



MULTILINGUALISM AS A MEANS OF PROMOTING EQUALITY OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY: EVIDENCE FROM THREE EUROPEAN UNION COUNTRIES

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Abstract

Multilingualism lies at the heart of educational policies adopted in most European Union countries. Knowledge of foreign languages now forms a significant part of the agenda concerning equality of educational opportunity. These policies are based on the premise that foreign languages help individuals in their professional and private life, combating poverty and social exclusion. In this paper, we present the education policies in relation to foreign languages in three European Union countries, Germany, Spain and Greece in order to examine whether they have been influenced by the equality agenda. We also present the results of a research study the aim of which was to investigate lower secondary education students' views and attitudes toward the teaching of foreign languages. Students seem to accept the official rhetoric regarding the beneficial outcomes of foreign languages. We conclude that multilingualism can contribute to the reduction of social class inequalities, as they can offer to all students, regardless of socioeconomic background, the opportunity to overcome obstacles and succeed in the education and employment field.

Keywords: equality of educational opportunity, foreign languages, social class inequalities

1. Introduction

In the last decades European societies are faced with fast changes as a result of the process of globalization, the "*shift from industrial to post-industrial*" (Brown et al, 1997, p.1), technological innovation and an ageing population (Commission of the European Communities, 2008). A significant development concerns the fact that people move

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more within the European Union, while a growing number of people live and work in a country other than the one in which they were born and raised, making European “*more international and more multilingual*” (Commission of the European Communities, 2008:5). The process of globalization itself is important in shaping education. Globalization has a deep impact, since it is considered to blur “*national boundaries, shifting solidarities within and between nation-states, and deeply affecting the constitutions of national and interest group identities*” (Torres and Antikainen, 2003, p.5).

In order to deal with these challenges, and to encourage communication among people with different cultures, in recent years, as part of its social agenda, European Union policies have been aiming to increase the level of education provided, since it is considered as a safeguard against poverty and social exclusion (European Council of Barcelona, 2002). Education is also associated with future economic growth (Drucker, 1993). Educational credentials are associated with increased opportunities for better paid jobs (Brown, 2003). It is now officially recognized that the education systems that are more productive are those that place an equal emphasis on equality and quality (OECD, 2012). It is worth mentioning that sociologists of education define equality in terms of the following components: equality of access to education for people from less advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, equality in relation to participation rates, as well as equality of outcome, which refers to educational achievements of people from marginalized groups (Lynch, 2000, p.93). Similarly, educational systems that promote equality of opportunity are those that make certain that students’ educational outcomes are dependent on students’ the abilities and efforts, rather than the level of familial financial capital (Brown, 1990).

Thus, recognizing the need for knowledge of foreign languages, in 2002 the European Council urged European Union member states to promote mastery of foreign languages for their citizens. More specifically, member states are urged to take measure in order to “*improve the mastery of basic skills, in particular by teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age: establishment of a linguistic competence indicator in 2003; development of digital literacy: generalisation of an Internet and computer user’s certificate for secondary school pupils*” (European Council of Barcelona, 2002, p.19).

An important aspect of the agenda concerning foreign languages concerns the fact that knowledge of foreign languages is closely linked to efforts within the European Union to create more inclusive societies characterized by social cohesion. In this framework, mastery of foreign languages is linked to the decrease of social inequalities. According to the Council of the European Union “*the knowledge of languages is one of the basic skills which each citizen needs to acquire in order to take part effectively in the European knowledge society and therefore facilitates both integration into society and social cohesion*”

(Official Journal of the European Communities, 2002, p.2). In the same document, it is emphasized that knowledge of languages facilitates education and professional mobility, as well as mobility “for cultural and personal reasons” (Official Journal of the European Communities, 2002, p.2). In other official European Union documents mastery of foreign languages and multilingualism are seen as having an impact on multiple domains, since it is stated that “multilingualism is a major cross-cutting theme encompassing the social, cultural, economic and therefore educational spheres” (Official Journal of the European Union, 2008a, p.1).

