

The language that cannot speak its name



Our understanding of the role of language in social life suffers from a particularly intractable problem: the terms we use to speak about language are often not very useful; on the contrary, they are confusing, obscurantist and create problems that we cannot even see because of our limited linguistic imagination.

Schools in particular frequently fall prey to applying imaginary language labels to their students. Last year, we reported on [an Australian study that found that only two out of 86 schools in Queensland felt they held accurate data about the language backgrounds of their students](#). This shocking finding was due to the fact that language assessment was conducted in haphazard ways; and assessors were prone to confuse ethnic identity with language proficiency. It was also due to the fact that they had no useful language labels at their disposal, with “English” and “language background other than English” as their main categories. This meant, for example, that creole speakers would be labelled as native “English” speakers while monolingual Standard English speaking children might be labelled “language background other than English” just because they had a migrant parent.

The problem with such messy records is not only an academic problem with data accuracy; much more importantly, the consequences of these dodgy data are that the role of language proficiency in learning is consistently misrecognized: creole speakers who are labelled as native English speakers may be considered slow learners and, because their language problems are not recognized, they do not receive the language support they need.

A recent Albanian study provides a further example of the ubiquity of linguistic misdiagnosis and its detrimental consequences. The researchers, Zana Vathi, Veronika Duci and Elona Dhembo examined the schooling experiences of “returnee” children in Albanian schools.



[Albania is one of the poorest countries in Europe and a country with a very high emigration rate.](#) The preferred international destination of Albanian emigrants is neighbouring Greece. However, as is well known, Greece was hit particularly hard by the 2008 global financial crisis. Within Greece, Albanian migrants were particularly vulnerable and around a quarter of adult Albanians returned from Greece to Albania in the period between 2009 and 2013 (134,544 out of around 600,000 Albanians in Greece).

Many of these returnees had school-aged children who needed to transition from a school in Greece to one in Albania. Most of these children were Greek-dominant bilinguals with varying levels of proficiency in Albanian. However, the fact that they are ethnically Albanian means that they are expected to speak Albanian natively, in the same way that their monolingual peers who have only ever been schooled in Albania do. In other words, ethnicity obscures language proficiency.

As a result of this mismatch, the educational experiences of returnee students were mostly negative. Many reported that their language was often the object of ridicule, not only by their peers but even by their teachers. With the exception of a school in the border region which also catered to a local Greek minority, none of the schools in the study were prepared to cater for the specific linguistic needs of returnee students. Measures such as supplementary Albanian classes for this cohort were non-existent.

While schools failed to recognize the specific linguistic needs of Greek-dominant bilingual students, they imagined (and addressed) another “need” they thought returnee students had: they imagined that the returnee students were particularly in need of a patriotic education. The consequence of such well-intentioned efforts to support their “Albanianness” constituted a further source of exclusion: many of the students missed Greece, considered themselves to have plural identities and had global rather than narrowly national aspirations. While

teachers thought they were being supportive by strengthening the students' Albanian identities, returnee students felt deeply alienated when only one aspect of their multiple identities was valued.

There is a widespread assumption that the central problem in the education of migrant students is related to ethnicity. As this study clearly shows being part of the dominant ethnicity does not protect migrant students from the effects of the linguistic and institutional disjuncture between different national school systems. As a result of this disjuncture, most returnee students experience downward educational mobility: they move into lower grades than those they had attended in Greece and their performance worsens. Some drop out of school altogether.

As long as we do not even have terms that could disentangle linguistic proficiency from ethnicity, schools around the world will continue to fail students who do not quite fit the profile we imagine for them.

If you would like to read more about the ways in which linguistic diversity shapes the educational experiences of minority students around the world, you might be interested in Chapter 5 of [my new book *Linguistic Diversity and Social Justice*, just out from Oxford University Press](#)



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