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of the Journal Scuola Democratica**

**REINVENTING EDUCATION**

2-5 June 2021

**VOLUME I**

**Citizenship, Work and The Global Age**

**ASSOCIAZIONE "PER SCUOLA DEMOCRATICA"**

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**Citizenship, Work and The  
Global Age**

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***Title* Proceedings of the Second International Conference of the Journal “Scuola Democratica” – Reinventing Education  
VOLUME I Citizenship, Work and The Global Age**

This volume contains papers presented in the 2nd International Conference of the Journal “Scuola Democratica” which took place online on 2-5 June 2021. The Conference was devoted to the needs and prospects of Reinventing Education.

The challenges posed by the contemporary world have long required a rethinking of educational concepts, policies and practices. The question about education ‘for what’ as well as ‘how’ and ‘for whom’ has become unavoidable and yet it largely remained elusive due to a tenacious attachment to the ideas and routines of the past which are now far off the radical transformations required of educational systems. Scenarios, reflections and practices fostering the possibility of change towards the reinvention of the educational field as a driver of more general and global changes have been centerstage topics at the Conference. Multidisciplinary approach from experts from different disciplinary communities, including sociology, pedagogy, psychology, economics, architecture, political science has brought together researchers, decision makers and educators from all around the world to investigate constraints and opportunities for reinventing education.

The Conference has been an opportunity to present and discuss empirical and theoretical works from a variety of disciplines and fields covering education and thus promoting a trans- and interdisciplinary discussion on urgent topics; to foster debates among experts and professionals; to diffuse research findings all over international scientific networks and practitioners’ mainstreams; to launch further strategies and networking alliances on local, national and international scale; to provide a new space for debate and evidences to educational policies. In this framework, more than 800 participants, including academics, educators, university students, had the opportunity to engage in a productive and fruitful dialogue based on research, analyses and critics, most of which have been published in this volume in their full version.

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# **Linguistic Pluralism and Minorities in a New Global Perspective. Education and Linguistic Policies**

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# Implementing Heritage Language Education in Migrant Hosting Countries: Lessons from the Austrian Case

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**ABSTRACT:** *The paper explores the policy challenges and best practices related to the introduction of migrant languages into national school curricula. It is based on the assumption that languages can be considered economic assets and that an individual who masters a plurality of such assets can therefore be regarded as a resource to society. At present, however, language education in Europe is predominantly based on an assimilationist interpretation of migrant integration. The paper represents an early milestone of a research endeavor that investigates the features of heritage language education in Austria as an advanced experience of multilingual education (European Commission, 2019), with a view to inspiring further research and policy reflection.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Public policy; Education policy; Migration; Language; Integration*

## Introduction

In contexts characterized by immigration flows and super-diversity in terms of cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Wiley, 2014), heritage language learning opportunities can represent a resource to both migrants and the host society. However, as will be seen in this paper, practical obstacles can lessen their feasibility. In order to understand and overcome these obstacles, the article analyses the Austrian case to learn from it as one of the most developed experiences in this regard, and one in which migrants' home languages are «considered as the basis of the whole education process in school» (European Commission, 2019). This analytical goal will be pursued by means of an examination of the measures supporting heritage language learning, based on the assumption that «in policy analysis, the most creative calculations concern finding problems for which solutions might be attempted» (Wildavsky, 1979, 3).

The scope of the analysis spans language education policies at all education levels up to secondary education, with particular regard to heritage language support measures, to which insufficient attention has been paid so far. The analyzed sources include policy documents,

literature, and interviews with key informants, i.e., teachers at all school levels as education policy deliverers.

The first section presents the rationale for heritage language education, the second sketches an overview of migrant language education policies in Europe, and the third provides some preliminary findings from ongoing research on the Austrian experience. Finally, the conclusion outlines some strengths and limitations of this study.

