

POLICY BRIEF #1

Multilingualism and education: the basics

ATHEME is a five-year long research project, bringing together world-class language scientists from all over Europe. Together, we aim to increase understanding of what it means to be multilingual in Europe today. Being multilingual doesn't mean that a person speaks every language perfectly, it means that he /she uses more than one language or dialect regularly. The results of ATHEME are of interest to many, especially to people who work in education, childcare and health care. In order to inform people who work in these areas, ATHEME produces a series of 'policy briefs', with summaries of research results. Our team can provide more background information about the findings cited here. But more importantly, the policy briefs are intended as a starting point for discussion between ATHEME, practitioners and policy makers. Their input will help develop our research questions and the policy recommendations that we will draw up at the end of our project in 2018.

Contact your national contact point to find out more about events that we organise near you!

What everybody in child care and education should know about multilingualism.

How common is multilingualism?

Multilingualism is very common across the world. Exact figures can't be givenⁱ, but it is estimated that the majority of the world's population regularly use more than one language or dialectⁱⁱ. With 196 countries in the world, and an estimated 6000-7000 languages, it is no surprise that more than one language is spoken in every country. Multilingualism is also widespread in Europe. The EU has 24 official languages and 60 other officially recognised indigenous languages. In addition, hundreds of languages have been brought to Europe by immigrants, including some widely spoken languages like Mandarin and Arabic. Of European citizens, 54% speak a language beside their mother tongue well enough to hold a conversation. 88% think that languages other than their mother tongue are useful for their personal developmentⁱⁱⁱ. It is not always easy to find out how many languages are effectively spoken in your home town or country, but in many European countries *some information* about the languages spoken by the population is in the public domain.

What are the advantages of multilingualism?

In the first place, knowing more than one language is an advantage in itself: it allows for communication with more people, and it enriches a speaker's linguistic repertoire. And as a person acquires more languages, it becomes easier to learn new ones. Second, multilinguals can participate in multiple communities, providing more varied social and cultural experiences. Third, language skills are increasingly valued on the job market. Fourth, multilingual people may have cognitive benefits: they appear to be better at focussing, and at switching between tasks and between perspectives. Fifth, though the evidence is still limited, when multilingual people get older, they appear to retain their cognitive skills longer. The regular use of more than one language functions like a constant training of the brain.

Is it really true that multilinguals....?

Because language is so personal, people often have strong beliefs about it. But it is important to check that these beliefs are in line with what the evidence says. Below are some of the most common questions about multilingualism.

The most frequent questions about multilingualism and their answers.

“Multilingualism is something I hold very dear.”

Frans Timmermans, First Vice-President of the European Commission

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Do multilingual children mix up their languages, so they don't learn to speak any language properly? There is ample evidence that babies distinguish the languages that are spoken to them before their first birthday. Children can easily learn to speak more than one language very well. Language mixing is common when multilingual people interact, but it is often a skill or a strategy, and not a sign of confusion.

Is learning a second language only useful when that language is widely spoken, like English? There are many reasons to learn a second language or dialect, and the benefits listed above apply regardless of the language (or dialect) involved.

Can a person only reap the benefits of multilingualism if he/she speaks the languages from an early age? It is generally recognised that language learning is easier for young children and that they become more fluent than adults. But adults can be very successful language learners, even at advanced ages.

Should deaf children, and children with communicative disorders, like dyslexia, or autism, be raised monolingual? Every situation is different and research in this area is ongoing. However, multilingualism is never the source of disorders, and there is no evidence that it makes any of these conditions worse.

How can children be raised multilingually?

There is no 'one size fits all' answer to this question. A family in which both parents speak a minority language may be very successful speaking the minority language at home and the dominant language in the school. A family in which each parent speaks his/ her own language with the child may be equally successful. The ideal language policy for a particular family depends on many factors, including the social status of the languages, time spent with children, the social network of the family and many others. **Children need rich, varied language input from a variety of speakers for an extended period of time, and active practice in each language.** How this is best achieved may be very different from one family to the next.

How does multilingualism affect education?

Recognising that multilingualism is prevalent in our societies, and that being multilingual has many advantages, implies that educational policy should foster multilingualism both in the home and at school. This has implications for both content and methods. For example, it means that teachers need up-to-date information about multilingual language development (both similar and different from monolingual development). Effective language support programs are required for pupils who don't speak the school language. Multiple language learning from an early age should be available, including minority languages. Finally, education *about* multilingualism should be part of the curriculum.

ⁱ The linguistic boundaries between languages and dialects are fluid, and the distinction between one language and the next is often the result of a socio-political process.

ⁱⁱ Francois Grosjean, *Bilingual: Life and Reality*. Harvard University Press, 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ Special Eurobarometer 386, *Europeans and their languages*, 2012.
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