Early Years Education and the Reversal of Language Shift

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Abstract

In this chapter we provide an international overview of the role of early years education in revitalizing endangered or minoritized languages. Unlike mother tongue or maintenance bilingual programs, these initiatives often operate in contexts where the majority of children and their families are not habitual or confident speakers of the target language. This means that, aside from difficulties associated with finding qualified teachers and appropriate classroom materials, teachers have the additional task of addressing deeply rooted language prejudices and raising community awareness of social and linguistic inequalities that have

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M. Schwartz (ed.), *Handbook of Early Language Education*, Springer International Handbooks of Education, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-47073-9_10-1

been rendered invisible by widespread misconceptions about historical realities and language acquisition processes. Such community and school-based projects face the challenge of bringing to life a language that may very well not form a part of children's linguistic and social repertoire, which involves not only increasing linguistic competence but also making their heritage language feel attractive, natural, and fun.

Beginning with an overview of key theoretical concepts, such as language hegemony, language shift, diglossia, and symbolic capital, we will examine past and current research data and analyze some of the sociolinguistic, political, and educational factors involved, including language policies at the local, state, and supranational levels. We will then review some of the strategies that have been employed at the level of early childhood education (ECE) in a variety of European contexts, which are not meant to be exhaustive, but rather to represent a variety of strategies that have attempted to address universal tendencies by responding to the local, situated nature of these realities.

Keywords

Early years education · Language shift · Language revitalization · Intergenerational transmission

Introduction

Understanding language, power, and history is crucial for analyzing minoritized languages. Indeed, we use the term *minoritized* here instead of the alternatives *minority*, *heritage*, or *regional* languages, terms which appear in academic and policy documents, in order to capture the process of *minoritization* that has led to current linguistic practices and attitudes. As Heller (2008) points out, essentialized notions of bilingualism, bilinguals, and languages themselves erase important and relevant complexities. Where does one language end and another begin? What happens when state borders bisect speech communities? The inclusive term "language varieties" includes the various forms of a language that are often referred to as languages, dialects, or registers, but these terms are ideologically loaded and often contested. Which language varieties (and, by association, their speakers) are legitimate, and which are not? These are not strictly linguistic questions, as they involve political, economic, and discursive processes that take place over time. From a sociohistorical perspective, language varieties never simply peacefully coexist in a single territory, but rather are unequally distributed in ways that result in limiting access of certain segments of the population to important social spheres, such as employment, justice, or education (Martín Rojo 2016).

In this chapter we provide an international overview of the role of early years education in revitalizing such minoritized languages, focusing especially but not exclusively on those languages receiving such support in the European context. Unlike mother tongue or maintenance bilingual programs, these initiatives often operate in contexts where the majority of children and their families are not habitual or confident speakers of the target language. This means that, aside from difficulties associated with finding qualified teachers and appropriate classroom materials, early years provision has the additional task of addressing deeply rooted language prejudices. This involves raising community awareness of social and linguistic inequalities that have been rendered invisible by widespread misconceptions about historical realities and language acquisition processes. Such community and early education–based projects face the challenge of bringing to life a language that may very well not form a part of children's linguistic and social repertoire, which involves not only increasing linguistic competence but also making these minoritized languages feel attractive, natural, and fun.

Beginning with an overview of key theoretical concepts in the following section, we will go on to examine some of the significant contributions to the field in terms of pioneering educational programs. We will then review some of the strategies that have been employed at the level of early childhood education (ECE), particularly in European contexts, which are not meant to be exhaustive, but rather to represent a variety of strategies that have attempted to address universal tendencies by responding to the local, situated nature of these realities.

Main Theoretical Concepts

In this section we review some of the concepts underlying minoritized languages and education. Language revitalization can be understood as a reversal of what has been defined by Fishman (1991, p. 1) as language shift, or a situation in which "intergenerational continuity is proceeding negatively, with fewer and fewer users (speakers, readers, writers, and even understanders) or uses every generation." This shift takes place through processes of linguistic hegemony, where "consent is achieved predominantly through systematic, consistent persuasion through, for example, the media and through institutions such as education" (Clark 2013, p. 62). The more powerful language may initially be imposed by state-sponsored coercion, but language shift eventually comes to be seen by minoritized language speakers as the natural product of rational-free choice. These processes are mutually entwined, as exemplified by the Galician language in the Spanish state: after centuries of gradual displacement by Spanish as the language of clerical and noble ruling classes, oppressive policies under the Franco dictatorship (1939 and 1975) prohibited its use in educational and government spaces, and now old and new linguistic prejudices combine with unsupportive educational policy to weaken its presence in early years classrooms (DePalma and Zapico Barbeito 2018).

In this section we will examine these processes of language minorization and revitalization, and the role ECE programs can play as part of broader initiatives supported by state and suprastate language policies – which transcend national boundaries.

An Ecological Approach to Language Diversity: Endangerment and Vitality

Activists and educators concerned with reversing minoritized language shift usually adopt an ecological perspective similar to conservationist arguments for protection of biodiversity:

> Most people know that global biodiversity in the early 21st century is experiencing mass extinction. According to some accounts, annual losses of plant and animal species are occurring at 1,000 times or more historic background rates.1 Yet few are aware of a parallel crisis for languages, with predicted extinction rates ranging from 50 to 90% of the world's 6,900 languages by the end of this century (Romaine 2015, p. 31).

Within this conservationist perspective, linguistic diversity like biodiversity is understood to be positive, and the disappearance (extinction) of any language is seen as a loss. For those wishing to prevent or at least slowing down language loss, language vitality is a goal: "Language vitality is an indicator of a language's sustainability, and of the extent to which intervention is needed for its maintenance" (Roche 2017, p. 193).

