Multilingual education policy, superdiversity and educational equity

Kendall A. King and Martha Bigelow

Introduction

Since the ‘superdiversity’ concept was introduced in the early 2000s (Vertovec 2005), it has been taken up by many different fields, including law, economics, social work, urban planning, linguistics and education (e.g., Valentine 2013). Within the fields of sociolinguistics generally, and multilingual education and language policy in particular, superdiversity has gained traction and coincided with the growing emphasis on understanding how multilingual practices intersect with transnationalism, globalisation and digital media (e.g., Canagarajah 2013; Duff 2015). Superdiversity is often invoked to draw attention to more complex (and realistic) conceptualisations of how individuals and communities function in society, the stance we take in this chapter. Concomitantly, superdiversity is sometimes used as a synonym for ‘hyper’ or ‘extreme’ diversity, taken to mean (even) more ethnic groups or more categories of minoritisation, marginalisation, othering or difference.

For the present review of the intersections of superdiversity and multilingual education policy, it is productive to return to the three inter-related dimensions of the construct as initially formulated (Vertovec 2007). The first and most widely applied aspect is descriptive. The term superdiversity was coined to describe the changing populations resulting from shifting global migration flows. These changes supposedly entailed not only the movement of people from increasingly varied backgrounds (i.e., national, ethnic, linguistic, religious, educational), but also varied migration channels (e.g., student migration, undocumented workers, family reunion). Superdiversity was proposed as a descriptive summary term, meant “to encapsulate a range of such changing variables surrounding migration patterns – and, significantly, their interlinkages – which amount to a recognition of complexities that supersede previous patterns and perceptions of migration-driven diversity” (Meissner & Vertovec 2015: 542), in addition to linguistic and textual mobility via, for example, online communication.

The second, less-frequently invoked components of superdiversity are theoretical and methodological. Recognition of these shifts and, indeed, the ‘new normal’ of unpredictable, wide-spread migratory flows calls into question many long-standing assumptions, terms and categories (e.g., trajectories of assimilation, culture, speech community, code-switching), and underlines the need to develop new theoretical and methodological approaches to describe and explain current conditions. This dimension has coincided with greater emphasis across the social sciences (as well as
applied linguistics) on cross-disciplinary methods, including transnational ethnography and multilingual and multimodal communication. Conceptually, superdiversity has given us new frames to understand, for example, how minoritised ethnic groups experience different living choices within the diversity of a large city (Chimienti & van Liempt 2015). The final components of superdiversity, and arguably the least considered to date, are the practical and policy implications of the construct. The term pushes actors, including educators and policymakers, to consider the conditions, challenges and opportunities created by these shifting and unpredictable migration flows.

This chapter considers how multilingual education policy intersects with superdiversity along each of these three, inter-related dimensions: descriptions of people and contexts; how these diversities are theorised or explored methodologically; and how the practical, on-the-ground practices or policies shape opportunities or experiences in educational contexts. We focus on how the term has been taken up within the field of multilingual education policy, and by offering a historical perspective, illustrate how many of the key shifts invoked by superdiversity were in fact already taking place across the field of language policy. Furthermore, we suggest that superdiversity, when considered across all three dimensions, has the potential to lead us towards greater educational equity by encouraging educators and policy-makers to reframe old notions of difference, and consider a wider range of perspectives, experiences and possibilities. Such a turn, we argue, entails recognizing the heterogeneity of the current student population, adopting a social justice framework, moving away from the quest for a one-size-fits-all policy and focusing more on the structures, capacities and social capital available to best support students.

**Historical perspectives**

While superdiversity is now at the heart of much research in the field of multilingual education policy, this was not always the case. Early phases of language policy research were characterised by attempts to solve ‘language problems’, typically of post-colonial nations (Ricento 2000). This research, rooted in the development efforts of the 1950s and 1960s, was concerned with solving perceived social problems related to language diversity, and ultimately, in contributing to nation-building. This early work offered scholars of sociolinguistics and the sociology of language a chance to contribute to an important practical challenge, but also to collect data in an “indispensable and truly intriguing array of field-work locations” (Fishman 1968: 11), including early work in India, Indonesia, Paraguay and Mozambique. As an example: Mozambique declared independence from Portugal in 1975. With more than eight languages spoken in the newly independent country, and no lingua franca, Mozambique leaders adopted Portuguese as official, spoken as a native language by fewer than 2% of the population. While the intent was to support national unity, this also presented huge pedagogical challenges (Hylenstam & Stroud 1998), such as how teachers, who themselves were still developing proficiency in Portuguese, could teach academic content and literacy in Portuguese.