2. Education, mastery of foreign languages and inclusive societies

Mastery of foreign languages can lead to more inclusive and egalitarian societies and to the reduction of social class inequalities in the following ways. First, multilingual people have more opportunities to find a job and work abroad. By improving their employability, people are less likely to suffer from poverty and social exclusion (Commission of the European Communities, 2008). Second, multilingual people can more easily take advantage of the opportunities offered by the widespread diffusion of the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). For instance, they can make use of more information sources than people who speak only their mother tongue. In this framework, they have more opportunities to acquire richer and higher levels of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Third, intercultural communication with citizens from other countries becomes easier. In this way, intercultural dialogue can flourish, and people have the opportunity to become more open-minded and overcome prejudices. In a similar vein, official documents state that “multilingualism contributes to developing creativity by allowing access to other ways of thinking, interpreting the world and expressing the imagination” (Official Journal of the European Union, 2008a, p.2). This means that knowledge of foreign languages can increase equality of life chances, since speaking foreign languages can combat the marginalization of certain groups of people, enabling them to fulfil their full potential in terms of employability and personal life prospects.

In summary, a host of benefits accrues to people who are multilingual. What is especially important is the link between foreign language mastery on the one hand, and equality of opportunity and combating social exclusion and poverty on the other hand. Education is crucial in this respect. Sociological thinking has long established a relationship between the educational system and the allocation of advantage and disadvantage in a given society (Willis, 1977; Gewirtz et al, 1995; Reay, 1998). European Union policies that set the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training up to the year 2020 are based around the premise that “education and

training have a crucial role to play in meeting the many socio-economic, demographic, environmental and technological challenges facing Europe and its citizens today and in the years ahead" (Official Journal of the European Union, 2009, p.1). The strategic framework that describes, analyses and coordinates the European cooperation scheme in education and training for the period up to 2020 is a significant contribution in the fight against social class inequalities, as it is specifically aiming, aiming other objectives, at the promotion of equity, social cohesion and active citizenship (Official Journal of the European Union, 2009).

In this framework, foreign languages are important in modern globalized European societies, as they can equip people with basic qualifications needed for the transition to the labour market. Foreign languages benefit states and individuals alike, facilitating move and work in Europe and promoting active participation of citizens in the globalized societies in which they live (European Council of Barcelona, 2002). European Union countries benefit, since *"foreign language skills, as well as helping to foster mutual understanding between peoples, are a prerequisite for a mobile workforce and contribute to the competitiveness of the European Union economy"* (Official Journal of the European Union, 2006, p.2).

The importance attached to the knowledge of foreign languages is reflected in the changes that have taken place in recent decades in the educational systems of Greece, Germany and Spain. In this article, we focus on policies concerning the teaching of foreign languages from an educational and sociological perspective. We present and critically analyse the changes and policies that have been implemented in the above countries in the last decades. More specifically, we present, analyse and compare foreign language policies in order to examine whether and to what extent they may contribute to the reduction of social class inequalities in education.

In order to undertake the above task, this article is organized in the following way. We first present foreign language policies in these countries and the framework of teaching foreign languages in primary and secondary education. Then, adopting a sociological lens, we attempt to evaluate these policies in relation to their potential to equip all students, regardless of socioeconomic or ethnic background, with knowledge of foreign languages that will enable them to become active citizens and succeed in the transition to the labour market and become active citizens. We then present the results of an empirical research, which aimed at examining the lower secondary students' opinions and attitudes concerning the teaching of foreign languages in three European Union countries, Germany, Spain and Greece.

3. Germany

Germany has a decentralized education system. Many decisions being taken at Lander (member state) level, which means that *“in the German case it is more proper to talk about centralization at the regional level”* (Green, 1998, p. 284). In relation to student performance, it has become *“an above-average performer on PISA”* (OECD, 2014c). However, its educational system faces challenges, as it needs to *“support students with disadvantaged and migrant backgrounds and to continue reducing the impact of socio-economic background on student outcomes”* (OECD, 2014c, p.4).