At the same time, some language activists and scholars have criticized the developmental metaphors implicit in notions of language vitality, vulnerability, and extinction. McEwan-Fujita (2006) argues that statistics on declining use of Scottish Gaelic have been taken up in media and popular discourses to pronounce an early death sentence that may turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy:

> Through repeated exposure to the idea that 'Gaelic is dying', there is always the possibility that Gaelic speakers themselves will become more fatalistic about the future of Gaelic, and will enact a self-fulfilling prophecy by failing to transmit the language to the next generation, since 'it is dying anyway' (p. 292).

In 1996 UNESCO published the first edition of the *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*. The most recent edition (Moseley 2010) categorizes about 2,500 of the estimated worldwide total of 3,000 endangered languages in terms of degree of endangerment, which is measured in terms of intergenerational language transmission:

Degree of endangerment	Intergenerational language transmission
Safe	Language is spoken by all generations; intergenerational transmission is uninterrupted
Vulnerable	Most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains (e.g., home)

(continued)

Degree of endangerment	Intergenerational language transmission
Definitely endangered	Children no longer learn the language as mother tongue in the home
Severely endangered	Language is spoken by grandparents and older generations; while the parent generation may understand it, they do not speak it to children or among themselves
Critically endangered	The youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently
Extinct	There are no speakers left

Source *UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* (online version)

The website Ethnologue (https://www.ethnologue.com/) provides more recent figures published in February of 2020, using an expanded graded intergenerational disruption scale (EGIDS) to estimate that about 41% of the world's languages are endangered: "A language becomes endangered when its users begin to teach and speak a more dominant language to their children."

According to UNESCO's diagnosis, about 3,000 of the world's languages can be considered to be either critically, severely, or definitely endangered, because the children no longer learn these languages through communication with older generations, even in cases where their parents and grandparents may understand the language and speak it among themselves. According to these criteria, a language is vulnerable when it is not supported by contexts outside the home, evidently including the school. We can conclude from these criteria that UNESCO considers the home to be the last bastion of support for a language that is losing speakers across the generations. Nevertheless, other social and institutional contexts, such as education, have been implicated in policies and programs designed to restore a language to a previous and more robust state of vitality.

Collective Language Rights in Hegemonic Historical Contexts

Social actions designed to support language revitalization are supported by legislation and policy that protects collective linguistic rights. Group language rights do not always coincide with the kind of individual rights encoded and defended in claims for mother tongue or bilingual education, since community members, including children, may be more fluent in the majority or official state language. In these cases, language rights claims are based on the preservation of cultural diversity in the ecological sense described above, expressed by UNESCO's as "the need to safeguard the world's linguistic diversity among policy-makers, speaker communities and the general public" (Moseley 2010). Many legal instruments adopt this framework, including UNESCO's *Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage* (2003) – which establishes language as a form of intangible cultural heritage, and specifically mentions education as a venue for "recognition of, respect for, and enhancement of the intangible cultural heritage in society" (Article 14).

In the European context, the current legal instrument for European language policy development, the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages (hereafter ECRML), adopts a similar view, establishing the need for "protection of the historical regional or minority languages of Europe, some of which are in danger of eventual extinction" (1992). An international treaty signed by 33 states and ratified by 25, the ECRML aims to regulate the protection of languages that are "traditionally used within a given territory of a State by nationals of that State who form a group numerically smaller than the rest of the State's population; and different from the official language(s) of that State" (Council of Europe 1992, art. 1, par. a).

This policy specifically designates "pre-school education in the relevant regional or minority languages" as a measure that should be made available at least to families who request it in sufficient number, "without prejudice to the teaching of the official language(s) of the State" (Council of Europe 1992). The ways in which these policies have been enacted in some European countries will be addressed in the following section of this paper.

While the existence of language policy has served to support educational and other institutionally based language revitalization efforts, the ECRML has received some criticisms for several reasons such as the highly flexible wording of its provisions (Woehrling 2012), unequal recognition and therefore protection of European minoritized languages, and the gap between formal language protection and implementation of language revitalization strategies (Gorter and Cenoz 2012). May (2014, p. 225) argues that, as a supranational policy, the ECRML is too quick to accommodate "the ongoing reticence" of European nations to put minoritized language rights policy into practice. Despite these shortcomings, the ECRML has provided a framework for schools and other institution to strive to revitalize endangered or vulnerable European languages.

Such collective linguistic rights claims are not simply attempting to slow down inevitable processes of linguistic decline and eventual death, but constitute collective political action aimed at redressing historical inequalities. The minoritization of certain European languages has been the result of long-term diglossia, where one of two languages in contact becomes associated with higher social and cultural functions and thus acquires greater power and status (Mendoza-Denton and Osborne 2009). Drawing upon Bourdieu's understanding of language as symbolic capital (prestige, honor, or recognition), speakers of minority languages suffer "'misrecognition' [. . .] of linguistic-communicative resources not because of their 'linguistic' features but of the sociohistorical load they carry" (Blommaert 2015, p. 6).

In this sense, policy designed to support language revitalization efforts also must contend with speakers' own attitudes. In the European context, national (majority) languages are seen to offer instrumental value in terms of social mobility and access to resources, while the value of regional (minoritized) languages is perceived to be limited to the sentimental, in terms of cultural–historical ties. Such "common sense" and implicit understandings of languages may cast parents who claim their right to minoritized language education as limiting the socioeconomic opportunities for their children (May 2014).

Roche (2017) points out that linguistic characteristics often seen as harbingers of declining language vitality, such as limitation to small language communities, speaker bilingualism, and lexical borrowing, are not themselves enough to explain these trends. He cautions against seeing language endangerment in terms of "generic, universal historical templates" rather than the result of "systemic power imbalances, particularly the minoritization of languages within state territories" that have emerged in particular contexts (Roche 2017, p. 209). Rather than language death, the more active notion of linguicide (language murder) place the blame squarely on state institutions, including schools, which, through the exclusion of minoritized languages from the curriculum, render them invisible (Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas 1995). By actively participating in efforts to revitalize minoritized languages, these same institutions can form part of efforts to claim collective linguistic rights and redress historic linguistic hegemony.