The assumptions embedded in much of this work were that language policy and planning would serve the development interests of these newly independent nation-states by providing structure, order and regulation, through, for instance, scientifically informed decisions about official and national languages (i.e., status planning); alphabets, grammars and dictionaries for those languages (corpus planning); and multilingual education policies (acquisition planning). In both the colonial and post-colonial eras, centralist, homogenizing ideologies of nation-state influenced the development of language and education policies that “embraced monolingualism in a European language as the norm”, treated the diversity of local languages as a problem and a threat to social order and considered local languages themselves as inadequate for advanced learning and socio-economic development (Kamwangamalu 2015: 7).
As Ricento (2006) and others note, this work was characterised by particular ideologies about the nature of language (i.e., as stable, finite and discrete), monolingualism (as normative and a prerequisite to modernisation) and language selection (as a simple matter of ‘rational choice’). By the 1980s, and with increasing fervour in the 1990s, this facade began to crack, when, for instance, key constructs such as diglossia, native speaker, mother tongue and speech community were critiqued and even abandoned in some cases (e.g., Davies 1991). For example, use of language in diglossic contexts is now understood to be much more fluid and less binary (García & Wei 2014). Similarly, speech communities are now understood to be less homogeneous, and represent much more diversity in terms of language attitudes and usage (García 2013). Further, terms such as native speaker and mother tongue have been robustly critiqued as privileging language as a birth right or paternal language rather than through lenses of proficiency, genre or linguistic and cultural identification (Canagarajah 2005). Perhaps most important in advancing the field was the growing recognition of the ways in which language (education) policies often reified or exacerbated inequalities, as well as the ways in which language education policy often had harmful consequences for students and communities, as we exemplify below. Tolleson’s (1991: 32) work was important in advancing this shift by establishing the field of Critical Language Policy and emphasizing the value of language policy research which aims to uncover “the historical and structural pressures that lead to particular policies and plans that constrain individual choice”.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, multilingual education policy researchers advanced this critical agenda, uncovering the ways in which policy both reflected and reproduced social inequalities. For instance, Hornberger’s study of language policy in Puno, Peru (1988) demonstrated how bilingual education might be successful in practice, but yet a policy failure. Through long-term work in two Indigenous communities, she documented how bilingual education enhanced student–teacher communication and student participation in school, but was nonetheless rejected by parents. Hornberger’s work pointed to the complications and inequities inherent in diglossic contexts, and argued for the need to promote Quechua in broader institutional domains beyond the school. A decade later, Heller’s (1999) sociolinguistic ethnography of a French school in Toronto uncovered how students and teachers negotiated language education policies promoting French monolingualism and a Parisian dialect. Heller demonstrated how bilingual, middle-class students, who were particularly skilled in balancing overt and covert language policies, were most successful at school.

More recently, Moore (2008) utilised interpretive policy analysis, informed by interviews, observations and artefact analysis, to investigate the implementation of English-only education policy in the U.S. state of Arizona. Through a popular referendum, bilingual education was largely eliminated in the state, and in its place, structured/sheltered English immersion (SEI), a linguistically subtractive programme model, was mandated. Moore focused on the required teacher–training modules. She found vast variation in what counted as ‘training’ in the state, uncovering overlapping and conflicting ideologies in the implementation of this policy. Bigelow’s (2010) long-term, mixed-methods research, in turn, investigated how a large influx of Somali refugees to Minnesota (U.S.) challenged educational systems accustomed to teaching English learners with print literacy and prior schooling. She also found that for adolescents with no alphabetic print literacy, educational policies often resulted in youth not having the opportunity to graduate before they ‘age out’ at 22.