It is also worth mentioning that the German educational system is a tracked one. Lower secondary education students are tracked according to performance in the following secondary education school types: *“Hauptschule”*, attended by students with lower academic performance, *“Realschule”*, a type of intermediate secondary school, and *“Gymnasium”*, which *“prepares for higher education and allows for direct access to universities”* (Krause and Schüller, 2014, p.2). In other words, there is a distinction between education that prepares students for higher education on the one hand, and on the other hand vocational education whose aim is to prepare students to enter the labour market (Shavit and Müller, 2000). This tripartite educational system makes the German educational system *“one of the most highly stratified systems in Europe”* (Kerckhoff, 2000, p.459).

In this framework, because students from less privileged social classes are usually placed in the lower tracks (Gamoran and Mare, 1989; Shavit and Müller, 2000), tracking has received criticism. More specifically, it has been argued that tracking is a system that impacts positively on the reproduction of social class inequality in education and the society (Bowles and Gintis, 1976).

3.1 Primary education

The teaching of foreign languages starts early in the German education system. It starts from the first grade of primary school in some Länder (member states), while in most Länder pupils are taught a foreign language from grade 3 (European Commission, 2016a). The teaching methods employed make use of the students' experiences with the aim of developing communicative competence. The knowledge of the foreign language that students are expected to master is set in accordance to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001, p.1).

The range of foreign languages taught in primary education is vast, including English, French, Danish, Dutch, Polish, Czech, while Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Turkish are also taught in some schools.

3.2 Secondary education

The aim of the teaching of foreign languages in general lower secondary education is to build on the knowledge acquired during primary education. On the whole, students who graduate from lower secondary education are expected to have acquired level B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). At the same time, students are expected to have basic knowledge in at least another foreign language (European Commission, 2016a).

The aim of the teaching of foreign languages in general upper secondary education is to promote intercultural understanding, writing skills and reading comprehension, involving understanding of a variety of text types, while speaking skills are also given priority (European Commission, 2016a).

At the end of general upper secondary education, students are expected to have achieved at least level B2 in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages for the foreign languages that they study since lower secondary level. Level B1 is expected *“for new foreign languages started at the end of the upper level of the Gymnasium”* (European Commission, 2016a).

4. Spain

The education system in Spain has a great degree of decentralization, since the Ministry of Education designs the general framework (the aims, and the organisation of the school system). The different Autonomous Communities of the country have a degree of autonomy in relation to regulating their educational systems based on the general framework (Miret-Gamundi et al, 2014), but the *“important and final decisions are taken at the center through”* (Holesch and Klaus-Jürgen, 2012, p.).

Providing equitable educational opportunities constitute the core element of educational policies in Spain. Indeed, one of the pillars of Spanish educational system is to develop *“fair and inclusive policies aiming to achieve an equitable system”* (OECD, 2014a, p.6). It is a worthwhile goal, since, according to official data, in Spain more than 20% of students come from socio-economically disadvantaged groups (OECD, 2014b).

In Spain, the aim of foreign language teaching is multilingualism, enabling students to speak a second and a third foreign language (European Commission, 2016b). A first foreign language is a core subject in primary education, while the teaching of foreign languages is done by specialist teachers, and not the class teacher.

In lower secondary education, the aim is to make students fluent in one foreign language. In upper secondary education, students continue their first foreign language, while a second foreign language is taught. In Spain, lower secondary education lasts

four years and students who attend it are aged 12-16. Lower secondary education is compulsory for all students (European Commission, 2016c).

