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Foreword: Multilingualism in Context

The recent realisation in the international academic community of the significance of multilingualism in sociocultural, educational and cognitive terms has come as something of a surprise to the very many communities across the globe where multilingualism has always been an integral part of people's everyday life. This is evidently due to the presence of large numbers of 'misplaced' populations who speak languages other than the assumed indigenous ones. These speakers are usually labelled as 'migrants', 'refugees', or 'ethnic minorities.' Over time, their languages become called 'community' or 'heritage' languages. The designation of a language and its speakers with one of these labels has serious consequences on the status of the language and the community in society. Policies and practices that are designed to support the minoritized languages and social groups usually assume that their status is a real one rather than imposed by society. For instance, in Britain and the United States where English is the dominant language, people who have roots in another country are often designated as English-as-an-additional-language (EAL) speakers. EAL children are expected to struggle in the mainstream educational system. They need help with English. And if they do achieve well in schools, they will be celebrated as examples of success.

Multilingualism is a human phenomenon; it is evidence of human beings' capacity to learn and use multiple languages. The learning and use of multiple languages presume access to them. But access may not be equal. To understand multilingualism, one must look at the specific historical, sociocultural, environmental and material conditions on access to languages for the individuals and communities concerned. Only in doing so can we understand the status of different languages in society and the implications of the designated status of the language for its speakers in society. Migration, which has hugely intensified across the globe in recent decades, is another condition that impacts on access to languages. The recent and ongoing migratory processes have not been balanced in the sense that it is often people from under-developed parts of the world migrating to the more developed countries and regions, though this is relative and by no means universal. The status of language and its speakers as a result of migration is a politically sensitive topic for exploration and has serious implications for policy and practice.

The educational impacts of multilingualism are a major concern for both the speaker and the system. Some people are able to maintain all the languages in their repertoire, and in fact, in some cases can even increase the number of languages they can learn and use. Others give up the languages they acquired in childhood and replace them with other languages that they use in their everyday communication. Reasons for language maintenance and language shift or attrition are complex and multiple. They are a fascinating topic for research. How the educational system responds to multilingualism is another hotly debated issue. The idea and ideal of education for all, or inclusive and equitable education, are put to real tests in the presence of diverse multilingual learners. Whilst many have argued that multilingualism is a rich and important resource for learning, it is fair to say that most of the so-called bilingual education programmes that exist in the developed world especially are educational programmes for people who are already bilingual rather than aiming to support learners to become bilingual or maintain their bilingualism and multilingualism. Institutional and policy support for multilingual pedagogies is still lacking.

The present volume is a welcome addition to the expanding body of literature that explores issues of diverse contexts of multilingualism and the implications for education. It is also an invitation to further research on these and other issues in an ever-changing world.