As suggested here, the study of multilingual education policy has been characterised in recent years by attention to the unintended consequences of language policy, and in particular, the inequalities that result as well as by a questioning of assumed categories and descriptors (e.g., standard French, diglossia, language education training). This work has also been marked in
Kendall A. King and Martha Bigelow

recent decades by a search for innovative, integrative methods that can capture the dynamic interplay across language policy and its local negotiation on the ground. These shifts in the field of language policy and multilingual education correspond with notions inherent in superdiversity. Indeed, the construct of superdiversity dovetails with other important developments in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics, and most importantly, the emphasis on transnationalism and its central role in understanding identity, language use and language learning. This work seeks to understand “increasingly flexible, often digitally mediated forms of citizenship (or non-citizenship) for migrants who may encounter a series of borders, languages, and interim homes, before settling temporarily or permanently in yet another location … as well as engagements with popular culture, new digital and other virtual social networking and gaming spaces” (Duff 2015: 76). Below, we highlight some of the core issues and topics facing the field of multilingual language policy as it grapples with superdiverse contexts, research approaches and policy developments.

Core issues and topics

Superdiverse descriptions

In recent years, multilingual education policy in many parts of the world addresses increasingly diverse student populations, which are, in many cases, the direct result of growing and increasingly varied and unpredictable worldwide migration patterns. The field of multilingual education policy has long embraced critical approaches in examining policy development, implementation and negotiation within a wide range of complex sociolinguistic contexts, far before these were characterised as newly superdiverse (see Flores & Lewis 2016). As Meissner and Vertovec (2015) note, superdiversity is a theoretical and conceptual work in progress, and many core issues remain unresolved. This on-going work takes place on varied fronts, some of which we highlight here.

At a descriptive level, multilingual education policy has attempted to refine how students are categorised and labelled, most often with the aim of better meeting students’ educational needs and receiving funds to support those educational services. For instance, within the U.S. and beyond, there has been increasing recognition of the immense diversity of students who are ‘English learners’. In U.S. education policy, this term is legally important as such students are eligible for language services, which districts are legally required to provide in order to ensure equal access to education. As established by Lau v. Nichols, schools that fail to take affirmative steps to identify such students and provide meaningful educational services are in violation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 by denying them “a meaningful opportunity to participate in the public educational programme” (Wang 1980). However, in the face of what has been characterised as the superdiversity of the current student population in much of the U.S., as a descriptive term, ‘English learner’, is wholly inadequate. For instance, in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, adolescent English learners, that is, students who are legally eligible for English language services, might include (1) Spanish-English bilingual students who have attended 1–12 years of school in the U.S. but do not meet English academic language proficiency standards; (2) multilingual Somali speakers who have never attended formal schooling of any type; (3) Mam-Spanish bilingual Guatemalan students who attended school periodically in their home country but are new to U.S. schools, and (4) Liberian youth who speak English as their first and only language. These students – among many others – have a wide range of educational assets and needs, across multiple linguistic, educational and social dimensions. In the effort to better document and describe what might be characterised as superdiverse student populations
of the present, a number of new terms have been proposed, and in some cases, adopted into education policy.

For instance, both the U.S. states of California and New York have recognised and developed language education policies for a sub-group of English learners, defined as ‘Long-term English learners’ (LTELs). LTELs are defined as students who are bilingual or are in the process of becoming bilingual; who speak a language other than English; who have attended school in the U.S. (or their current country of residence) for five years or more; and who have social English-speaking and listening-comprehension skills similar to their native English-speaking peers, but who perform far below grade-level expectations in academic tasks (Olsen 2012). LTELs generally have not had opportunities to develop native language literacy skills, often having experienced disruptions to their schooling due to transnational moves or inconsistencies and inadequacies in school programming (Cushing-Leubner & King 2015). LTEL, as a term, has drawn attention to the particular needs of an English learner sub-group, and has pointed to the shortcomings of the educational system serving them. The term also highlights the false and problematic ways in which EL/non-EL is treated as a binary category (Rambow 2013). While cognitive, linguistic and SLA research concur there is no set threshold of when ‘ELs’ become ‘non-ELs’, most language education policies are developed around precisely this sort of artificial and often arbitrary distinction. LTELs might not be viewed as ‘typical’ English learners in that they have high levels of proficiency in some modalities and weaker skills in others. Likewise, they might differ from other English learners in their perceptions of school because of their long-term marginalisation in school or societal settings.

