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2004 Minority Education Reform and pupil performance in Latvia



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ABSTRACT

One quarter of all schoolchildren in Latvia go to the publicly funded minority (predominantly Russian) schools. In 2004, the language of instruction in minority schools was changed from essentially minority language to a composite of 60% Latvian and 40% minority. This paper studies the effects of this '60/40' reform on the academic performance of pupils in minority schools. Using data on 2002–2011 centralised exam results for the universe of Latvia's secondary schools, we find that there has been a significant deterioration in the exam performance of minority schools relative to that of majority schools after the reform year 2004. The negative effects were most pronounced in the early years following the reform.

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1. Introduction

In many linguistically diverse societies, the choice of the language of instruction in schools has aroused much public debate and academic interest. Few people doubt that, for intellectual development of a child, learning in the native language is preferable to the 'sink or swim' approach of immersing the child into a school environment with a language different from her native one. However, learning exclusively in one's native language may come at

the expense of acquiring the dominant language skills, hampering the chances for a successful career and upward social mobility in the mainstream society.²

In this context, bilingual education has often been proposed as an education model which combines the virtues of learning in one's native language with the acquisition of the dominant/majority language skills.³ This approach, often aimed at improving academic outcomes of the linguistic minority students, has, for example, been adopted in several states of the US with significant Spanish-speaking

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² For example, there is a large earnings premium to the proficiency in the mainstream society language among the indigenous people of Bolivia and South Africa (Chiswick, Patrinos, & Hurst, 2000; Godoy et al., 2007) and the rural Chinese migrants (Gao and Smyth, 2011).

³ The underlying idea is that developing literacy skills is easiest in the student's mother tongue and, once developed, these skills can be transferred from one language to another (see e.g. Cummins, 2000).

populations (McCarty, 2004) and Latin American countries hosting significant indigenous populations (Dutcher & Tucker, 1997; Patrinos & Velez, 2009). Another motivation for bilingual education is the political willingness to preserve, strengthen or promote a particular language, identity and culture; this is the case of Wales in the UK, the Basque region in France and Spain and Quebec in Canada (Baker, 2011). In most cases, the move to bilingual education entails a shift from instruction entirely in the dominant language to a significant proportion of instruction in the minority language, usually in the early years of schooling.

Implementation of bilingual education programmes spans a wide spectrum ranging from community experiments with voluntary children/parent involvement and active stakeholders' participation to a 'top-down' approach where the new bilingual model is imposed on the target groups, without much consultation. While acceptance of the bilingual education model by children, parents and teachers is one important ingredient for its success, equally if not more important are good design and careful implementation of the bilingual programmes. This requires competent, enthusiastic, committed and supportive teachers trained specifically for bilingual education, strong leadership, appropriate teaching materials, sufficient financial resources and parental involvement (Baker, 2011; Varghese, 2004). Much is at stake: if the programmes are implemented successfully, the bilingually educated students will benefit from improved academic outcomes which, together with the dividends of bilingualism, will have positive long term effects on their careers and earning prospects; if programmes are badly designed and implemented, students may suffer double damage: low proficiency in the dominant as well as native language and weak academic accomplishment. To give these conjectures some operational meaning, we turn to a concrete and relatively unexplored case: recent experience with introducing bilingual education in Latvia's public secondary schools.

The Latvian education model deserves attention for reasons of informing the general debate, but also because of one rare feature: the move to bilingual education has been from the initial condition of instruction in the minority language, and not, as typically observed, from the majority language. Usually bilingual or multi-lingual programmes are instituted to protect ethno-linguistically (and politically) relatively weak minorities. In Latvia, however, we have been witnessing a nation's ethno-linguistic majority protecting itself, and building self-confidence that was eroded during its time as a province of the Soviet Union, by establishing the official state language (Latvian) as the premier language of discourse not only *de jure* but also *de facto* (Karklins, 1994). So Latvia's language policy is to be viewed against the backdrop of its predecessor: Soviet language policy with its promotion of the pre-eminence of the Russian language in Latvia.⁴

The Latvian education scene is indeed a parallel world. Two linguistically separated education systems have co-existed side-by-side – one with Latvian as the language of instruction and one with Russian. The parallel education systems are largely a legacy of the time when Latvia was a province of the Soviet Union.⁵ The Soviet policy of industrialisation, russification and planned migration brought into Latvia massive numbers of Russian speaking workers (predominantly from Russia, Belarus and Ukraine), whose children were educated in Russian, while ethnic Latvian children went to Latvian schools.

When Latvia re-gained⁶ independence in 1991, the dual education system persisted. At the same time, state education reform was introduced and has continued to this date. One of its main goals was and is to secure the primacy of the Latvian language in education – the only state/official language of Latvia – in what is largely a bilingual society. A major step in this policy was the introduction of the '60/40' minority education law in 2004, stipulating that minority secondary schools, from now on, had to deliver 60% of courses in Latvian language, leaving 40% to be taught in Russian.

The '60/40' law has stirred up considerable controversy – finding expression in a spectrum ranging from large scale street demonstrations to newspaper and journal articles. Much commentary has been delivered from the perspective of ethno-politics, as evidenced in the negative by sound bites such as 'assimilation' and 'latvianization' and in the positive by 'acculturation', 'integration' and 'bilingualism' (Bjorklund, 2004; Cara, 2010; Pavlenko, 2011). There are, however, other concerns that go beyond ethno-politics: it is believed that the reform, in spite of its good intentions to integrate the Russian speaking pupils into the mainstream Latvian society, has eroded the *quality of education* in Latvia's minority schools due to lack of funding and poor implementation.

Leaving aside concerns of ethno-politics, this paper looks at the effects of the 2004 Minority Education Reform on the minority pupil performance in Latvia. The paper documents the effects of what has become known as a deficiently implemented reform initiative – and thus it does not deliver a judgement on bilingual education *per se*. In particular, we study centralised exam performance in minority and majority schools before and after the pivotal year 2004. The fact that the centralised exam questions are identical for the minority and majority schools is most opportune for the investigation of this paper, as it provides us with a 'treatment group' of Russian speaking schools (affected by the reform) and a 'control group' of Latvian speaking schools (not affected by the reform). Our main result is that after the '60/40' reform the relative position of the Russian minority schools, as measured by the minority–majority difference in the centralised exam results, significantly deteriorated. The negative effects

⁴ As Elmārs Vēbers, a scholar of ethnopolitics in Latvia is said to have expressed at a conference on Ethnopolitics and Democratization in Latvia, Riga, 19. May 1992: "... it would be absurd to speak of the rights of the French in France, but it is a dire necessity to speak of the rights of Latvians in Latvia" (Quoting Karklins (1994), page 142).

⁵ In effect, parallel education systems pre-date the Soviet Union, as Russian and German schools have existed in what is now Latvia for many generations (Silova and Catlaks, 2001).

⁶ There was an independent Latvian state between the two World Wars.

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