The Role of Early Years Education in Language Revitalization

Mainstream schooling practices are influenced by broader language ideologies, defined by Pomeranz (2002, p. 280) as:

> constellations of people's assumptions and expectations about language and language users. They differ from beliefs in that they are shared across individuals and implicated in power relations. Whereas beliefs are often characterized as existing within peoples' heads, ideologies are seen as a social production, constructed within and through everyday linguistic practice.

Specific ideologies about language and education may derive from nationalist *monoglot* (one nation = one language) views (Ricento 2013) or neoliberal priorities for competence in national or supranational languages (Martín Rojo 2016). These ideologies may also be guided by (mis)understandings about language learning, including popular (populist) convictions that monolingual children have cognitive and educational advantages, and that linguistic and metalinguistic skills acquired in one language are not applicable to another (Cummins 1998). As a result, formal schooling may be considered the appropriate domain for more prestigious language varieties, even by speakers of minoritized varieties (DePalma and Teasley 2013; Ferri 2017).

Nevertheless, minoritized language-medium preschool education is specifically promoted by the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (article 8). It is important to keep in mind, however, that this policy allows for a great deal of flexibility on the part of signatory states.

Just as schooling has been complicit in the minoritization of certain languages as part of state sponsored national identity projects (Matusov and Julien 2004), educational institutions may serve to reverse trends of linguistic substitution. Early years education (ECE) at the preschool level may be particularly well suited to this task, as the philosophy and pedagogy are usually child centered and prioritize comprehensive social and personal development. Fishman (1991, p. 374) considers it an essential requirement for revitalization that the language obtain "a secure niche in the early pre-school and co-school intimate socialization processes at the family-neighborhood-community level." Institutions that provide education to young children, before the onset of obligatory, primary schooling, can support intergenerational transmission by proving a basic language competency (especially when the language is no longer used in the home) and by generating positive attitudes toward historically minoritized languages. Young children are still in the early stages of initial language acquisition, and ECE programs can take advantage of their curiosity and aptitude for language learning.

In fact, these preschool programs are often established through community-based language activist networks, as in the case of the Basque language *Ikastola* movement in France (Heidemann 2015), and may be easier to establish than primary-level programs, given state educational policy (Hickey and de Mejía 2014). While preschooling projects may result from, and in turn strengthen, grassroots language rights movements, they are not sufficient. In fact, the long-term results of school-based initiatives in general have not always been positive, in terms of students' future language use. Thus, new speakers of minoritized languages may well have insufficient opportunities for use in less formal settings (Dunmore 2018; Ó Riagáin et al. 2008).

School and ECE-based revitalization, therefore, must form part of a comprehensive social program; it cannot single-handedly provide (future) speakers with the tools, motivation, and opportunity to use the minoritized language in their daily lives. Drawing upon early sociological and psychological models of human behavior and accounting for factors specific to minoritized language contexts, Iglesias Álvarez (2003) proposed a comprehensive model to explain language choices that takes into account multiple factors: competence (real and perceived); habits of language use developed over the lifetime; potential contexts for use (family, community, school, and social media); and normative beliefs held by the social groups to which one belongs or wishes to belong. ECE can help to provide competence and confidence, as well as positive associations and attitudes – but it cannot address all these important factors in language revitalization. At the same time educators must avoid new problems associated with the institutional context itself – such as new prejudices about the artificiality of children's school or preschool-acquired language varieties (Costa 2014; Hornsby 2017; O'Rourke and Walsh 2014) and the received relevance of these languages beyond these contexts (Smith-Christmas 2017).

While primary and secondary schooling in minoritized languages may not be sufficient to determine minoritized language use in adult years and subsequent intergenerational transmission, early years education in particular may be crucial to make such choices possible. Thus, ECE may contribute to an individual's eventual choice to use a minoritized language by providing a basic linguistic competence and, what may be even more important, confidence to use the language in social interactions (Iglesias Álvarez 2003). Preschooling in the minoritized language may also establish early language habits that can become automatic or default choices in certain contexts or when addressing certain speakers – for example, by establishing an internalized lexical repertoire related to games, chants, stories, and songs that can render intergenerational transmission more natural and comfortable. The ECE classroom is an ecosystem where teachers design language-conducive contexts for learning – the language is the first tool for exploration of the physical and social environment inside and outside the classroom (Schwartz 2018). In this sense, mere use of the minoritized language as a vehicle of instruction in the early years is not enough, and teachers need to create positive associations and language attitudes toward this language. For young learners, sources of motivation for language learning may include not only the learning activities themselves but relationships formed with the teacher, families, peers, and speakers in the broader community (Mihaljević and Nikolov 2019). Parents and other adults must be careful about how they motivate children's minoritized language use beyond the classroom. In many cases, these parents are not themselves fluent and habitual speakers of the language, even though they may have emotional and political reasons for participating in revitalization efforts. By not using the language themselves in the home, or by unintentionally framing its use as a didactic activity to be performed rather than used in everyday interactions, motivations for speaking the language beyond the classroom may be undermined (Smith-Christmas 2017).

In summary, ECE can be a valuable element of broader initiatives to revitalize minority languages. Early years education as well as primary and secondary schooling can equip potential new speakers with the necessary competence and experience, but it is up to other social institutions (employment and media) and informal social networks to provide the opportunities (contexts for use). Schools, and particularly preschools that have a more comprehensive learning philosophy, can also address language ideologies that affect language choices made by habitual and new speakers alike, but these speakers are ultimately responsible for claiming the language for themselves and for their children. In the following section we will examine some specific cases of early years education–based language revitalization initiatives.

