

Language, Identity and Participation

Rethinking Syria's Education System

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Europäisches Zentrum für Kurdische Studien
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Disclaimer: The principles in this paper reflect the discussions of the workshop. This does, however, not mean that all participants agree on all points of this document.

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Young Engaged Syrians Making Their Voices Heard

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Results Paper

Language, Identity and Participation: Rethinking Syria's Education System

1. Syria's school and education system needs a restart in many respects: Safety concerns due to acts of violence by militias or the Syrian military, as well as poverty, prevent many young people from attending school. To improve these conditions, schools must be physically rebuilt, and pupils must be able to get to school and take part in lessons safely. More schools are needed, and poorly qualified teachers require additional pedagogical and subject-specific training. The curriculum also needs to undergo reorientation.
2. School not only has the task of conveying factual knowledge, but also to empower young people to grow into self-determined citizens who are able to actively participate in political decision-making processes.
3. Three areas of the Syrian school system must be rethought in particular: Firstly, the area of religious education. The question is whether religious education should take place at school as part of an obligatory academic subject, and how different religious affiliations should be accommodated. It is not very realistic to keep religious education off the curriculum completely, but there could be offers for all religious groups – for Sunni, Alawites, Druze and Yazidis as well as for various Christian denominations. The challenge lies in equitably including all religious groups, and in training suitable teachers. It may also be helpful to offer ethics classes in addition to religious education in order to enable a uniting exchange between people of different religions.
4. The second area that must be rethought is the curriculum in the social sciences, particularly history. Recent events of Syrian history – particularly those since the First World War, are interpreted extremely differently by the different components of society. Narratives for Syria as a whole must be developed that still leave room for the narratives of various minority groups, some of which may differ. The way in which current Syrian history and politics is taught in schools also must be established through the transformation process, taking into account aspects of Transitional Justice. The important point is that school is not misused for propaganda as it was under Assad's regime.
5. The third key area that needs to be rethought is the question of how active multilingualism should be reflected in the school curricula in Syria. There are a number of concepts that could inform the Syrian discourse and that entail varying levels of real multilingualism being promoted and / or achieved. Canada, for example, only has one French-speaking province: Quebec. Nevertheless, there are both English- and French-speaking classes in all parts of the country, with the exception of Quebec, where French speakers have to send their children to French-speaking schools, and English speakers have to send their children to English-speaking schools.

In Switzerland, the individual Cantons decide which language of instruction they want to offer – in most places there are both German- and French-speaking schools, with the exception of Grison, where three of the four official Swiss languages – German, French, Italian and Rhaeto-Romansh – are offered.

In South Tyrol, there are German-language schools for German speakers and Italian-language schools for Italian speakers. In each case, pupils have to study the other language as a second language. The Ladins, a small linguistic minority, have a special school system, where they are taught half of the classes in German and half of the classes in Italian, with the Ladin language as a separate subject.

6. Despite all of the differences between the language models described, many of them have common features, one of which is the fact that true multilingualism is elitist. In Switzerland, for example, most people speak either German or French at native language level, while they merely understand the other language well enough to follow discussions that extend beyond every-day subject matters. In South Tyrol and Canada, the situation is very similar.

Despite this, bilingual schools that teach two languages at native-language level are only rarely supported, with the exception of the Swiss cities of Fribourg and Berne. Those who speak minority languages often fear that bilingual education will ultimately weaken the minority language. Many Italian-speakers in South Tyrol, for example, would like to send their children to German-language schools in order to improve their prospects on the German and Austrian job markets. The German-speaking minority is opposed to that, arguing that this would lower the quality of the classes.

What are the lessons from this for Syria?

1. Syria should have a common, official language that allows citizens of any origin to communicate with each other.
2. Realistically, this language would be Arabic because it is usually also spoken by minority groups, such as Kurds, Assyrians, Armenians or Turkmens.
3. It would also be conceivable to opt for English as a common language, or to select one of the minority languages as the language of official communication.
4. A common language – probably Arabic – should be taught at all schools across the country. This does not mean that Arabic necessarily needs to be the language of instruction.
5. The many minority languages must be recognised in the Syrian constitution as official languages, and state school must offer classes in all minority languages.
6. From the start of their school education, pupils should have the opportunity to get to know Syria's linguistic, religious and ethnic diversity. Their parents – and from a certain age on the pupils themselves – should be able to make an independent decision on which language to choose, irrespective of their personal origin.
7. Depending on the needs of Syrians in different regions, different educational models should be offered, so that even if the majority of the population does not wish to have bilingual schools, those interested in a bilingual model should be able to choose so.
8. In this context, there has been criticism of the fact that Kurdish parents in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria have no option of sending their children to an Arabic-language school. While the presence of Kurdish-language schools is welcome, forcing people into a particular school model on the basis of their ethnicity is a negative outcome, especially because the school-leaving qualifications issued by Kurdish-language schools are not recognized by the Syrian government, and thus also not by other states. As a consequence, graduating from a Kurdish-language school significantly minimises the career opportunities of young persons.
9. Another factor affecting the decision for a school system to teach in a specific language is cost. A multilingual system requires multilingual teaching materials as well as well-trained, multilingual teachers. Developing multilingual teaching materials and training bilingual or multilingual teaching staff costs time and money. Another aspect is that a multilingual education system has consequences for a country's administration. Multilingualism will (have to) play a role here, with downstream costs caused by everyone having the right to official communication in their first language, and by all laws having to be published in two or more languages.
10. Language and identity are closely intertwined. Recognising a (minority) language as an official language in the constitution means that the state recognises minorities as citizens with equal rights. Such recognition is an essential part of an inclusive understanding of the state, and a precondition for developing a common Syrian identity that integrates linguistic and ethnic minorities.

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