Language learning and diversity in society

Margaret Snowling draws on her study of language-learning difficulties to offer some suggestions for promoting diversity in society.

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Diversity is something I think about frequently. It is a word that we hear a lot in the media. And it is a topic that brings together my research interests and my current role in higher education and as head of a college.

I have often heard it said that 'diversity means quality'. When I reflect on this statement and what it means to me, I think that diversity implies taking into account different perspectives, and sometimes moving outside of your comfort zone; understanding the perspective of a different culture, or possibly even a different part of society, and working across different disciplines. Being open to diversity is greatly enriching: it enhances our knowledge and leads to personal growth. In fact, embracing diversity requires 'openness to experience', and this is a personality trait that is predictive of personal success; perhaps it also can determine the success of an institution?

Dyslexia

It seems, when I reflect, that I have been working on diversity all my career, although I have never actually thought of it in those terms. My research has mainly been on dyslexia, a specific learning difficulty characterised by a problem in learning to read fluently and to spell. In the last 50 years, we have learnt a lot about the causes of dyslexia. We now know that it is a heritable disorder; it is associated with the influence of many genes; and the genetic effects are realised in brain differences, in how responsive the brain is to formal or even informal reading instruction. At the cognitive level, which is where my work has focused, we know that dyslexia is associated with a specific difficulty in dealing with the speech sounds of spoken words. But why should such a difficulty affect learning to read? The reason lies in our writing systems, which require us to make connections between spoken words and written words. In English and all alphabetic languages, those connections, or mappings, are at the level of the very small speech sound or phoneme.

We also know about interventions that ameliorate dyslexia. These tend to build on our theoretical models which lead us to intervene at the level of phonological or speech sound awareness. These interventions help children to understand how speech is segmented into sounds and how those sounds tie up to letters. This, in turn, helps them to crack the 'alphabetic code'. If a child cannot do that at the right time, problems with decoding ensue.

Given how specific dyslexia is, you would think that education would be able to embrace it readily and make accommodation for it. Unfortunately, for too many children, this is still not the case – they are missed by the educational system and done a great disservice. If dyslexia is not identified and supported, this leads children to be frustrated, demotivated, demoralised, and ultimately

disengaged. Then there is a downward spiral of poor educational attainment, limited career opportunities and, in the worst-case scenario, poor adult well-being.

There is really no excuse within a diverse society not to allow for differences in learning, such as those that are apparent in dyslexia. These days, in contrast to 50 years ago, there is a whole raft of technologies that can help people with dyslexia, ranging from the longstanding spellcheckers, through to text recognition systems that read to you, and voice recognition software to enable dictation. I think it falls to our education system to invest in academic support and compensatory devices such as these. In addition, there is a need to encourage individuals with dyslexia to thrive in other domains where they have potential, be that music, sport, art, or scholarly endeavours that do not rely so heavily upon literacy, such as maths, physics and computer science, where abstract thinking is much more important than reading.

Language

More recently, I have become very interested in language as a foundation for education and learning. Promoting language is really important, not just nationally but globally, and in developing education systems. Children who come to school with language difficulties, like children with dyslexia, do very poorly in the education stakes. It is well known that there is a social gradient for language from the very early years. By the age of 3, children in under-privileged circumstances are hearing many fewer words per hour than children from middle-class homes. This quickly translates into an achievement gap when children go to school, precisely because literacy builds on language. Language is particularly important for reading comprehension – that is, if we are to read with understanding and read to learn. Of course, these difficulties are compounded in a diverse society where many children are learning to read in a language that is not their home language.

There is far too much of what might be called a blame culture. I have heard it said: '… these mums, they are on their mobile phones and they are not talking to their kids.' Frankly, this is a nonsensical explanation for children's language difficulties. Language difficulties, like dyslexia, are heritable. What these commentators fail to grasp is that the parents who are not talking to their children may themselves have poor language. They almost certainly have poor education. It is really important that we do not let processes of intergenerational disadvantage move from them to their children.

Right now, most children in England are receiving a good diet of phonics in schools. Policy-makers like phonics: it is an easy-to-implement and effective approach, and it is easy to measure progress. However, if children are to read to learn, they need language. Language brings knowledge of the world to the task of reading. This kind of cultural capital is important for social mobility. We need policy-makers, to grasp that language is a right but not always a given. Parents who have children with language difficulties do not need criticism; they need support and they need advocacy for their children. They can improve their own language and they can help their children improve theirs.

For the past 12 years, we have been working on language interventions and looking at the efficacy of implementing these in mainstream schools. Beginning with a theory of what is needed for reading comprehension, we train teaching assistants and support them to deliver work on vocabulary, listening comprehension and narrative skills. After running robust evaluations, we know that this kind of intervention works. It works in the early years, and we also know that versions of it can be delivered by parents who are carefully supported through community centres and other organsations.

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Diversity and identity in society

Finally, I am concerned with diversity and identity in society. In public life, we still hear that there is a lack of diversity, be it in the boardroom, the legal profession, academia or elsewhere. Clearly, for there to be diversity at these levels, education is vital, and tranches of society are locked out because of lack of opportunity: the differences between the 'haves', if you like, and the 'have nots' – terminology for those who are socially mobile or not.

Highly selective universities, which tend to produce the leaders in public life, continue to be criticised for a lack of diversity. I know, because I work in one. However, I am absolutely confident that so-called 'elite' universities are doing all they can to encourage applications from children from backgrounds where progression to such institutions is not typical. What this requires, however, is not only a massive effort but also massive resource. There is a lot further to go, but we are going in the right direction. What we cannot put right are the social inequalities that lead society to have far fewer 17-year-olds from under-privileged backgrounds who have the knowledge, qualifications and cultural capital to access higher education, and hence to be upwardly mobile. I think it falls to us all to encourage aspiration, to offer support, to provide the right learning opportunities to give children confidence to make ambitious plans. It is only then that we will be able to close the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. This is not just a national priority, it is a global issue, and it needs to be addressed if we are fully to embrace equality and diversity.

This article is taken from Maggie Snowling's contribution to the December 2017 edition of 'From Our Fellows', a regular podcast in which Fellows of the British Academy offer brief reflections on what is currently interesting them (www.britishacademy.ac.uk/from-our-fellows).