Major Contributions

In this section we will begin by presenting some of the early, well-known ECE programs dedicated to minoritized language revitalization, which have set important precedents and have served as inspiration for the European examples that follow.

The Role of Kindergartens in the Revitalization of Hebrew

The case of Hebrew revival is often mentioned as an unquestionable model of successful language revitalization. The lack of native speakers, the high status of the language, and the sociopolitical conditions in which the process of revival took place make this situation rather unique (Fishman 1991; Spolsky and Shohamy 2001). However, this early example of reversal of language shift has been seen historically – and still is – as an inspiration for other contexts (Spolsky 1991, 1995; Zuckermann and Walsh 2011; Lemus 2012; Singh 2018). Moreover, it seems particularly relevant here due to the central role that education in early years settings such as kindergartens played in the process.

As Fellman (1973, p. 11) points out in his seminal study, the term "Hebrew revival" refers to "the successful introduction into common, spoken, general, everyday use of a hitherto written language, conceived thereby as a national and cultural symbol of the Jewish people." The first all-Hebrew school was founded in 1888 in Rishon Le-Zion. Ten years later, the first Hebrew kindergarten was opened in the same colony. This preschool level was added for pragmatic reasons that have served as a precedent for later initiatives in contexts where the children do not learn the target language at home. As Sitton (2001, p. 88) points out, this early exposure served to prepare them for school-based immersion: "Because most of the children who started school knew no Hebrew, the teachers' work was very difficult and they felt that a preparatory year in kindergarten would make the beginning of schooling easier for both pupils and teachers." By 1916, 40% of the Jewish population in Palestine declared that Hebrew was their first or daily language (Fellman 1973). Kindergartens managed to provide children with the necessary exposure to the language and encouraged them to take it outside the school, so they eventually became "the main instrument of developing Hebrew fluency" (Spolsky 1991, p. 144). The language became progressively a part of the children's world, separate from their parents' languages. These new generations of children educated entirely in Hebrew served as language propagators, bringing it into the households. The success of this model owed a great deal to the Zionist movement, which established the Hebrew language as a principal ideological pillar (Spolsky and Shohamy 2001).

Language Nests and the Revitalization of Indigenous Languages

The majority of the endangered languages in the world are indigenous languages (Aboubakrine 2017), that is to say, the languages of those communities, peoples, and nations

> which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them (Martínez Cobo 1983, p. 50)

According to the 2017 report of the United Nations about the state of the world's indigenous peoples in education, there is a continuous pattern of marginalization of those communities worldwide (United Nations 2017). This overview identifies some serious issues, such as the violation of the right to education and the use of education as a means of cultural assimilation into mainstream society. Nevertheless, over recent decades almost all regions have shown some progress in the development of intercultural bilingual education and revitalization of indigenous languages. Apart from the implementation of a number of maintenance programs, devised to preserve and dignify the language of L1 speakers (Bale 2010; McCarty and Nicholas 2012), there are also some remarkable language revitalization practices in contexts where the indigenous language is not the first language of most of the children anymore. Such is the case with the language nests' initiative.

Language nests are immersion programs in an indigenous language for pre-primary school–aged children. They provide a homelike environment where children are intensively exposed to the language and traditional culture through meaningful content (Johnston and Johnson 2002), with a significant participation of the families along with other members of the community, ideally the elders or the fluent speakers of the language (Hinton 2018). They usually blend traditional indigenous pedagogies, which include experiential learning and acquisition of community values through daily coexistence with the elders, with Western teaching methods, such as Montessori's (Borgia and Dowdy 2010; Chambers 2015). Most of them were started by groups of parents as pilot projects, some in early childhood centers and others in more informal settings. The involvement of the families and the community is essential for the success of these programs. The nests usually offer language classes for the parents, so they can support their children's learning at home. Family members are also encouraged to participate in some activities, such as cultural events, field trips, and regular meetings with the staff, the elders, and the other families (First Peoples' Cultural Council 2014).

The first nest opened in 1973 in Tokoroa (Aotearoa/New Zealand) for the Samoan language, but it was the successful experience of Māori nests (*Te Kōhanga Reo*) in the 1980s that inspired the spread of this educational model throughout the world. This program has been established for the revitalization of languages as diverse as Mohawk in Canada, Hawaiian and Seneca in the USA, Mixtec and Zapotec in Mexico, Quechua and Aymara in Bolivia, and Sami in Norway and Finland (Meyer and Soberanes Bojórquez 2009; Chambers 2015; Instituto Plurinacional de Estudio de Lenguas y Culturas 2017; Hinton 2018; King 2018). The language nest experience is now globally acknowledged as a touchstone in language revitalization processes. The key element of this system is the creation of a culture-based immersion environment, which helps reinforce the sense of identity of the children and raise their collective self-esteem. However, a nest is just one step among many in the reversal of language shift, so it is necessary to implement further measures in order to guarantee the involvement of the whole community (First Peoples' Cultural Council 2014).

Early Years Education and the Revitalization of Minoritized Languages in Europe

As in the case of the language nests, in Europe, education through the medium of minoritized languages has often been pioneered by groups of activist parents in contexts where the state provision for those languages was inexistent or unsatisfactory for their standards. These associative programs exist at ECE, primary, and secondary levels and include, among the most relevant cases, Ikastolak for Basque, Gaelscoileanna for Irish Gaelic (see Chap. X in this handbook), Mudiad Meithrin for Welsh, Diwan schools for Breton, Bressolas for Catalan in Northern Catalonia, and Calandretas for Occitan. They typically began by establishing early childhood education for a small number of children and progressively added further levels. Over the years they have expanded and gained official recognition and even state support – in different degrees, though, depending on the states – and in the present day they coexist with other types of both public and private bilingual programs (Gorter and Cenoz 2012; Chapalain 2013; Ó Duibhir et al. 2015). This kind of immersion education will be illustrated using the examples of Mudiad Meithrin (Welsh-medium preschools) and Diwan *skolioù-mamm* (Breton-medium preschools).

