, especially toward languages and language education • Any other relevant information (e.g. special requests regarding language education or racist acts)
Teachers	• Total Number of teachers • Qualifications held by staff • Previous teaching experience • Average age and age range • Linguistic and cultural composition of teachers and other school staff; languages spoken and levels of competence, attitudes toward languages, cultures and literacy practices, etc. • History of their professional development (e.g. instructional and assessment practices, involvement in extra-curricular activities) • Readiness of teachers to diversify language education (e.g. provisions for students with language problems, languages used as media of instruction, use of ICT, use of languages outside of lesson hours on the school site) • Possibilities for sharing teacher expertise with other institutions (also including e.g. resources, special programmes, materials)

Administration	• School administration practices (e.g. level of autonomy, school development planning, school leadership and decision making processes) • School funding and budgeting • Recruitment of staff (short-term and long-term goals) • Existing school policies and ethos (obstacles and opportunities for responding positively to diversity; declared and potential list of priorities)
Other	• Current views in community, or nationally, regarding the value of languages and of language education • Current international trends regarding language education • Positive and negative events relating to multiculturalism and plurilingualism experienced by the stakeholders (learners, teachers, parents, school administrators) that might have a bearing on school language policy • Needs expressed by the stakeholders in relation to language education • The position of the Ministry of Education, of the Regional Authority and of the Local Authority on the issue of linguistic diversity

2 Staff development

Teachers are an important resource in creating and sustaining a plurilingual environment within the school. Here is a list that can be used to assess achievements, and outline future plans,

for staff development. It is divided into four categories ranging from an ‘elementary’ type of in-service training that teachers can take on as individuals, or that do not require major commitment, moving on to

more ‘advanced’ initiatives where a concerted team effort and substantial investment of time as well as personal dedication are necessary.

Elementary	• attend regular in-service and other courses organised by external agencies • invite guest speakers to the school • organise induction for student- and novice-teachers to explain the school’s language policy • keep up to date with developments in language education • invite a senior, external teacher to observe and give ‘objective’ feedback • participate in community evenings concerning languages and cultures
Enquiry-based	• act as ‘being a learner for a day’ and attend all lessons to understand better the language and cultural issues from a learner’s point of view • visit other schools, participate in exchanges, and witness alternative ways of teaching • get involved in classroom observation and/or team teaching, followed by reflection and discussion • organise and participate school-based workshops in order to tackle specific difficulties or opportunities • conduct surveys to collect data prior to implementing policy • evaluate an innovation • enrol for a language, or language education course • keep an updated list of references, e.g. books, videos, CD-Roms, web-sites, about linguistic diversity and plurilingualism
Hands-on	• participate regularly in co-operative teaching to ensure a plurilingual approach • experience new tasks, e.g. time-tabling, chairing committees, organising examinations (rotating tasks among teachers) with an inclusive view to languages and cultures e.g. to actively involve speakers of different languages, and to ensure that some language-subjects are not discriminated against • participate in work-in-progress, such as needs analyses, appraisals, the development of specific policies in relation e.g. to special needs, autonomous learning, provision for high achievers, etc. with reference to language education • explore and challenge staff attitudes toward educational issues, and more specifically toward language attitudes and language education • plan cross-curricular teaching activities involving several languages

Advanced	• organise a working party to improve a particular curricular area pertaining to language education e.g. weekend- or week-long workshops • exchange of (language) teachers with other schools, and/or making arrangements for additional language coverage through sharing of teaching load • work in partnership with other stakeholders, e.g. parents, local authorities, to overcome specific problems such as those related to racism; or to introduce large-scale initiatives such as multicultural events • organise and participate in a course aimed at cultivating positive energy on a human level, e.g. by focusing on positive past events, team building exercises to tackle issues like mistrust and conflict, role playing to improve body language, etc. underlining linguistic and cultural diversity • commit the school to changing negative and discriminating attitudes towards languages and cultures, e.g. by embarking on a campaign (e.g. producing and distributing brochures) to convince authorities or community-based groups about the values of linguistic and cultural diversity
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Inside the school	• Signs in several languages • Books in different languages in school/class libraries • Multilingual story bags • Letters and school guides for parents in different languages • School web-site with items in different languages • Multilingual exhibitions at regular intervals • School magazine/newspaper with items in different languages • Invite parents who speak other languages to the school/classroom
Involving the community	• Excursions with parents, learners and teachers using several languages • Meetings for grandparents especially if they are conversant in minority or foreign languages • Organise language courses at school for parents and other community members • Fund raising to sponsor language and culture projects • Cultural evenings involving community members
Further afield	• Partnerships with multilingual entities such as tourist businesses, e.g. offering learners posts for work/language experience • Involvement of other institutions such as multinational companies in school life • Exchanges with learners, teachers, families who speak other languages – involving travel abroad and hosting in return – and ensuring adequate preparation for all those involved

3 Products and Processes

This is a list of ideas aimed at fostering linguistic diversity starting with simple visual aids such as welcome signs and exhibitions, to activities like special cultural and language evenings, adult education initiatives, exchanges and projects.

References

More detailed information can be found in Camilleri Grima A. (Ed.) (2007). *Promoting Linguistic Diversity and Whole-School Development*. Strasbourg: European Centre for Modern Languages/Council of Europe; and *Guide for the development of language education policies in Europe* (2007). Strasbourg: Language Policy Division/Council of Europe.

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Eva Antonini, *Incomunicabilità*.