## **1. The Rationale of Heritage Language Education**

The starting point of the study is the assumption that languages can be considered as assets and that an individual who masters a plurality of those assets can therefore be regarded as a resource (rather than a problem) to society; at the same time, migrants' social position and economic opportunities can be enhanced by the possession of multiple linguistic assets (Clyne, 2000).

In a view to enhancing language skills, migrant language education can leverage native linguistic backgrounds to favor an increase in the number of bilingual workers and thus represent an important factor of economic and productive growth for the host country (Ruiz, 1988; Vedovelli, 2014). A possible objection to this approach consists in the disparities between languages in terms of usefulness. However, the history of the world economy has shown that the economic position of a single country – and therefore the economic value of the language spoken therein – can substantially vary over time, thus making this kind of concern inconsistent. On the other hand, the importance of migrants' first languages has been the subject of copious studies (e.g., Benson, Kosonen, 2013 or Eurydice, 2009), showing that mastery of one's own first language is desirable for a number of reasons. These reasons (non-exhaustively) range from the facilitated acquisition of a second language (Cummins, 1979) to the avoidance of phenomena like Heritage Language Anxiety (HLA), which arises when heritage language mastery is absent (Sevinç, Backus, 2019) and can in turn give rise to social distress.

It is in the interest of migrant hosting countries as well as of migrants, therefore, to provide equal opportunities to all the ethnolinguistic components that coexist within the national context, which makes the case for powerful support for a multilingual education policy in a multilingual country (Schmidt, 2009). In order to achieve successful integration, education systems can act as key socialization mechanisms, both for migrants and host communities, to promote mutual knowledge and respect, including in linguistic terms. However, in many cases, language education measures targeting migrants have proven to be inadequate, as far as either the host country language(s) or migrant languages are concerned (OECD, 2015).



However, some countries have already understood the inherent value of this kind of policy, as is the case with Austria, which considers home language learning «as the basis of the whole education process in school» (European Commission, 2019, 19). With advanced experiences in this regard, one can envisage policy learning phenomena that draw upon the lessons learned from countries that have already tested educational practices within their own school systems.

Language education policies involve the management of diversity generated firstly by historical configurations and subsequently by more recent immigration (Zolberg, 2001), which has increased the degree of linguistic diversification (Deumert, 2006). From a socio-economic perspective, language policy can be referred to as a

systematic, rational, theory-based effort at the societal level to modify the linguistic environment with a view to increasing aggregate welfare [which is] typically conducted by official bodies or their surrogates and aimed at part or all of the population living under their jurisdiction (Grin, 2003, 30).

According to recent studies, immigrants want and need to learn the language spoken in their host community, as they perceive it as useful to learn and increase employability, but at the same time they fear weakening their proficiency in the heritage language, which is an identity element as well as a means to access formal and informal help from migrant networks (OECD, 2015). In this context, education can play a key role to promote intercultural dialogue between immigrant and non-immigrant students. Promoting knowledge of migrant languages as a key component of intercultural education can give migrant students a perception that their cultural and language background is valued as much as that of the majority (Brind *et al.*, 2007), while at the same time it can favor comprehension of and respect for migrant students' cultural background in non-migrant students. However, very few countries have decided to pursue a bilingual approach to education, also due to practical and financial obstacles, such as the difficulties implied in finding qualified teachers and the cost of implementing immigrant language activities (OECD, 2015).