General upper secondary education (Bachillerato) comprises two academic years, which are attended by students aged 16 to 18 years. It provides education and skills that will enable students to study in higher education. It places special emphasis on the teaching of foreign languages and supports multilingualism, since one of its main objectives is to provide students with knowledge that will enable them to communicate fluently in one or more foreign languages. In general, providing equality of opportunity, increasing performance levels and preventing drop-out from school are among the officially stated objectives of secondary education. They constitute central goals, since official data show that achievement for 15-year-old students in Spain “*has remained below the OECD average over the years*” (OECD, 2014a, p.4).

5. Greece

In Greece the unified curriculum for foreign languages is in accordance with the European Union policies for foreign languages, since its main goal is the promotion of multilingualism, since European Union citizens who speak foreign languages are better equipped to benefit from the increased educational, professional and financial opportunities available to them (Pedagogic Institute, 2012).

The teaching of foreign languages in the Greek education system aims at providing students with the skills necessary for communication in different linguistic and cultural environments (Dendrinou and Karava, 2013).

In Greece, the teaching of foreign languages starts from an early age. More specifically, English is taught from the first grade of primary school, while students learn a second foreign language (German or French) from the fifth grade of primary school. In lower secondary education, students are also taught English and German or French. Students who attend upper secondary education are taught one foreign language. Students choose one foreign language from English, German and French.

6. Foreign languages and equity of educational opportunity in comparative perspective

The above presentation and analysis of the educational policy in relation to education in general and in particular foreign languages leads us to the following conclusions.

First, in official documents that describe the educational policy in these countries it is acknowledged that education plays an important role in helping European Union countries address the challenges in knowledge based societies in relation to “socio-

economic, demographic, environmental and technological challenges” (Official Journal of the European Union, 2009, p.1). Investment in education is considered to promote the human capital of European Union countries, which in turn, leads to increased social cohesion and active citizenship. Second and connectedly, the educational systems in these three countries aim at helping all students learn at least two foreign languages from a very early age. Embedded in the educational systems of these countries is the principle that all students should be provided with the opportunity to master two foreign languages, apart from their mother tongue (Commission of the European Communities, 2008). This will help intercultural understanding, given the fact that in European Union countries there are a growing number of first or second generation migrants (European Commission, 2012a).

In relation to issues of equity, in all three countries the teaching of foreign languages is linked to the provision of equal opportunities for all students. Mastery of foreign languages is believed to have a positive impact on increased employability, the transition from school to the labour market and intercultural understanding. The belief in the benefits of mastery of foreign languages lies behind the policies in these countries for the introduction of the teaching of foreign languages from an early age.

7. The research study

Bearing the above into consideration, we conducted a research study. The aim was to examine the lower secondary school students’ opinions and attitudes concerning the teaching of foreign languages in two European Union countries, Germany, Spain and Greece. We attempted to examine whether the students accept the official rhetoric concerning the usefulness of foreign languages. We also wished to examine whether these view differ by country. In other words, the aim of the research was to investigate whether the official rhetoric of the European Union concerning foreign languages is endorsed by the students.

To explore the above issue we asked the students if they believe that mastery of foreign languages is beneficial for them and for what reasons. We also included questions which aimed to explore their experiences concerning the teaching and learning of foreign languages in lower secondary education. For example, the students were asked if they believe that the school provides them with adequate knowledge of foreign languages.

The sample of the research study was 15 lower secondary education students from Germany, Spain and Greece. We used focus group as a method of data collection in order to examine students’ perceptions and attitudes towards the issues under

investigation, since focus groups “*provide insights into how people think and provide a deeper understanding of the phenomena being studied*” (Nagle and Williams, 2013, p.2). Focus groups are informal discussions among a group of people which are organized in order to explore particular issue (Kitzinger 1994; Wilkinson 2004). We chose to conduct a focus group to collect data, as they can help researchers understand meanings and interpretations of a group of people with similar experiences (Liamputtong, 2009) and to gain “*an understanding of a specific topic from the perspective of the participants of the group*” (Liamputtong 2011, p.3). Focus groups generate ideas within a social context, since the researcher can ask the respondents to share and compare experiences, and beliefs and discuss “*the extent to which they agree or disagree with each other*” (Breen, 2006, p.468).

