

# Multilingualism and wellbeing in UK

Report – Cambridge Bilingualism Network Forums – June, July, October 2017

## A Multilingual UK

The UK is increasingly multilingual. In 2016, 1 in 5 primary school children in England spoke English as an Additional Language, which is more than double the number in 1997, and most likely an underestimate of the proportion of multilingual young people. In the 2011 Census, there were more than 600 different answers to the question, 'what is your main language?'

This means that there are more and more families who speak one language in the home and another in the community, or who speak more than one language at home. Their situations are diverse: they may be the only multilingual family in the neighbourhood, or they may be part of a community of speakers of their language; they may speak, write and read a language with a standardised written form and literary heritage, or they may speak a language without a written form; and the language may be perceived as having high or low value by its own speakers and by others.

The UK is facing something of a 'language crisis', lacking the language skills needed in business and public services, and, particularly in England, lagging behind in implementing the EU 1+2 language policy. Yet, there is a rich linguistic landscape to be valued, which could bring great benefits.

## Wellbeing in young people

Over the last decade or so there has been an increased emphasis on the nation's wellbeing in policy and research. For example, the Measuring National Well-being (MNW) programme was established in 2010 within the Office of National Statistics, while The Children's Society in partnership with University of York has been pioneering research on young people's wellbeing in UK since 2005, publishing their annual Good Childhood Report since 2012. Wellbeing measures are typically categorised as objective – such as poverty, health or employment – or subjective – including self-reported sense of life satisfaction.

There is good evidence that communication within a family is a main predictor of young people's subjective wellbeing. The OECD PISA 2015 Report found that young people were more likely to report feeling satisfied with life if their parents ate a main meal with them around a table and spent time just talking with them. Likewise, the 2013 Good Childhood Report found that parental support, including talking and listening, was positively associated with life satisfaction.

## Wellbeing and multilingualism

Despite the increasing focus on wellbeing and increasing multilingualism in UK, there seems to be little systematic research or practice to date on the effects being multilingual has on wellbeing. However, the potential interactions are clear both in the family and in education settings. The 2013 Good Childhood Report identified six 'priority areas' for children's wellbeing: learning, money, environment, relationships, self and leisure. Of these, three have particularly obvious links to multilingualism:

- **Self** – Languages and the values attached to them by the self or others form an essential part of identity. This could include how a language is viewed by the family members who speak it or the wider community, or how having an 'English as an Additional Language' status at school is viewed by peers and teachers.
- **Learning** – Community languages present a unique opportunity for learning, especially when there is the option of becoming multiliterate, as well as multilingual. While English fluency is needed for academic progress, it is supported by literacy in home languages, and this contributes to both positive self identity and life satisfaction, and also objective wellbeing in education and economic outcomes.
- **Relationships** – Given the link between communication and young people's wellbeing, the question arises for multilinguals: in which languages does this communication take place and does it matter? The choice of languages used in daily communication and the issues this raises can affect the development of relationships, within the immediate and wider family.

Three areas where multilinguals' wellbeing could be improved through further research and changes in practice were identified in the Forums: community language education; English as an Additional Language; and the provision of guidance for multilingual families, particularly at the antenatal stage.

**Key questions** about wellbeing in multilingual young people include:

- How do different attitudes to languages, personally and in society, affect views of self-identity, including self-worth?
- What effects do different learning environments have on young people's multilingual identity?
- How do language choices and use in the family and community affect relationships?

### Summary

The multilingual experience has the potential to impact young people's wellbeing both positively and negatively, and much more research is needed on this interaction. However, three recommendations that emerged from the Forums are the development of:

- Curricula for community language education
- Qualification pathways for EAL professionals
- Material on multilingual family wellbeing for antenatal provision

### Community language education

For many multilingual families in UK, community language schools play an important role, providing access to language learning, culture and community. There are currently diverse approaches to curricula and teaching both within and across languages. The forums identified two pressing questions. Firstly, what approach to community language curricula will bolster young people's wellbeing through language learning? The current main choices are either resources from the countries where the language is a majority language – which does not take into account the young people's multilingual experience in UK – or resources for second language learners – which does not consider their oral fluency. Secondly, how can community language schools and mainstream schools be integrated to contribute positively to young people's multilingual identity? A few case studies show the benefits of closer collaboration, but more examples of how this could work on a larger scale are needed in order to formulate policy recommendations.

### English as an Additional Language

Young people who speak a language other than English may be described as having 'English as an Additional Language' (EAL) in the UK education system. However, this is currently an extremely broad label, being applied to both those who have always lived in UK and those who have just arrived, those with little or much experience with English. Importantly, 'EAL' is an educational category, not an identity. The Forums suggested two areas for change. Firstly, the introduction of a more positive assessment of 'EAL status' would promote wellbeing by valuing languages as an asset rather than a problem, and taking young people's knowledge of their home languages into account. Secondly, the provision of teacher training and qualifications, such as for an EAL coordinator role, would improve appropriate support and elevate the status of EAL professionals.

### Multilingualism in the family

The family is a place of negotiation of multiple identities that can change over time, as well as the focus of those relationships which are so crucial to young people's wellbeing. Research so far, as well as anecdotal evidence, suggests that there can be both negative and positive effects of speaking more than one language in the family: for instance, where family members place different value on their different languages, tensions may arise over different choices of language use (e.g. Little, 2017). In contrast, maintaining languages can foster relationships with wider family members or give access to cultures and traditions. However, there is a real need for expert advice for parents which emphasises the importance of communication *about* language and includes realistic information about the consequences of speaking more than one language for family wellbeing. Antenatal education and provision was identified as a key opportunity to provide this support.

### Further reading

Bak, T. H., & Mehmedbegovic, D. (2017). Healthy linguistic diet: the value of linguistic diversity and language learning across the lifespan. *Languages, Society & Policy* doi.org/10.17863/CAM.9854

Little, S. (2017). Whose heritage? What inheritance?: conceptualising family language identities. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* DOI: 10.1080/13670050.2017.1348463

Rees, G., Goswami, H., & Pople, L. (2013). *The Good Childhood Report 2013*.

[www.childrensociety.org.uk/the-good-childhood-report](http://www.childrensociety.org.uk/the-good-childhood-report)

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