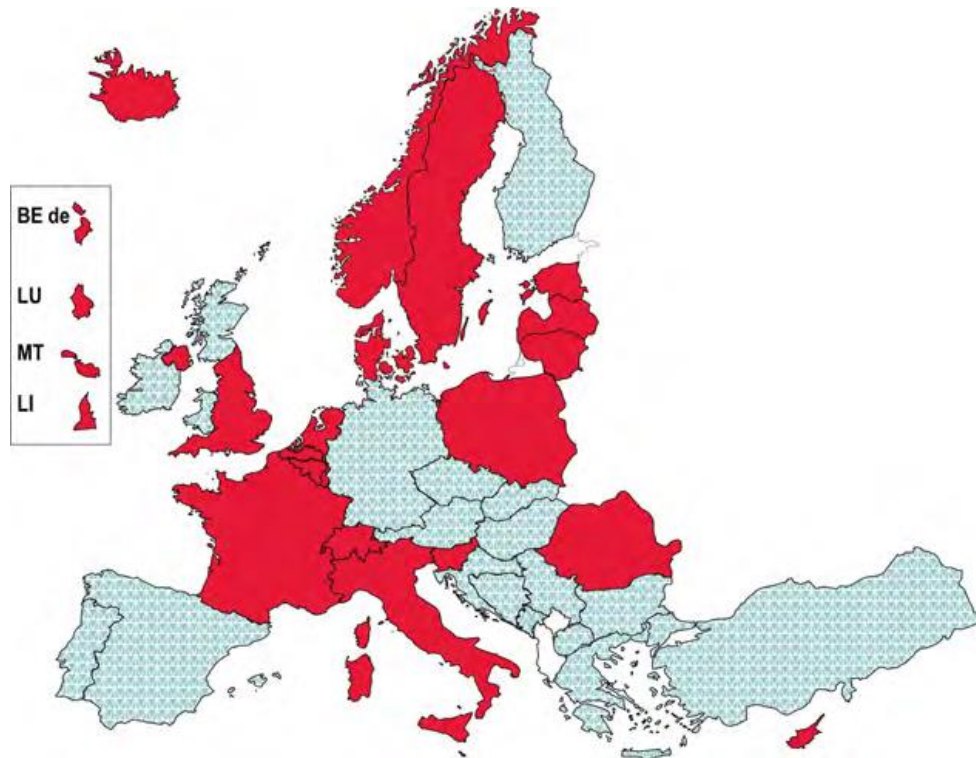
## **2. Migrant Language Education Policies in Europe**

### *2.1. Language and integration*

Migration is a widespread phenomenon throughout Europe. Migration flows often involve children, who most often follow the migratory trajectories of their families. These children are integrated into the school system of the new country hosting them, but not all European countries recognize them as a specific category requiring special

training and support. Figure 1 illustrates a map of the countries recognizing migrant students as a specific category.

**FIG. 1.** *Newly arrived migrant students identified as a specific category in 2017/18.*



Source: European Commission (2019, 54).

Only a few education systems provide heritage language support and/or the opportunity to learn migrant languages as foreign idioms (Extra, Yağmur, 2012), and even fewer provide these as migrants' rights since heritage language is often seen as merely instrumental to having migrants learn and switch to the host country language of instruction (European Commission, 2019).

This policy approach has some deep roots. The use and promotion of languages imply adherence to theories of political systems, always have social implications and are linked to identity and power issues in a particular society. This relationship between language and politics also develops in the opposite direction: political rhetoric and theories often imply consequences on the linguistic level, usually in the sense of affirming the superiority of the dominant language and standard varieties over minority languages and varieties different from the standard ones (Blackledge, 2009).

Historically, European countries have interpreted the relationship between language and nation in an identificatory way, building their own identity on the traditional connection between language and nation unity (Wright, 2016). However, the European landscape is *de facto*

largely determined by its cultural and linguistic diversity (Extra *et al.*, 2009), not only on a continental level but also within each country. This diversity has been accentuated by the more recent migratory waves, to the point of configuring what has been called super-diversity (Wiley, 2014) or hyper-diversity (Suárez-Orozco *et al.*, 2011), caused by a kind of migration that materializes on several levels. Indeed, migration flows can be exogenous, i.e., coming from other countries, or endogenous, i.e. materializing within the same country (for instance from Southern to Northern areas). To this increased complexity, nation-states have reacted mainly by reinforcing entry barriers and by implementing policies to regulate this new type of immigration, not least in an attempt to control multiculturalism and plurilingualism (Hogan-Brun *et al.*, 2009).

