

Multilingualism brings communities closer together

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Learning their community language outside the home enhances minority ethnic children's development, according to research led from the University of Birmingham. The research, which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, found that attending language classes at complementary schools has a positive impact on students.

Complementary schools provide out-of-school-hours community language learning for children and young people from minority groups. They aim to develop students' multilingualism, strengthen the link between home and the community, and connect them with wider social networks. The study found that the parents believed that bilingualism had economic benefits for their children as it improved their chances of success in the global jobs market.

According to Angela Creese, Professor of Educational Linguistics, who led the research, there is a growing interest in complementary schools because they are unique, offering students the opportunity to develop their verbal and written language skills across a variety of languages 'It is rare to find an environment where two or more languages are used in teaching and learning,' she explains. 'Teachers and young people move between languages, and our findings show that the children are proud of their flexible language skills. One Turkish boy told us he was learning four languages and loved being able to show off to his friends.'

The research builds on an earlier study of complementary schools in Leicester that found significant evidence of the value of these schools.

Consisting of linked case studies of schools serving four of Britain's linguistic minority communities, the study focused on Bengali schools in Birmingham, Chinese schools in Manchester, Gujarati schools in Leicester, and Turkish schools in London. It explored the social, cultural and linguistic significance of these schools in their communities and in wider society.

The findings highlight the general view among minority communities that children need to study language, heritage and culture at school rather than in isolation at home. A Chinese parent told the researchers that children who were taught by private tutors had a limited experience: 'They need to learn with other kids, to see how other children learn, their attitudes and so on. Then they can decide for themselves what kind of person they should be.'

Source: Economic & Social Research Council

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