Mudiad Meithrin (literally "nursery movement") is the main provider of preschool education through the medium of Welsh. It offers nursery provision (*cylchoedd meithrin*) as well as parent and toddler groups (*cylchoedd Ti a Fi*), which allow families to play and socialize in an informal Welsh-speaking atmosphere. Grant-funded now by the Welsh government, it also organizes training for nursery staff, and publishes preschool materials in Welsh. It was established in 1971 as a grassroots movement within a context of accelerated loss in the percentage of Welsh speakers and has significantly grown ever since, with a number of over 1,000 units registered in 2012/2013 (Jones and Jones 2014). A recent comparative study about the state of European minority languages in education has characterized the Welsh preschool provision as "excellent," granting the possibility for every parent to enroll their child in a Welsh-language nursery (Van Dongera et al. 2017). The same cannot be said, however, of the primary school system, so children attending Mudiad Meithrin might find it difficult to continue their education in Welsh in some areas of the country (Jones and Jones 2014).

From a quantitative viewpoint, Welsh-medium preschooling appears to have a positive impact on the number of young speakers. According to the 2011 UK census, 23.6% of the children aged 3 and 4 were reported to be able to speak Welsh, showing an important increase over the 2001 figure of 18.8%, and over that of 1971 – 11.3% (Jones and Jones 2014). Regarding the qualitative outcomes of this education, data from an evaluation of achievement carried out by Roberts and Baker in 2002 (quoted in Hickey et al. 2014) show that children in Mudiad Meithrin make significant progress, in light of the low baseline, in different Welsh-language skills, such as listening and understanding, speaking and communication, and early literacy development. This applies particularly to children from English-language homes. Further research is needed to assess the progress in language skills among children from Welsh-speaking or mixed backgrounds.

The situation of education through the medium of Breton is considerably different, due to France's historical lack of support to its autochthonous languages ("autochtonous languages" refers to those historically present in European territories, while indigenous is usually associated with First Nations). France is one of the few member states that has not ratified the ECRML, and, although the state administration has shown more receptivity in recent years toward the introduction of regional languages to schools (Lyster and Costa 2011), immersion education still has to face major challenges to survive.

Immersion education in Breton is provided by Diwan, a federation of associative schools which offer education for children aged 2 to 18, in which the French language is introduced gradually (Třesohlavá 2018). In ECE, *skolioù-mamm,* Breton is the only language used by the teacher, irrespective of the child's home language. According to the Diwan organization, the evolution of the children's linguistic skills in *skolioù-mamm* is as follows: (1) they usually reach the understanding threshold very soon after they start school, by the repetitive and significant use of the language; (2) how quickly they attain the communication threshold mostly depends on external factors, such as the family languages or the degree of linguistic exposure of the child; and (3) the conceptualization threshold, which allows children to make a complex use of the language, is generally reached by the end of this level (Diwan n.d.-a). Proof of the effectiveness of this model is that Diwan pupils who were enrolled in the early childhood program outperform the students from the other bilingual models in their proficiency of Breton at the end of primary school (Vetter 2013). On the other hand, the quality of the Diwan pedagogical system has also been acknowledged, not only for the positive results in national tests in subjects other than Breton, and the teaching of foreign languages, but also for an emphasis on creativity and artistic disciplines (Chauffin 2015). This is one of the reasons why parents would choose Diwan today, as well as the understanding of bilingualism as an asset for their children. Some of the parents still base their choice on identity reasons, but it is clear their profiles have diversified considerably since the 1970s (Balcou-Debussche and Tupin 2017).

Diwan is a part of Eskolim, the network of associative bilingual immersive nonreligious schools in metropolitan France, together with Seaska (Northern Basque Country), Bressola (Northern Catalonia), Calandreta (Occitania), and ABCM-Zweisprachigkeit (Association for bilingualism from Early Childhood Education) (Alsace/Moselle) (Chapalain 2013). It was set up in 1977, inspired by the immersion experiences in Québec, Wales, and, most especially, in the Basque Country. After years of tough negotiations with the French government to join the public system, the State Council eventually opposed the agreement in 2002, arguing that the immersion model contravened the French Constitution, which states in art 2 that "French is the language of the Republic" (Chauffin 2015). In the present day Diwan has 47 primary schools (K12), 6 *collèges* (12- to 15-year-olds), and 1 *lycée* (15- to 18-year-olds) (Třesohlavá 2018). It is the third option among the students attending a bilingual school, after Div Yezh (public schools) and Dihun (private Catholic schools), which provide bilingual instruction on a parity basis (50% Breton and 50% French) (Office publique de la langue bretonne n.d.).

These cases illustrate the ways in which early years education has played an important role in reversing language shift in different parts of the world, including a range of different European contexts. Next, we will examine these initiatives in more recent years.

New Projects

Early years education continues to be included in projects designed to revitalize minoritized languages. One of the most recent initiatives aimed at identifying and supporting European autochthonous language revitalization projects is the Sustaining Minoritized Languages in Europe (SMiLE) project sponsored by the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage (2019), a US-based organization that funds collaborative research teams working in six case study communities: Galician (the Spanish region escribed above), Greko and Griko (languages of Greek origins spoken in the south of Italy), Irish, North Frisian (a Germanic language spoken in coastal and island zones of north-western Germany), Occitan (a Romance language spoken in various national contexts – Italy, France, Catalonia, and Monaco), and Upper and Lower Sorbian (spoken by a Slavic ethnic minority group in Lusatia, Germany).