The term «integration» is often used to refer to the need to incorporate immigrant minorities into the socio-economic fabric of European nation-states. In theory, integration would imply an adaptation effort on the part of both migrants and the host society (Eisikovits, Beck, 1990). In practice, the adoption of integration policies translates into the implementation of cultural assimilation policies. Assimilation can be defined as a process through which migrants adopt the habits, language, customs, culture, and values of the host society. In most cases, integration policies force migrants to choose between the imitation of the dominant culture and the acceptance of a lower social and political status (Cainkar, 2013). Furthermore, the public opinion in favor of multiculturalism becomes subject to severe criticisms after the occurrence of violent episodes, which leads to the adoption of less tolerant policies (Rutter, 2013) in a declared attempt to satisfy bottom-up requests.

The idea is also widespread that if migrants learn the local language, this will instill a sense of security and confidence in the population (Van Avermaet, 2009). Moreover, as far as employment and gender are concerned, host country language learning brings about better job opportunities for migrants and more participation of women in the labor market (Villareal, 2009), although it has also been pointed out that it is access to better jobs, better education and ultimately social mobility that led to greater language knowledge, rather than the other way round (Van Avermaet, 2009).

According to the prevalent orientation of integration policies, migrants are considered a resource as long as they conform to the native community's language and customs (Ros i Sole, 2014). The tendency to evaluate the use of the dominant language as more desirable than the use of the language of origin is determined by extralinguistic factors that refer to theories of the social good, including the minimum criteria to facilitate equality and justice from a socio-economic point of view (Ricento, 2009).

Several scholars (Extra *et al.*, 2009; Hogan-Brun *et al.*, 2009) agree that in most European countries the prevailing policy orientation is

increasingly assimilationist, focusing on the requirements that immigrants should fulfil to participate in the host country life, for instance in order to obtain a residence permit. This orientation often translates into a type of integration obtained, language-wise, through measures for learning the language of the host country rather than through the promotion of multilingualism and intercultural dialogue (Extra, Yağmur, 2012).

### *2.2. The provision of migrant language education*

The provision of education services by public schools is highly dependent on exogenous factors, which include local and state elections, national education policies, budget changes, as well as the financial and human capital available (Melton, 2017). In particular, bilingual approaches in education are not widespread mainly due to practical barriers in terms of costs and complexity of implementation, with this latter being linked also to the difficulty in finding a sufficient number of qualified teachers and in producing high-quality guidelines and materials connecting mother tongue education to the mainstream curriculum (Nusche, 2009).

Although education policy is now designed and implemented in many sites and the education policy community is increasingly diverse and changeable (Ball, Junemann, 2011), national and sub-national public actors still remain the most important providers of (school) education services. In some countries, the education sector has been subjected to decentralization while in others the delivery of services is under the central education authority's control. The administrative decisions concerning the provision of education services include curriculum-related activities, human resource decisions, and allocation of funds through the budget, with some countries providing subnational autonomy with respect to all those activities and other countries retaining centralized control over one or more of them (Aoki, Schroeder, 2014).

The European scenario is extremely varied in terms of migrant language education. According to Extra and Yağmur (2012), some countries, such as Denmark, finance the related educational initiatives through national, regional, or local funds, while others, such as Spain and Switzerland, employ funds from migrants' countries of origin with which international agreements have been signed to partially cover costs; moreover, in France and Switzerland, migrant language classes are open to all students, while in Denmark and Spain they are reserved for native speakers of those languages; Spain and Switzerland offer classes partly during regular school hours, while in other countries they are offered as extracurricular activities; finally, the results in migrant language learning are generally not linked to any obligation or standard to be observed in terms of required competence level, although the development of language skills is generally monitored by schools.