A further example of how language education policy has grappled descriptively with superdiversity is the development of the term SLIFE, or Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education. For instance, the U.S. state of Minnesota recently amended educational legislation to include a definition of an SLIFE student as one who usually speaks a language other than English or comes from a home where the language usually spoken is other than English; who enters school in the U.S. after grade 6; who has at least two years less schooling than his or her peers; who functions at least two years below the expected grade level in reading and mathematics; and who might be preliterate in his or her native language. Furthermore, the state established mandates that districts work to meet these students’ particular needs. Like ‘LTEL’, the officialisation of this term in education policy has drawn attention to these students’ particular needs, and both of these new terms can be viewed as a policy response to an increasingly diverse student population.

However, educators are discovering that while it is helpful to have terms to describe English learners who are atypical, the categories still lump together students who have vastly different strengths and needs. Among students considered SLIFE there could be, for example, a high school student who missed two years of schooling, but is print literate and schooled in her or his home language and thriving in a strong programme for English learners. There could be another SLIFE who has never been to school, who is not print literate in any language and who is thriving in a programme focusing on emergent literacy.

Moreover, both of these terms, SLIFE and LTEL, not unlike many that have preceded them (e.g., English Learner, Heritage Language Learner, semilingual), suggest the ways that multilingual educational policy attempts to deal with student populations. In all cases, policy has been developed (and variably adapted and adopted) with the aim of identifying and developing educational programmes appropriate to that group. Yet, in all cases, the ‘group’ or category is invariably more complex still. Furthermore, as discussed below, this process is not without serious risk: these labels potentially further stigmatise and draw attention to the deficits rather than strengths of students who might be already vulnerable. In this way, superdiversity has the potential to reify,
rather than unpack, norms about language and student identities (Flores & Lewis 2016). And as suggested in the final section of this chapter, what is needed is less attention to more or new categories, and a deeper commitment to understanding students’ experiences, skills, strengths and needs and to developing policies that work to support them, their communities and the institutions that serve them.

Superdiverse methods

At a methodological level, superdiversity underlines the need for the field of multilingual education policy to develop new theoretical and methodological approaches to describe and explain current conditions. Here, we see two divergent trends. On the one hand, there is an increasingly rich set of methods for collecting and analysing data about superdiversity. These include, to spotlight just a few examples, the application of corpus linguistics to language policy (Fitzsimmons-Doolan 2015). Recent research has highlighted the power of corpus linguistics, using vast, searchable databases of texts, to offer a reliable means to study how language is used (rather than thought to be used), patterns associated with variation and ideologies encoded in political text, all of which are central to the field of multilingual education policy. Such an approach has allowed researchers to ask (and answer) questions such as: ‘To what extent is public discourse about language policy really about immigration?’ Fitzsimmons-Doolan (2015) found, in a U.S. case, that contrary to widespread belief (at least among linguists), in her analysis of newspaper articles, there was little connection.

Others have advanced the application of integrative approaches such as nexus analysis (Scollon & Scollon 2004) to multilingual education policy. Nexus analysis is a methodology that focuses on human action as the unit of analysis (rather than language or culture). Hult (2015), for instance, argues that nexus analysis is particularly useful for mapping connections across scales, that is, national or institutional language policies and the language practices of individuals, by “synthesizing principles and techniques from ethnography of communication, interactional sociolinguistics, and critical discourse analysis” (Hult 2015: 215). Nexus analysis is perhaps well suited to investigations of superdiversity and to the analysis of contexts where “research questions increasingly focus on relationships between semiotic resources and social issues that are often complex and mediated by confluence of factors from individual to sociopolitical scales and shades in between” (Hult 2015: 215). Lane (2010), for instance, used nexus analysis to analyze how language education policies in a small Kven-speaking community in Norway become internalised and then materialised in action through language choice.

