

Research report

Forum: UNESCO

Issue: Strategising ways to mitigate the impact of social division on the education and promotion of multilingualism and multiculturalism

Student Officer: Ane Usandizaga

Position: Deputy chair



LMUNA

Lorentz Lyceum
Model United Nations
Arnhem

Introduction

The issue of social division poses a formidable challenge to the education and promotion of multilingualism and multiculturalism in societies across the globe. In our rapidly changing world, cultural diversity, multilingualism, and the coexistence of different identities have become defining characteristics of modern societies. These elements enrich our global experience, promoting understanding and cooperation among people from various backgrounds. However, the complex issue of social division, rooted in factors such as race, ethnicity, religion, language, and culture, poses a significant challenge to realizing the potential benefits of multilingualism and multiculturalism.

Multilingualism, the ability to speak multiple languages, and multiculturalism, the idea that diverse cultural groups can peacefully coexist within a single society, hold great promise for building inclusive and equitable communities. These ideals reflect our aspiration to celebrate diversity and foster harmonious societies where differences are valued.

However, the reality is often far more complex. The pervasive problem of social division creates divisions along identity lines, leading to unequal access to resources and opportunities, concomitantly encumbering the path to realizing the profound potential of multilingualism and multiculturalism. Its implications are far-reaching, impacting various aspects of society, including education, cultural understanding, and social cohesion. Hence, realizing the importance of profound explorations of the intricate issue of social division and its profound effects on education and the promotion of multilingualism and multiculturalism.

Definitions of key terms

Social division

Social division refers to the process by which society becomes fragmented along the lines of identity, leading to disparities, tensions, and inequalities among various social groups in access to opportunities, economic resources, and social privileges. These divisions can be based on a range of factors, including but not limited to: Race, ethnicity, religion, language, culture, gender, socioeconomic status, nationality and immigration status, and political beliefs.

Multilingualism

Multilingualism is a complex linguistic phenomenon characterized by the ability of individuals, communities, or societies to use and communicate effectively in multiple languages proficiently. It simultaneously refers to the societal condition where multiple languages coexist and flourish within a given community or nation.

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Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is a multifaceted and dynamic societal concept that encompasses and advocates for the coexistence, recognition, appreciation, and equitable integration of diverse cultural groups within a single society, fostering diversity, and mutual respect. At its core, multiculturalism acknowledges the existence of a broad range of cultural backgrounds, including differences in customs, traditions, languages, beliefs, and values, within a given society. It also emphasizes the importance of inclusion and equality for all cultural groups, regardless of their size, visibility, or historical presence, and promotes respect, dialogue, collaboration, and mutual understanding as a means of ensuring equal access to opportunities, preventing discrimination, and building social cohesion.

General overview

Social division presents several significant challenges within the context of education and the promotion of multilingualism and multiculturalism. In the first place, social division often leads to marginalized communities facing significant barriers to accessing quality education, leading to disparities and limited participation in cultural and linguistic exchanges. These barriers manifest in various forms, including but not limited to economic barriers, geographic disparities, and discriminatory practices. Lower-income individuals and families may lack access to educational resources, such as tutoring, extracurricular activities, and educational technology, all of which can hinder academic success. Moreover, in some regions, there may be disparities in the quality and availability of educational institutions. For example, rural areas, in particular, may have limited access to high-quality educational facilities and experienced educators. Furthermore, discrimination within educational institutions can manifest in various ways, such as biased disciplinary actions, unequal opportunities, and differential treatment based on race, ethnicity, or language background.

Additionally, social division often perpetuates stereotypes and prejudices, resulting in discrimination and bias against specific cultural or linguistic groups, which can have a profound impact on educational experiences and outcomes. For instance, biased syllabuses may perpetuate stereotypes and misrepresent certain cultural or linguistic groups, leading to a distorted understanding of their contributions and histories. In addition, students from marginalized backgrounds may experience discrimination, bias, or microaggressions from peers or educators, which can create hostile learning environments and negatively affect their educational experiences. Moreover, students who experience discrimination or encounter stereotypes may internalize negative beliefs about themselves, affecting their self-esteem and motivation to succeed academically.

Furthermore, in societies marked by social division, dominant languages and cultures may suppress minority languages and cultures, leading to language erosion and a potential loss of cultural heritage. This is because the dominance of one language can lead to a decline in the use and transmission of minority languages within communities. This phenomenon, known as language shift, threatens linguistic diversity. Correspondingly, the marginalization of cultural

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practices and traditions can lead to cultural homogenization, where diverse cultural expressions are replaced by a dominant culture, resulting in the loss of unique cultural identities. Both of which result in a lessened promotion of multilingualism and multiculturalism.

Additionally, certain communities or individuals may experience cultural isolation, hindering their ability to engage in multicultural exchanges. This is due to the fact that social division can create social and cultural boundaries that isolate individuals or communities. In turn, individuals who are socially isolated may have limited exposure to diverse cultures, languages, and perspectives, which can hinder their ability to appreciate and engage with multiculturalism.