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The following extract from a recent study published by the European Commission (2019) seems to well represent the educational situation in the three countries that present the most advanced policies in terms of heritage language education, including Austria:

In Austria and Sweden, the learning of home languages is [...] considered as the basis of the whole education process in school. In other words, it is seen as contributing to migrant students' achievement and well-being. In Sweden, where top-level education authorities have defined a very comprehensive assessment procedure, migrant students' competences in their home language are also assessed. [In] Finland [...] the teaching of home languages is seen as a contribution to fostering bilingualism and plurilingualism for all learners. In this country, top-level education authorities draw on the linguistically and culturally diverse environment in which schools operate. All languages present in the school are consequently valued and used; they all pertain to the school culture. The curriculum promotes plurilingualism and aims to develop students' linguistic awareness. [In] Austria, Sweden and Finland, [...] top-level education authorities have designed a curriculum specifically for the teaching of home languages.

One of these advanced experiences, i.e., the Austrian one, is the subject of the next section.

### **3. Problematic Aspects and Good Practices from the Austrian Case Study**

Thus, in Austria, the learning of heritage languages is considered as the basis of the whole education process and is seen as contributing to migrant students' achievement and well-being. As such, it is one of the three European countries – together with Sweden and Finland – where top-level education authorities have designed a curriculum specifically for the teaching of migrant languages (European Commission, 2019).

#### *3.1. Context*

In Austria, the Federal Ministry of Education has legislative and implementation responsibility for primary and secondary education as well as school-based vocational education and training, while the nine provinces (*Länder*) are in charge of school maintenance and recruitment matters in compulsory education institutions, as well as pre-primary education (OECD, 2017). Expenditure per student is higher than the OECD average, but expenditure on educational institutions as a percentage of GDP is below average with a greater portion coming from public sources than the average in the remaining OECD countries. Investments in primary and secondary education are relatively high, with funding for educational institutions being provided at both the

federal and the provincial levels. The education system includes both public schools, free of charge at all levels of education, and private schools, which usually charge fees (OECD, 2017). In the Austrian education system, key stakeholders are teachers, school leaders and school inspectors, i.e., civil servants of the school supervision service and teachers who are assigned supervision functions (Altrichter, 2017).

### *3.2. The promotion of inclusive plurilingualism at school*

Within this context, plurilingualism in Austria tends to be highly valued, especially among educators. The reasons for this can be identified in high consideration for plurilingual and reflective intercultural personality as an ideal of European language education, seen as a civic virtue and as a means to facilitate later job mobility (Council of Europe *et al.*, 2008). Languages, including migrant ones, are generally seen as a national resource and as part of Austria's linguistic capital, which – it has been argued – should nonetheless be more fully exploited through an approach that sees mother tongue instruction not only as a means to facilitate instruction in German but as an end in itself (Council of Europe *et al.*, 2008). Representatives of parent groups affirm the importance for migrant children to be competent, first of all, in their family language, considering also that the availability of a sufficient number of teachers who are able to teach languages such as Croatian, Serbian or Turkish (Council of Europe *et al.*, 2008) makes heritage language education feasible.

In Austria, considering the features of migrant presence in the country, teaching students with a migrant background is an important aspect that education providers must consider in their everyday work, rather than being an issue referred to certain schools or specialists only. With this situation at play, Austria is one of the countries that recognized the importance of providing linguistic support to immigrant students in the form of both German and heritage language support (OECD, 2010). On the other hand, it has been acknowledged that the effectiveness of heritage language support should be enhanced and made uniform across instruction levels (Nusche *et al.*, 2010). The language education system still faces challenges such as variations in language education services' quantity and quality across regions and schools, as well as a deficit-oriented approach to language development which sees students with insufficient knowledge of German as non-regular students. Migrant language support is provided in twenty different languages, and idioms such as Turkish and Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian can also be chosen as foreign languages in secondary school. However, these languages are only rarely opted for. In addition to this, according to some key informants already interviewed, the effectiveness of support given to migrant students seems to be closely linked to teachers' sensibilities and ideas: «the people [teachers] I've come to know are very liberal and very

progressive» (interview with secondary school teacher based in Vienna, speaking about her colleagues' attitudes towards migrant students).