Other innovative approaches have attempted to integrate language policy with new media drawing from virtual ethnography (Hine 2000), and virtual linguistic ethnography (Kelly-Holmes 2015; Blommaert, Kelly-Holmes, Lane, Leppanen, Moriarty, Pietikainen & Piirainen-Marsh 2009). With ever more user-generated content uploaded from many diverse locations, researchers have argued that the Web is an ideal ground for investigating ‘bottom-up’ practices as well as policy-making and policing, including questions such as: “How do groups regulate their practices online? Are there explicit policies, how do implicit policies (resulting from practice) emerge? How are they ‘policed’ and monitored?” (2015: 132). Yet another recently introduced approach draws upon Lemke’s (2000) notion of timescales, defined as the spatiotemporal envelopes in which particular processes happen. In other words, this lens involves examining phenomena by exploring the events leading up to a particular moment in time. Applied to the study of multilingual education policy, this approach emphasizes the range of resources across various timescales that are made relevant to any particular case. In order to understand classroom or school implementation of a particular language policy, it is productive to uncover the patterns
of indexical relationships that connect interactional practices with covert and overt policies across various timescales (Bigelow & King 2015; Mortimer & Wortham 2015). Collins (2012) adopts this approach in his analysis of family and school language learning among Indigenous Mexican immigrants in New York. His close description highlights the ways in which processes that are happening at a global scale (e.g., migration, increasing stratification of economic and social capital) constrain local events (e.g., lack of use of Spanish in public spaces and signs), often reproducing and intensifying inequality.

Classroom discourse analysis (Martin-Jones 2015) has a deep and well-established tradition, making important contributions to our understanding of multilingual education policy creation, policy interpretation and appropriation. This work provides “fine-grained insights into the ways in which students and teachers, in diverse multilingual settings, interpret, respond to, or create … language-in-education policies and on the ways in which policy ‘on paper’ gets translated into communicative practice in the daily rounds of classroom life” (Martin-Jones 2015: 94). While this work has a long tradition, it continues to bring new and productive insights. For instance, Cincotta-Segi’s (2011) study of the use of Lao and Kmhmu, the widely spoken local language in Northern Laos, illustrated how Kmhmu was effectively used to do ‘text scaffolding’ and ‘oral annotation’ of texts while procedural utterances, directive, and classroom management utterances were largely in Lao, “ensuring that a Lao ethos was maintained in the class, while Kmhmu was the main resource for teaching and learning” (Martin-Jones 2015: 104).

Lastly, participatory pedagogy is a Freirian or Auerbachian method of critically exploring the concerns, interests and resources language learners bring to the classroom. In contexts using this approach as both pedagogy and inquiry, learners (mostly adults) are invited into the process of creating a classroom learning environment that generatively, and iteratively, involves their lives and learning goals through community-building and constructivist pedagogies. This approach has been attempted by a group of educators and their adult English learners in pilot form in a project entitled Whose Integration? (see Cooke, Winstanley & Bryers [2015]). Whose Integration? sought to involve ESOL students in public debates that concern them, but do not typically involve them, and to explore the efficacy of participatory teaching methods in the classroom. To achieve these goals, the pedagogy was fluid and involved the students in an over-arching process that unfolded in three stages: (1) making meaning, (2) going deeper and (3) broadening out. The results are promising, particularly in contexts in which instructors have the liberty to co-create the curriculum with adult learners.

For multilingual education policy, methodologically, superdiversity entails grappling with new research and theoretical approaches that are better equipped to deal with hyper-diverse, fluid and unpredictable contexts in which transnational flows and migrations are the norm rather than the exception. Researchers in the field have, for some time, been grappling with these methodological challenges, as, indeed, the field has always been interdisciplinary, utilising multiple methods. Part of this work is methodological, entailing expertise in layering research methods productively (King & Mackey 2016). An important part is also conceptual, requiring researchers to be open to increasing wide sets of skills and assets of learners (e.g., Somali students in the U.S. who are refugees from Ethiopia without formal schooling, but who speak German and Dutch), and to conduct fewer single-group studies, but rather to document “creative and colourful forms of social life that emerge in fascinating post-migration contexts” while also attending to issues of power (Malsbary 2016: 24). This work furthermore demands that researchers ask questions that help build appropriate policy responses, and in particular, that work to support social justice and participatory parity, as discussed in the concluding section.
Superdiverse policy

As noted at the outset, the policy development and implementation components of superdiversity have been the least addressed, and are arguably the area of greatest need. As Meissner and Vertovec (2015) observe, superdiversity presents policy-makers with serious challenges because policies are often made for the majority, or in response to a prototypical issue or idealised person. Aspects of this work to date have been problematic and are ongoing. For instance, to return to the descriptors discussed above, SLIFE and LTEL, while developed with the intent to better identify and serve multilingual students, have the potential to become a sort of shorthand, deficit category (not unlike semilingual, cf., MacSwan 2000), to serve as a euphemism for ‘slow’ learners and to be framed as an individual cognitive deficit rather than the result of sub-optimal language and education policy. There are indications that this (re)stigmatisation process might already be underway. Flores, Kleyn and Menken (2015), for instance, demonstrate how the LTEL label works in schools in ways that can be understood as part of a racial project that perpetuates white supremacy through the marginalisation of the language practices of communities of colour.