8. Findings

Research findings indicate that most students have acquired a high level of knowledge of foreign languages, especially the English language. In relation to the English language, most of them have qualifications above the level B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). In addition, the students in the sample had a good knowledge of other foreign languages, including French and German (students from Greece and Spain). What is important is that there was no relation between knowledge of foreign languages and socioeconomic background.

In relation to the research questions, the first issue we explored in the focus group was whether the students believe that mastery of foreign languages is beneficial for them. The data we collected helped us explore the issue under investigation and answer the research questions.

More specifically, all students in the sample expressed the view that foreign languages are essential for their future professional careers. What is important is that the vast majority of these students expressed the view that their families shared this belief. It is a significant finding, given the fact that family plays an important role in the cultural reproduction process (Bourdieu, 1977, 1996).

Students, regardless of socioeconomic background, also expressed the view that foreign languages will help them find employment. Moreover, a sizeable percentage expressed the view that foreign languages are useful for their educational career, especially in higher education. Apart from that, they reported that foreign languages are important for their private lives, since it gives them access to multiple sources of information, such as the internet. They also said that foreign travel and understanding

of people from different countries are facilitated with mastery of foreign languages, since speaking a foreign language gives them access to different cultures and ways of thinking.

In general, students expressed the view that mastery of foreign languages is important. A significant finding was that they attached great importance to the learning of foreign languages and considered the subject of foreign languages as an important one in the school curriculum.

If we compare the students' attitudes toward foreign languages with the official rhetoric that states that a good command of foreign languages facilitates employability, mobility and intercultural dialogue (Official Journal of the European Union, 2014), we see that they seem to be in agreement. The students espouse the official rhetoric concerning the usefulness of a good command of foreign languages.

Apart from the above, the vast majority expressed the view that the teaching of foreign languages at school helped them acquire the skills necessary to communicate effectively. The students from Greece mentioned the role of private supplementary tutoring, but they believed that the teaching of foreign languages at school provided them with adequate knowledge of foreign languages, especially English.

In relation to the students' experiences from the teaching of foreign languages, the vast majority mentioned that they found foreign language instruction interesting and they were motivated in participating in the learning activities. Most students reported that they benefited from innovative teaching methods, including the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and techniques such as project-based learning and collaborative work.

9. Conclusion

One of the basic foundations of educational policy at European Union level is the provision of quality education for all its citizens. Current policies aim at lessening the impact of social class on the educational opportunities due to differential access to economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979, 2000). As it is stated in the Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training, which attempted to describe the main objectives of European Union education and training systems up to the year 2020, "*education and training systems should aim to ensure that all learners-including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, those with special needs and migrants-complete their education*" (Official Journal of the European Union, 2009:4).

In this framework, the educational systems in Greece, Germany and Spain have adopted policies and strategies that promote educational equity. These policies define equity in terms of “*equity as inclusion*” (OECD, 2012), making sure that all students acquire a basic minimum level of skills, allowing them to fulfill their learning. Equity is also defined as “*fairness*”, which means that that “*personal or socio-economic circumstances, such as gender, ethnic origin or family background are not obstacles to educational success*” (OECD, 2012, p.15). It is worth mentioning that often in sociological writing “*family background*” is used to refer to three components: financial capital (income or wealth), human capital (often measured by parental education), and social capital in or outside the family (Coleman, 1998).

Educational policies in relation to foreign languages constitute a significant part of the greater equity agenda incorporated in the educational systems in these countries. Foreign languages are seen by policy makers and governments as a way of combating social class inequalities. Societies with citizens who can speak foreign languages help them find a job, participate in society and become active citizens, while at the same time they provide citizens with knowledge and skills that will help them combat poverty and social exclusion.

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