The research and case studies are freely available on the project website (https://folklife.si.edu/smile), with each team responding to a set of established common research questions to ensure comparability across the various case study contexts. These include key social actors (individuals, societies and organizations, and schools), attitudes, intergenerational transmission and lifelong learning, support, and infrastructure, and responses to new media, domains, and speakers. Early years education may be especially relevant to addressing some of these issues, since ECE programs are particularly well placed to impact linguistic attitudes, the recuperation of intergenerational transmission, and the formation of potential new speakers.

While at the time of this writing the results of the analysis of these new projects have not been published, we can provide some insight into the Galician case study in Spain, based in part on a seminar presented by two of the SMiLE researchers (O’Rourke and Dayán-Fernández 2018). Their research has focused on the Semente (“Seed”) educational project, a network of preschool centers designed particularly to serve children in urban areas who are less likely to be immersed the minoritized language in the home or community context. As of 2018, Semente was running five preschools and one primary school, with plans to open three more preschools and one more primary schools in the near future (Pardo 2018). These schools are run as cooperatives, meaning that they depend on the support from families and other community members for funding and management. As described by SMiLE researchers (O’Rourke and Dayán-Fernández 2018; Smithsonian Institution 2019), key features of this initiative include:

- Language revitalization as a grassroots effort
- A communities of practice approach to learning, which means taking into account the collaborative efforts of teachers, families, children, language activists, and language speakers
- Education as a social movement, a perspective which links education to activism through the combined agency of teachers, families, and community activists
- An emphasis on the circulation of alternative, positive, language ideology as part of the language revitalization process

The Semente movement identifies its school language policy as one designed to counter processes of majority (Castilian, or Peninsular Spanish) language substitution, and relates these to broader processes of cultural hegemony operating within the Spanish state. Encoded in Semente policy is a sense of belonging to a broader international language revitalization movement, with ideological ties to Ikastola, Diwan, and Bressola school–based language activism projects. Semente does not see a contradiction between promoting regional language and identity and adopting more global perspectives, as evidenced by their commitment to alternative pedagogies that have not yet been embraced by the Galician public school system (DePalma and Zapico Barbeito 2018).

These new programs illustrate that the precedents set and lessons learned by early, pioneering programs continue to guide practice. In the following section, we will describe some of the current issues that early years educators must take into account when designing and implementing minoritized language revitalization projects.

Critical Issues and Topics

In this section, we describe some of the main critical issues facing efforts to reverse language shift through ECE programs: these include weak policy support, low speaker competency, and language prejudices concerning the value of the minoritized language. We will focus on the European context, in order to illustrate that despite geographic proximity, relative economic privilege on a global scale, and a shared supranational policy that actively promotes preservation of minoritized languages (ECRML), these initiatives must address significant difficulties.

The Uneven Impact of Regional Language and Educational Policies

The current European policy framework (the ECRML) provides an important positive impulse for striving to protect rights of linguistic groups (rather than individuals) and for recognizing early years education as a venue for action. It has been acknowledged for having extended protection to some languages that were previously neglected. Moreover, the monitoring of its implementation by a committee of experts has been considered as an incentive for some members states to improve their policies and practices (Oeter 2014). Nevertheless, it has also been criticized for establishing a three-tiered order where official state languages take precedence, regional languages are protected when this is deemed feasible according to rather vague criteria, and migrant language varieties are excluded. According to Gorter and Cenoz (2012), the *à la carte* formula of the Charter – allowing the states to choose the level of protection they wish to bestow on their languages – has provoked many states to adopt a "cautious approach." Thus, the most common case of language use inside the curriculum is the inclusion of the minoritized language as a subject area and the use of the dominant language as a medium of instruction.

Therefore, the potential for public education to improve the situation of minoritized languages in Europe varies considerably as a consequence of state language policies, which may be more or less in compliance with the European policy supporting minoritized language revitalization (ECRML). The Roma people, a minoritized group commonly referred to as "gypsies" living in various European national contexts and speaking variants of the Romani language group, are an especially interesting yet often forgotten case of European language diversity. While most countries that ratify the ECRML have identified Romani as a language to be protected, the actual protection of the language has been deemed inadequate in many of these countries by the Charter's committee of experts:

> The high level of ratifications for Romani – mostly based on an equality principle between all minority languages of the country in question – often lack implementation. This imbalance in the level of ratification as well as the deficits in implementation indicate, at least to some extent, the reality of marginalisation of both Romani and its speakers (Council of Europe 2015).

In Hungary, for example, the argument that many Roma have already lost competence in their community language has been offered as an excuse for not applying the European language revitalization policy. According to the very Hungarian authorities responsible for monitoring compliance with the ECRML, such compliance is cast as detracting from the "real" problems of social exclusion:

> The majority of Roma/Gypsies have lost their native language, speaking only Hungarian as mother tongue (although often with severe deficiencies in linguistic skills [. . .] For the purpose of the Charter, only these some 30% of minority language-speaking Roma/Gyspies are relevant, not the large majority of Hungarian-speaking Roma/Gypsies whose main problems are social exclusion and discrimination (2001 Hungarian ECRML Monitoring Report, cited in Tremlett 2009, p. 138).

Moreover, language protection may be uneven and unequal even within the same European nation, in cases where education falls under the competence of local/regional administrations. Such is the case with some regions (autonomous communities) of Spain, like Catalonia, Euskadi (the Basque Country), and Galicia, the three "historical nationalities" recognized by the Spanish Constitution. In these three territories both Castilian (Spanish) and the co-official language (Catalan, Euskera, or Galician) are present in education, but their current policies and practices are completely different.

