Modern Meets Community: Bridging the Language Learning Gap in Scottish Schools

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Abstract: This thought piece examines the state of community language provision in Scotland, primarily provided by complementary schools, in comparison to that of modern languages. It considers several strategies for how community language learning can be enhanced through increased minority ethnic teacher numbers, collaboration between mainstream and complementary schools, and opportunities to gain qualifications, with a particular focus on engaging with families and communities. The author reflects on her own experience to consider how children from immigrant backgrounds can find their complex selves reflected in the classroom.

Keywords: community languages, Punjabi, Scotland, education, complementary schools, minority ethnic

Introduction

As a child, my mother drove my younger brother and me to our Gurdwara in Glasgow's southside every Sunday morning where we attended Punjabi school. We bemoaned sitting in a basement classroom with our stern volunteer teacher alongside other Scottish-Punjabi children who always seemed to have a better grasp of the language than we did. Despite regular attendance, our language skills stagnated. We told our mother we no longer wanted to attend, and our language learning came to an end.

Our experience of those classes differed from that of our peers who spoke predominantly Punjabi at home with Punjabi native speakers, and particularly with grandparents. We had no grandparents in Scotland, and our parents only spoke English with us. Our only exposure to Punjabi was from teachers who, we felt, expected us to simply know the language by virtue of our ethnicity alone, and from community members who chastised us, as though not being able to speak Punjabi was our own moral failing.

Perhaps surprisingly, I excelled at modern languages in secondary school, studied Italian and French at university, and obtained my Masters in translation and interpretation. Over the last decade, I have made many attempts to study Punjabi by attending Gurdwara-run adult classes, finding online tutors, and self-study, but I worry that my Punjabi will never reach the level that my Italian and French have.

Many before me have made the case that mainstream education should provide community language education. In a context where community languages are the remit of complementary schools, with minimal input from a mainstream education system

struggling to increase numbers of minority ethnic teachers, how can community language learning be given the same recognition that modern languages receive in Scottish schools?

Context

The 2022 Scottish census found that Punjabi is spoken by 23,150 people in Scotland, making it the third most spoken language at home (other than English and Scots) after Polish and Urdu (National Records of Scotland, 2021). The Scottish Government classifies languages offered in schools as either 'modern' (such as French, Italian and German) or 'community' (such as Punjabi, Urdu and Polish), the implication being that the latter are not modern languages, and vice-versa. Community languages are not widely taught in Scottish schools, where European languages are dominant.

Community language learning is primarily provided by complementary schools which offer classes outside of mainstream education, particularly during evenings and weekends. Li (2006) argues that the very existence of complementary schools shows that mainstream education fails to meet the needs of minority ethnic children. Indeed, it demonstrates that minority ethnic children in the UK are unable to access heritage language and cultural education in mainstream schools, raising questions around which languages and cultures mainstream education deems important and useful. This system deprives children of the opportunity to connect with classmates from immigrant backgrounds and appreciate their languages and cultures, hindering community integration and embedding a cultural divide.

Strategies

In 2018, the report titled 'Teaching in a Diverse Scotland: Increasing and Retaining Minority Ethnic Teachers in Scotland's Schools' outlined how schools and local authorities can best support minority ethnic teachers. It highlighted that the multilingual abilities of those teachers 'should be greatly valued by schools' rather than being seen as a cause for concern (The Scottish Government, 2018b, p. 12). Traditionally, their language skills have been employed to support pupils with English as an Additional Language, while the other linguistic benefits they could bring to the classroom are sidelined. Increasing minority ethnic teacher numbers and taking advantage of their skills may be one strategy, but this would require significant work and investment. In 2018, the Scottish Government committed to doubling the number of minority ethnic teachers in Scottish schools. To meet this target, 'around 10% of all new teachers until 2030 will need to come from an ethnic minority group', a figure that stood at 3% in 2023 (The Scottish Government, 2023, p. 5). Teacher numbers in language subjects in general have fallen over the last 12 years (*STV News*, 2023), making it difficult to imagine this possibility. It seems improbable that community language teaching could be adequately provided by mainstream education and meet the needs of a growing number of minority ethnic pupils.

Another solution may lie in partnerships between local authorities and complementary schools. Practitioners could draw upon the work of the East London primary schools and Bengali, Somali and Russian complementary schools that worked together to develop lessons, taught in both settings. This project enhanced cultural and linguistic knowledge and increased agency for children, family, and teachers (Kenner & Ruby, 2012). Local authorities could provide resource and support to community language educators by providing textbooks and multimedia resources, classroom space, and development opportunities. They could host multicultural and multilinguistic events and develop peer learning programmes. Voluntary teachers without prior teaching experience may benefit from training to support teaching of their mother tongue, similar to the Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) course, which develops the knowledge and skills required for language teaching in English speakers, and in doing so bridge the gap between the pedagogical expertise of mainstream educators and the proficiency and cultural knowledge of volunteer teachers. Mainstream schools and complementary schools may have different aims, priorities, and teaching styles, but 'Where conflicting agendas exist, these debates can be used as a stimulus for reflection and risk-taking' (Hancock & Hancock, 2021, p. 343).

Community language learning could be bolstered by offering qualifications. The Scottish Qualifications Authority offers certification in some community languages (The Scottish Government, 2018a) such as Urdu, but in the case of Punjabi (Gurmukhi), pupils must look to the AQA, the awarding body of England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The Times of India revealed a general decline in pupils sitting GCSEs in Indian languages in recent years, with an 11% drop in pupils sitting Punjabi from 2015 to 2022. This has a knock-on effect for Higher Education, with one School of Oriental and African Studies professor noting a decline in student enrolments in South Asian languages (Canton, 2022). Opportunities to develop language skills to an academic level are hard to find. Consequently, it is rare that learners of community languages gain the level of competence required, or example, for courses in teacher training and translation and interpretation (McPake and Sachdev, 2008). Offering this formal study of language would support the development of future educators and champions of those languages in a variety of fields.

Conclusion

I have suggested that the Scottish Government could enhance community language learning for pupils through increasing teacher numbers, collaboration with complementary schools, and offering qualifications. For these strategies to work, however, engaging families and communities is key. The cultural knowledge of speakers, enhanced by the pedagogical expertise of schools, must be properly valued by mainstream education.

The languages I learned at school and Punjabi belonged to two distinct worlds. There was no room for Punjabi in the mainstream classroom, so it fell by the wayside. Despite

my conversational knowledge and sporadic attendance at evening classes in recent years, I cannot read a book or a poem in Punjabi. My academic study allowed my French and Italian to become sophisticated enough to read novels and work in the translation industry in those languages. Not having the same skills in Punjabi creates the feeling that I have neglected not just the language but a part of myself. I have not given it the same recognition because I have not had the same opportunities to do so.

These strategies should be implemented not because of the multitude of economic and professional benefits alone, but also so that minority ethnic children can feel that their whole selves are not just welcomed in the classroom, but seen as an asset.

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