Similar risks of stigmatisation and racialisation are present for SLIFE students as well, and the term is further complicated by its broad and sweeping definition, and lack of clear parameters. This is at least partly an artefact of the testing and placement processes for new and incoming multilingual students in many contexts. We have found that in the U.S., many states have home language versions of some high-stakes assessments in the languages of high incidence (Bowles & Stansfield 2008); however, it is not common practice for schools or districts to have a systematic way of assessing home language skills – oral or written. Our current site of work, an urban school district serving predominantly African, African-American, Latino and Asian students, of whom about a quarter are English learners, provides insights into how assessments can ineffectively identify students’ educational strengths and needs. Here, as in most of the U.S., as part of school registration, all new students with a non-English language spoken at home must take the WIDA-Access Placement Test (aka, the W-APT), a little-known but widely used English language assessment. The W-APT serves as both a screener for eligibility for ESL services and as a placer, to determine appropriate levels and amount of ESL instructional services. It is an adaptive test, assessing students across four language domains, and placing them on the six-level WIDA proficiency scale. Unlike previous assessments, the W-APT is linked with English language curricular goals and focuses strongly on academic contexts and academic language. However, for many newcomer students in our district, there is a floor effect wherein more than 70% receive a 1 or 2 (and fewer than 6% receive a 4, 5 or 6). Because the test focuses solely on academic skills in English, with nearly half receiving the lowest possible score, it tells district administrators and educators nothing about students’ first language literacy skills and little to nothing about previous formal schooling. While a trained observer could identify evidence of previous formal schooling (e.g., tracking words on the page, decoding black and white line drawings, ease of pencil grip), none of these are built into the scoring system. Therefore, two entering high school students – one of whom is monolingual in Spanish but enjoyed 10 previous years of formal schooling in Guatemala City, and another who speaks four languages but never participated in formal education – both receive the lowest score (a ‘1’), and are treated and likely placed identically (King & Bigelow, 2016). In essence, the screener that hundreds of thousands of children take each year is an artefact of 1970 policy-making (Wang 1980), and ill-equipped to capture many aspects of the superdiverse student population nearly all districts now serve.

Nevertheless, we are encouraged that, through advocacy efforts, both legislative and local, schools are trying to identify SLIFE. This process is often carried out through intake interviews.
in the home language where the student or the family reports on years of schooling. Some states have identified the need for better diagnostic tools. New York State, for example, partners with City University of New York’s Research Institute for the Study of Language in Urban Society (RISLUS) in the development of multilingual assessments. The Literacy Evaluation for Newcomer Students (LENS) is available in a number of languages, and the Multilingual Literacy Diagnostic (MLD) will be an online tool for educators to use to assess new students’ home language literacy. Assessments such as these are not widely used for many reasons, including the fact that students with interrupted schooling and low print literacy might also speak a low incidence language, thus requiring a new assessment for very few students.

Thus, although these terms (e.g., LTEL, SLIFE) developed in direct response to the superdiversity of the student population, policy-makers and educators still have a long way to go to effectively and productively operationalise and utilise them. There is an inherent challenge embedded here: embracing a superdiversity approach in terms of theory entails recognition of the fluid, highly variable and dynamic nature of these populations (Malsbary 2016). It also potentially entails greater recognition of the deep-seated structural inequalities that cannot be undone through the application of new labels and categorisations alone.

New debates

Both research and practice in multilingual education policy are in need of continued work and attention with respect to description, methods and policy development in order to meet the challenges of superdiversity, and, more importantly, of achieving educational equity for all students. While most scholars in the field would agree this is a shared, reasonable and laudable goal, there are on-going debates about how to achieve this. Several of the most salient debates are highlighted here.