In Catalonia there is one single linguistic model, which aims at balanced bilingualism through total Catalan immersion from the early years onward. In the Basque Country parents are allowed to choose between three models: model A, which offers Castilian-medium education and Euskera as a subject area; model B, in which both Castilian and Euskera (the Basque language) serve as media of instruction; and model D, which provides Euskera-medium education and Castilian as a subject area. However, over the years parents have increasingly leaned toward models B and D (DePalma and Teasley 2013). Such a tendency for parents to select full or partial immersion in the minoritized language may be explained not just by the wish to revitalize the language, but also for pragmatic reasons – proficiency in Euskera is required for a number of jobs, and students schooled exclusively in the majority language generally achieve a very poor command of the minoritized language (Gorter et al. 2014; Vila et al. 2017).

In Galicia current language policy requires early years–level teachers to use the predominant L1 among the children, which is largely the majority language in areas of higher population density (DePalma and Teasley 2013; Vila et al. 2017). Since nearly two-thirds of Galicians live in urban areas where Castilian is dominant (Mesa pola Normalización Lingüística 2017), most Galician children received Castilian-medium early years education – a situation contrary to European language revitalization policy. The parent collective Semente, described above, emerged as a popular response to this failure of the public school system to guarantee quality preschool education.

Overcoming the Lingering Effects of Historical Hegemony

From the beginning, early childhood education programs designed to promote minoritized languages have met with logistical difficulties derived from historical exclusion of these languages from the school system and other social contexts. Even in the early pioneering work with Hebrew, teachers faced major challenges, such as their own lack of experience and training, the unavailability of teaching materials in Hebrew, and the inexistence of a proper classroom vocabulary in the language. A whole new repertoire of Hebrew games, songs, and dances needed to be invented (Fellman 1973). It is important to keep in mind that positive community attitudes were highly instrumental in the success of Hebrew revitalization efforts. As Spolsky and Shohamy (2001) put it, the use of Hebrew as an everyday language among children was a common practice supported by the ideology of the Zionist movement and promulgated as policy by the leaders of that movement. In this context the strong ideological acceptance of Hebrew was of central importance for the language revitalization (Spolsky 1991).

Language nests also had to overcome important problems resulting from the lingering effects of a colonial past that resulted in a scarcity of speakers with sufficient proficiency to serve as language models, accompanied by a general lack of educational expertise. This has led to the recruitment of young educated teachers, either new speakers or ongoing learners of the indigenous language, and to the development of parallel language training programs for adults. On top of these problems, a shortage or lack of official funding has often motivated the request of parental contributions in the form of money or volunteer work (McIvor 2009; Chambers 2015; Hinton 2018; King 2018). While these early immersion programs have proven to be one of the most effective tools for indigenous language restoration, they are not enough to reverse a language shift produced by such enduring and powerful legacies of language hegemony. Further immersion or bilingual education using the minoritized language at the primary and secondary level is needed (Hinton 2018), in addition to "whole community" approaches to language revitalization (McIvor 2009).

When the Basque Autonomous government in Spain began implementing its language policies, it encountered problems similar to those experienced by language nest programs, such as the shortage of teachers who were proficient in Euskera (less than 5% in 1976) and the lack of teaching materials. In this sense, the substantial economic support of the Basque government is to be highlighted. Teachers were allowed the opportunity to spend three years studying the Basque language while they kept their full salary, which raised the percentage of qualified teachers to over 85% in 2007. A wide range of curricular up-to-date materials was created (Gorter et al. 2014; Ó Duibhir et al. 2015). This financial support is especially noteworthy if we take into account that preschool programs are often undervalued and even confused with simple childcare facilities.

In the European context, some so-called national languages (like French, Spanish, and English) have become associated not only with the unity of the nation-state but also with progress and suitability for educational advancement, even beyond their national boundaries. English-medium education beginning at the early years level is becoming more and more popular in many European countries. In Spain's Basque country, this has caused concern in some sectors of the population about a possible reduction of the time devoted to Euskera-medium instruction. Thus, the challenge is to continue developing measures to protect the minoritized language while paving the way toward a multilingual model (Vila et al. 2017).

Given the sociolinguistic environments of Welsh and Breton, where the omnipresence of English and French within and beyond the society strongly determines the outcomes of the educational system, the strategy of immersion of these schools does not aim for monolingualism, but for balanced bilingualism (Mudiad Meithrin n.d.; Diwan n.d.-b). Both in Mudiad Meithrin and in Diwan preschools children are fully immersed in the minoritized language until primary school, where the dominant language is ideally introduced at the age of 7 (Vetter 2013; Ó Duibhir et al. 2015: Balcou-Debussche and Tupin 2017).

Increasing Linguistic Diversity

Another critical issue faced by these programs is that processes of language substitution by stronger national languages has resulted in internal diversity, so that even in regions where minoritized languages have historically been spoken, children may come from families that speak the majority language in the home. This means that children from the same region may bring quite different minoritized language competencies to the same ECE classroom.

For example, in Mudiad Meithrin and Diwan preschools children coming from these different linguistic backgrounds are grouped together. Thus, classrooms need to provide at the same time immersion education – for the second language learners – and maintenance language education – for children who come from families that speak minoritized (Welsh and Breton) languages. There is no data available for the case of Breton, but research on Mudiad Meithrin has shown that in these situations the nursery staff tends to prioritize the needs of the L2 speakers, neglecting those of the L1 speakers, who often end up switching to the majority language. In this sense, a specific approach to the provision for minoritized language speakers should include an enrichment in input through more linguistically challenging activities as well as opportunities to use the language with their peer L1 speakers (Hickey 2013; Hickey et al. 2014; Ó Duibhir et al. 2015).