Finally, social division can also exacerbate disparities in access to multilingual and multicultural experiences. For example, marginalized communities may have limited access to multilingual education programs, which can impede their ability to acquire and use multiple languages proficiently. Unequal access to cultural exchange programs or multicultural events can also hinder individuals from diverse backgrounds from participating fully in multicultural experiences. In addition, resources for promoting multilingualism and multiculturalism, such as cultural centres, language courses, and cultural festivals, may not be distributed equitably, perpetuating inequalities.

Overall, social division is a complex issue rooted in identity-based disparities that poses significant challenges to the education and promotion of multilingualism and multiculturalism. However, through comprehensive strategies that prioritize inclusive education, public awareness campaigns, policy frameworks, support for civil society, and international collaboration, the impact of social division can be mitigated, and inclusive and harmonious societies where the potential of multilingualism and multiculturalism are fully realized can be fostered. As societies continue to diversify, the pursuit of these ideals remains critical for building equitable, inclusive, and culturally enriched communities.

Major parties involved.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

UNESCO is primarily interested in promoting cultural diversity, linguistic diversity, and intercultural dialogue. It values the preservation of languages and cultures as essential components of human heritage. Its motivation is grounded in its mission to build peace, eradicate poverty, and ensure sustainable development through education, science, culture, and communication. It recognizes that social division can threaten cultural diversity and linguistic heritage. Moreover, UNESCO has significant influence in shaping international policies and guidelines related to multilingualism and multiculturalism. It provides a platform for member states to collaborate and share best practices. In addition, UNESCO initiates programs, research, and awareness campaigns to promote multilingualism and multiculturalism. It designates and supports World Heritage Sites, which often have cultural and linguistic significance. UNESCO also monitors the state of linguistic diversity and cultural expressions globally.

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International Organization for Migration (IOM)

IOM is interested in promoting safe and orderly migration, which often involves addressing social division, cultural exchange, and language issues faced by migrants. It is motivated by its mission to ensure that migration benefits both individuals and societies. It recognizes that social division can be exacerbated in the context of migration and seeks to mitigate these challenges. Furthermore, IOM provides support and assistance to governments and migrants, including education programs and initiatives that promote multiculturalism, language learning, and social integration. Additionally, IOM supports programs that provide education and language training to migrants, facilitates cultural exchange, and promotes social cohesion in host countries. It also conducts research and provides data on migration and social inclusion.

International Cultural Diversity Organization (ICDO)

ICDO is dedicated to promoting cultural diversity and linguistic diversity. It seeks to protect and enhance cultural and linguistic expressions, particularly in the face of globalization. Its motivation is rooted in its commitment to safeguarding cultural and linguistic diversity as a means of preserving human heritage and fostering intercultural dialogue. It recognizes that social division can threaten linguistic and cultural expressions. Moreover, ICDO specializes in cultural and linguistic diversity issues and has the capacity to provide expertise and guidance to member states and organizations in preserving and promoting these diversities. ICDO conducts research, advocacy, and awareness campaigns on cultural and linguistic diversity. In addition, it collaborates with member states to develop policies and initiatives that protect and promote diverse expressions.

Timeline of Key Events

1971	UNESCO's convention on the means of prohibiting and preventing the illicit import, export, and transfer of ownership of cultural property.
1992	United Nations declaration on the rights of persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities.
2001	UNESCO's universal declaration on cultural diversity.
2005	Convention on the protection and promotion of the diversity of cultural expressions.
2015	United Nations 2030 agenda for sustainable development.

Previous attempts to solve the issue

Several countries have implemented strategies to attempt to mitigate the impact of social division on multilingualism and multiculturalism. For example, in 1971, Canada initiated a government-led approach to addressing social division and promoting multiculturalism. Canada's multiculturalism policy includes acknowledging that cultural diversity enriches Canadian society and contributes to its economic, social, and cultural development. Furthermore, the policy also promotes equal participation for all cultural and linguistic groups in Canadian society to have equal access to opportunities and resources. Canada has also placed a strong emphasis on bilingualism and multiculturalism by prioritizing equitable access to quality education for all, irrespective of cultural or linguistic background, and including support for Indigenous education and languages. Syllabuses in Canadian schools also incorporate diverse cultural perspectives, celebrating the contributions of various cultural and linguistic groups to Canadian society.

Another example is South Africa's post-apartheid reforms, which reflect a commitment to redress historical inequalities and promote multiculturalism and multilingualism. South Africa has acknowledged its history of apartheid and seeks to address its legacy. This includes efforts to rectify past injustices, for instance by integrating cultural awareness and a multicultural education to foster a sense of unity in diversity. Further, South Africa recognizes 11 official languages, reflecting its linguistic diversity.