Perhaps the most visible of these debates concerns what effective and high-quality multilingual education policy might look like in contexts of superdiversity, many of which are characterised by transnationalism and translanguaging. Translanguaging, a widely considered and influential construct in the last five years, refers to “the dynamic ways in which bi- or multilinguals interact with the world translingually, beyond the two language systems that are assumed in traditional definitions of bilingualism” (García & Hesson 2015: 227). In increasingly fluid and multilingual contexts, it is to be expected that individuals use a wide range of linguistic resources to connect and communicate, and, in this sense, superdiversity and translanguaging are potentially compatible constructs, driven by some of the shared demographic and conceptual forces.

Yet as García and Hesson (2015) rightly note, language policy in schools traditionally has insisted upon use of the standard variety of the language (or languages) of instruction. “As a result, many language-minoritised students, speakers of different varieties of the languages used in schools, have high rates of academic failure” (221). Weber and Horner (2012: 110) argue that despite the EU’s stated policy of additive bilingualism (i.e., individuals are encouraged to learn two European languages in addition to their mother tongues), EU countries tend to ignore or exclude immigrant languages. Likewise, even in contexts where heritage language learning is part of the curriculum (e.g., Spanish for native speakers of Spanish in the U.S.), pedagogy often presents a monolingual norm (Leeman & King 2015). Many have argued that multilingual education policy needs to move beyond promoting a sort of double monolingualism, that is, the learning of two compartmentalised monolingual codes, each of which is viewed and treated as a separate bounded system (Orellana & Rodriguez-Minkoff 2016; García 2013). García and Hesson (2015) propose a response which rejects this double monolingualism approach: a translanguaging framework which “ensures that the students’ different home language practices are not only validated,
but also used and leveraged for academic purposes – to think critically and creatively, to produce authentic work, to analyse language use, to better understand what are traditionally known as students’ own bidialectal and bilingual practices” (García & Hesson 2015: 221).

While this is a potentially productive approach, adopting a tranglaurc framework does not resolve all debates. For instance, tensions still exist concerning supporting high levels of proficiency in target language(s) while also encouraging students to simultaneously use all of their linguistic resources at hand. This is particularly true for languages that have very limited numbers of speakers and restricted contexts of use, such as endangered, Indigenous languages. For many Indigenous and minoritised languages, the classroom (or possibly the school) represents the only context where students (and teachers) might have the chance to be immersed in that language. Furthermore, communities are often deeply invested in members learning ‘good’, ‘correct’ or ‘authentic’ varieties of that language (King & Hermes 2014); in such contexts, ‘multilingual pedagogies’ are directly at odds with protecting a language perceived to be under attack due to intensive contact with English over many decades. Hornberger suggests that “multilingual language policies are essentially about opening up ideological and implementational space in the environment for as many languages as possible, and in particular endangered languages, to evolve and flourish rather than dwindle and disappear” (2002: 30). While we agree with her, we also suggest that it remains unresolved and, indeed, in some cases, deeply contentious, what those spaces should look like. For instance, in Indigenous (immersion) schools, should only Ojibwe language be used (thus, excluding one of students’ languages), or should students be encouraged to tranglaurc and make use of all of their linguistic resources, even though this inevitably means extensive use of a dominant, former colonial language (English, in this case)? In multilingual, multidialectal contexts and classrooms, how can space be created to support minority and Indigenous languages while at the same time recognising and drawing upon the myriad linguistic resources students bring?