Migration, including internal migration (movements within nation-states), can contribute to this existing language diversity. Catalonia, for example, is home to immigrants from Latin-American countries and other areas of Spain, who speak the national language (Spanish) but not the minoritized, regional one (Catalan). A challenge faced by the Catalan administration has been the incorporation of these children into the Catalan school system. In response to this situation, the Catalan Department of Education has been implementing since 2004 a plan for language, interculturality, and social cohesion, which includes the creation of reception classrooms for the newcomers (Arnau and Vila 2013). As we have explained earlier, the Catalan autonomous government is committed to implementing Catalan-medium education, including at the ECE level. These efforts to regulate linguistic immersion in early years education have met with some political and judicial opposition, based on the controversial issue of whether parents have the right to choose their children's school language (Corretja Torrens 2013). In an attempt, perhaps, to find a compromise between the two positions, the 2009 Education Act has established that in the first year of education parents of Castilian-speaking children may request personal attention in their L1.

Future Research Directions

Taking into account Europe's ambiguous policy framework and the presence of global languages such as English, French, and Spanish, that are strongly associated with internationalism and national identity, several areas of research and action are of particular relevance to the role of early years education in reversing language shift, including:

- *Linguistic realities and their implications for pedagogy*

  Returning to Heller's (2008) critique of essentialized notions of language, it is important to recognize languages themselves as fictions, whose borders may be imposed from above by state boundaries as well as (re)negotiated at the grassroots level by speech communities. Fluid language practices (such as translanguaging, or the use of linguistic codes attributed to multiple languages in the same interaction) have been rightly embraced as a positive and creative aspect of many speakers' linguistic repertoires (García and Wei 2014), and have been incorporated in some minoritized language pedagogy (Moriarty 2017). At the same time, it might be useful in some educational contexts to separate the minoritized from the majority language, in order to provide nonhegemonic spaces where they might flourish (O'Rourke 2019). We recommend more research to explore how pedagogical strategies can account for and draw upon linguistic realities and practices beyond the classroom.

- *language variation and standardization*

  In many areas, a standard variety of the minoritized language has been supported by language policy and educational practices, to the detriment of others. In the case of the Galician Semente project, for example, participating schools have chosen to use the "reintegrationist" variety, which stresses the language's historical proximity to Portuguese, over the official standard variety, which is closer to Spanish. The basis for and impact of such pedagogical decisions remains to be more fully explored through classroom and community-based research that goes beyond essentialist understandings of "language" to take into account minoritized language varieties.
- *longitudinal studies of minoritized language use*

  The research reviewed here suggests that early childhood immersion in minoritized language can improve competency in these languages, but people's adult decisions about language use, particularly in terms of intergenerational transmission, will be affected by many other social factors that require more comprehensive language planning and support. Thus, we recommend more longitudinal studies on language use by those children who have received early years minoritized language-medium instruction, in order to understand how to support them as lifelong new speakers.
- *family support and motivations*

  In some countries early childhood educational provision is nonobligatory, or at least involves a greater degree of curricular flexibility than that provided by primary and secondary levels. In many cases, young children's participation in minoritized language revitalization programs is based on family choice. Where attendance is not mandatory, preschool is often not free, which systematically excludes children from financially disadvantaged families from benefitting from these programs. In some cases, as we have seen, such early years programs depend on the active participation and support of participating families. Research focusing on the motivations and needs of these families would provide insight into the kinds of programs most likely to attract and maintain enrolment.
- teacher training and resource development

  Because these programs are developed in contexts of historic language hegemony, teachers may themselves lack linguistic competency and may even have adopted implicit stereotypes regarding the minoritized language and its use in school contexts. These factors are often accompanied by a scarcity of teaching materials (such as children's books, popular songs, chants, and games) that can provide important resources for young children's early linguistic and social development. More research in teacher education institutions is needed to identify these pedagogical needs and explore how to respond to them.

- innovative methodologies

  As we have seen in programs such Diwan and Semente, many of these schools go beyond language provision to incorporate further innovation into their curriculum, offering methodologies such as arts-based and experiential learning that many traditional ECE programs have not fully embraced. Further investigation into the specific pedagogies employed in these early years programs – how they affect children's learning and language development as well as school–family relationships – can provide important insight into their potential for success.

Conclusion

During the process of state formation, the endeavors to create national homogeneity have been a threat to language diversity. This has been the case throughout the world, as evidenced by UNESCO's monitoring of the word's endangered languages. Supported by the double pressure exerted from above by supranational policy and from below by grassroots activism, assimilationist educational practices have been challenged:

> International pressure to protect minority languages (that is, languages other than that of the state), combined with the political pressure exerted by linguistic minorities, is effectively shifting standard policies from assimilation to bi- or multilingualism. Minority language education is now becoming the standard policy in the territories inhabited by linguistic groups other than that of the state (Pujolar 2007, p. 79).

In collaboration with other approaches, such as adult education, language modernization, and language-dedicated social spaces, early years education has had a key role in reversing these trends (Hinton 2018).

In Europe, language shift has particularly accelerated since the nineteenth century, due to different factors, among which the spread of universal basic education has been decisive. This *monolingual habitus* (Gogolin 2009) has been hegemonic in the educational system for a long time and still persists in the present (Busch 2011). Nonetheless, in the last 50 years, a number of initiatives on behalf of minoritized languages have flourished.

Programs like the ones described in this chapter are faced with the daunting task of reversing linguistic inequalities that have developed over many years and have become entrenched in lower speaker competencies and negative attitudes. Their success will require a great deal of support from the professional, academic, and activist communities that are dedicated to effecting long-term sociolinguistic change by inspiring new generations of minoritized language speakers.

Cross-References

▶ Early Language Education in Israel
▶ Heritage Language Immersion Context: Irish Immersion Preschools in Ireland
▶ Indigenous Languages in Early Childhood Education in Chile

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