Singapore, a multiracial and multicultural society, also places a strong emphasis on bilingualism as a means to promote intercultural communication. For example, Singapore's education system offers programs for students to learn their mother tongue languages alongside English, a diverse linguistic approach that encourages cultural preservation. Singapore also seeks to promote cultural understanding among its diverse population through educational and cultural exchange programs. Moreover, Singapore has implemented policies aimed at promoting social integration and cohesion among its diverse communities, hence emphasizing the importance of embracing the diverse cultural heritages of its population, while still nurturing a shared national identity.

In each of these attempts to mitigate the impact of social division on multilingualism and multiculturalism, the respective governments have implemented policies and strategies aimed at allowing equitable access to educational programs, the preservation of linguistic diversity, and the celebration of cultural diversity. These case studies serve as valuable examples of how countries can address social division and harness the potential of multilingual and multicultural diversity for the benefit of society.

Possible solutions

One of the fundamental approaches to mitigating the impact of social division is the development and implementation of inclusive education policies. These policies aim to ensure equal access to quality education for all individuals, regardless of their cultural or linguistic background. Inclusive education goes beyond mere tolerance; it celebrates diversity and recognizes the value that different perspectives bring to the learning environment. Such policies also require providing resources and support for teachers to address the diverse needs of students, including language support for multilingual learners. By fostering an inclusive educational environment, societies can promote multilingualism and multiculturalism from an early age.

Preserving and promoting indigenous languages and cultural traditions is another vital strategy. These languages and traditions are integral to the identity of many communities and contribute significantly to the rich tapestry of multiculturalism. Governments and communities can establish programs aimed at celebrating and passing on cultural and linguistic heritage. This includes support for community-based initiatives that provide a platform for cultural exchange and the preservation of indigenous knowledge. By recognizing and valuing these aspects of cultural diversity, societies can mitigate the erosion of linguistic and cultural traditions caused by social division.

Cultural exchange programs and awareness initiatives play a crucial role in promoting intercultural understanding and appreciation. These initiatives bring together individuals from different cultural backgrounds, providing opportunities for dialogue and collaboration. By facilitating interactions among diverse communities, societies can break down barriers and stereotypes, fostering a sense of unity and shared humanity. Additionally, raising awareness about the benefits of multiculturalism and multilingualism through educational campaigns, media, and community outreach can help dispel misconceptions and prejudice, leading to more inclusive societies.

Encouraging open and respectful dialogue among diverse communities is essential for mitigating the impact of social division. Dialogue initiatives aim to create spaces where individuals from different backgrounds can engage in meaningful conversations, share their experiences, and foster empathy and understanding. Promoting tolerance and dialogue requires deliberate efforts to facilitate interactions and build bridges between communities that may have historically been divided. By creating platforms for dialogue, societies can lay the groundwork for constructive relationships and cooperation among diverse groups.

Enacting and enforcing legislation that prohibits discrimination based on race, ethnicity, religion, language, or cultural background is a fundamental step in addressing social division. These legal frameworks serve as a basis for promoting multiculturalism and multilingualism by ensuring that all individuals have equal rights and opportunities. Comprehensive policy frameworks can be developed to explicitly promote multiculturalism and multilingualism, emphasizing their value in creating harmonious and diverse societies. The enforcement of such laws and policies reinforces the commitment to inclusivity and diversity.

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Further reading

1. “Council of Europe Language Policy Portal.” Council of Europe, www.coe.int/en/web/language-policy.

The Council of Europe offers a range of reports and publications on language policies, language rights, and multilingualism in Europe, providing a valuable resource for understanding regional approaches to these issues.

2. “Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development.” Taylor & Francis Group, www.tandfonline.com/journals/rmmm20.

This academic journal publishes research articles, reviews, and discussions on topics related to multilingualism and multiculturalism, including their impact on society and education.

3. “Migrant Integration and Social Cohesion.” International Organization for Migration, www.iom.int/migrant-integration-and-social-cohesion.

IOM's website offers reports and publications on migration, social cohesion, and language inclusion, providing valuable insights into the impact of migration on multilingualism and multiculturalism.

4. “The Report & Education For All (EFA).” Global Education Monitoring Report, UNESCO, en.unesco.org/gem-report/report-education-all-efa.

These annual reports provide insights into global education trends, including efforts to promote multiculturalism and multilingualism in education.

5. UNESCO, [www.unesco.org/en/search?category=United%2BNations%2BEducational%2C%2BScientific%2Band%2BCultural%2BOrganization%2B&text=multilingualism%2Band%2Bmulticulturalism&sort by=search api relevance](http://www.unesco.org/en/search?category=United%2BNations%2BEducational%2C%2BScientific%2Band%2BCultural%2BOrganization%2B&text=multilingualism%2Band%2Bmulticulturalism&sort%20by=search%20api%20relevance).

UNESCO's website offers a wealth of resources, publications, and reports related to education, cultural diversity, and multilingualism.

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