In Austria, heritage language teachers can have different profiles in terms of qualifications and origins. They might come from abroad or be first- or second-generation migrants who received education and training in Europe (European Commission, 2019). There is no pre-service training for migrant language teachers and foreign qualifications are not fully recognized, which contributes to low-level working conditions for those teachers and consequently to poor-quality instruction in migrant languages (Nusche *et al.*, 2010). However, efforts have been made in this regard, since a guide has been provided to enable those holding foreign qualifications to find the right contact person to start the recognition process<sup>1</sup>.

### *3.3. Good practices and challenges from the Austrian experience*

Some preliminary lessons can be drawn from the Austrian case for sounder regulation and implementation of a form of plurilingualism that includes migrant languages as assets. The preliminary findings of this research, from both previous thematic studies and the interviews that have been carried out so far, show that while governmental support is of course an important element for heritage language education, what is especially significant is the sensibility of teachers vis-à-vis intercultural education. Moreover, in a view to improving bidirectional integration, the opportunity to choose migrant languages as foreign languages to learn at school seems to be crucial, although this significance seems to be lessened by the actual decisions made by families in terms of language choice, which in Austria indicate a low number of people opting for the inclusion of these languages in students' curricula. On the education provider side, another element that stands out as crucial is the recognition of the availability of individuals equipped with migrant language skills, which also implies the recognition of their possibly foreign qualifications.

Barriers to an adequate development of heritage language education, instead, consist in the variation across geographical areas and schools in terms of language education service quality and quantity, which can also create segregation side-effects (Nusche, 2009). This variation can also be observed in the non-uniformity of heritage language support across instruction levels. A segregation effect can moreover be triggered also by deficit-oriented approaches to language development, which see migrant students as irregular ones, rather than consider migrant languages as resources for all students and, more generally, for the enrichment of an otherwise uniform linguistic landscape *latu sensu* (Landry, Bourhis, 1997). Furthermore, the beneficial effects of the provision of opportunities for migrant language learning and

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<sup>1</sup> More information about the measure is available at <https://www.berufsanerkennung.at/en/>

intercultural education can be lessened by an insufficient degree of promotion, especially among families, of language learning as a resource. Finally, on a policy-deliverer level, the lack of pre-service training for migrant language teachers as well as of full recognition of foreign qualifications can have detrimental effects on both the quality and quantity of migrant language education.

## **Conclusion**

This paper preliminarily illuminates some aspects related to the formulation and implementation phases of migrant language education. It shows some of the good practices and challenges that need to be addressed by policy actors in the field while at the same time keeping in mind that policy learning and transfer imply adaptation to the specific context in which the policy is to be adopted (McCann, Ward, 2012). Therefore, the applicability of lessons in specific national systems remains to be assessed on a case-by-case basis, for instance through piloting. The main strength of this study consists in the introduction of the heritage language learning issue into the policy implementation debate, which has so far largely neglected it. Open questions still remain. For instance, the issue of how to collect the resources to finance immigrant language education, which draws upon more general theories on the financing of language policy (Grin, Vaillancourt, 2000), would deserve to be dealt with. Moreover, one limitation of the preliminary findings presented here is that they are a product of still-in-progress research, while another drawback consists in the absence of evidence regarding the selection of home languages to be taught, which is a crucial issue for decision-makers.

Overall, the approach adopted in this research, trying to explore the multifacetedness of migrant language education practice, is important to acknowledge the complexity of providing migrant language education in schools. If governments opt for multilingual policies in education, this implies a need for wise management of bilingualism with cooperation between multiple actors. While the absence of policies that recognize and protect bilingualism can have disastrous effects on mental health and consequently on the social integration of migrants, decisions about the promotion of bilingualism in migrant hosting countries should consider the personal and family circumstances of the child and must imply, *inter alia*, both educational and family efforts (Toppelberg, Collins, 2010).



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