Ultimately, these questions get at deeper, conceptual problems concerning who the ‘community’, ‘audience’ or ‘target’ of the language education policies are in contexts of superdiversity. As Jain and Wee argue, the central problem with language education policy (both monolingual and multilingual) is that it tends to “start by justifying its pedagogy in terms of language communities” (2015: 70). They note that “once a language community becomes the basis (implicit or otherwise) of language education, the language itself (as opposed to actual communicative practices) becomes seen as the object of pedagogy” (2015: 70). This, in turn, then encourages teaching and learning practices that treat the language as a compartmentalised and bounded denotational system, which ultimately leads to an emphasis on policing language boundaries rather than facilitating their crossing and negotiation by learners (Jain & Wee 2015: 72). In all contexts, but in particular in those characterised by superdiversity, the policy assumption – that “varieties associated with traditional native speakers are automatically more coherent, systematic and useful than ‘newer’ varieties – further leads to a concern with propriety rather than effectiveness in language use. That is, the goals become one of ensuring that language learners approximate traditional native speaker usage. What is lost, as a result, is the fact that effective language use often requires the ability to switch styles associated with different varieties (including adopting constructions that might be metadiscursively stigmatised as ‘poor’, ‘ungrammatical’ or ‘colloquial’)” (Jain & Wee 2015: 72). Valdés describes some of these phenomena as part of the process of language curricularisation, that is, what happens as the language moves from a “species-unique communicative system acquired naturally in the process of primary socialization” to a curricular subject or skill, wherein the elements can be “ordered and sequenced, practiced and studied, learned and tested in artificial contexts within which learners of the target language outnumber proficient speakers” (2015: 262).
The foundational notion here of ‘language community’ is problematic because it is built upon assumptions of a static and bounded notion of language and a direct relationship with an assumed community of speakers (e.g., Guatemalans = Spanish speakers). We agree with Jain and Wee (2015), who note that the notion of speech community is still over-reliant on a ‘community’ as bounded and identifiable. As they note, there is a great need for multilingual education policy to recognise that the “community or, more appropriately, the communities that learners will interact with are increasingly fluid, multi-layered and even transient” (2015: 82), and associated with varied social status and different access to material and symbolic capital both within and across them. Adopting such a stance, which takes language use as a repertoire of heterogenous practices with ongoing, ever-negotiated indexical relationships between these practices and scales of higher and lower power or value (Canagarajah 2013), opens the door for productive future debates and conversations about how best to design and implement language education policies that simultaneously reflect and build upon students’ emergent, and highly divergent, language skills.

**Conclusion**

As noted at the outset, the field of language policy has changed dramatically since its inception in the 1950s, moving sharply away from its early foundations, which were built on static notions of language as object, and rational, technocratic decision-making. The field has greatly expanded its approach, in step with current developments in sociolinguistics as well as social sciences more broadly, with a greater focus on inequality, social justice, local policy-making, negotiation and resistance. These changes were driven by the same forces that spurred thinking and writing about superdiversity, and indeed, are highly compatible.

Moving forward, the intersection of superdiversity with current work in multilingual language policy in education points us towards a localised, flexible, non-standardised approach. Such an approach, as suggested above, entails focusing on language users and uses, rather than languages, and recognizing the fluid, highly variable and ever-changing nature of the relationships across language, power and identity. Greater recognition of heterogeneity of our student population, and their skills, strengths and needs, across multiple dimensions and scales, moves us away from top-down, one-size-all approaches in our effort to achieve educational equity. Helpful here is Fraser’s (2009) work on social justice, which emphasises participatory parity as a central goal; in many educational contexts, this means the opportunity for learners to engage with each other, the educators and the curriculum in an effective, equitable and dignified manner. Fraser (2009) suggests there are three aspects to advancing this goal: (1) redistribution of resources, material as well as symbolic; (2) recognition of participants (e.g., based on the languages they use); and (3) representation and belonging to local or national community (potentially based on the languages they use).

As Leibowitz (2015) argues, based on her analysis of language in higher education in South Africa, institutional and national-level policies are often highly problematic and ineffective. This is perhaps particularly the case in contexts of superdiversity, where is it is increasingly difficult to foresee, much less legislate, the micro-politics of everyday life (Janks 2010). Rather, as Leibowitz suggests, “the solution might be to acknowledge the limitations of such policy or plans and to base them on a less reified understanding of language. Most importantly, the analysis of the data from a social justice perspective suggests that what is needed is to have guidelines or at least an understanding (based on a social justice perspective) about how people should behave towards each other as human beings … rather than specifically about how language use should be governed” (47).
For practitioners and policy-makers of multilingual education, adopting this social justice stance entails several specific things. First, it means deep commitment to understanding students’ experiences, skills, strengths and needs, moving beyond simple, one-dimensional categories and assessments. Second, and equally importantly, it entails focusing less on developing one-size-fits-all, all-encompassing policy, and more on the structures, capacities and human capital to implement guidelines to best support these students, including their needs to be recognised and to belong with current language practices.

Further reading


Examines the LTELL label, arguing that its uptake and application potentially marginalises language practices of students of colour.


Argues that language policies should be built upon principals of social justice (rather than notions of “rights” or “peoples”).


Introduces a special issue on super-diversity, and provides a synthesis and analysis of how the term has been applied and interpreted over time.

References


Canagarajah, A. S. (2013) *Literacy as Translingual Practice: Between Communities and Classrooms*, London: Routledge.


