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Study calls for a rethink of ethnic categories recorded for school attainment data

A report out today shows that existing ethnic categories used by the Department for Education (DfE) to monitor ethnic inequalities in attainment may not be fit for purpose, given the growing ethnic and linguistic diversity within English schools.

The Institute for Policy Studies in Education (IPSE) at London Metropolitan University was commissioned by Arvon, the national creative writing charity, to research linguistic diversity and attainment in England's schools. The report, which is supported by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, draws on a combination of DfE published data on attainment by first language other than English (commonly EAL); attainment by ethnicity and available local authority information on specific linguistic communities in select regions. Whilst it is known that language barriers clearly impact on the attainment of some minority ethnic groups, data on attainment gaps are only published by ethnicity and not by language spoken.

The research found that the ethnic categories, of White; Mixed; Asian; Black and Chinese, used in published DfE statistics and reported on by the media, mask a great deal of ethnic, national, linguistic, religious and social diversity and do little to enhance our understanding of minority communities' relative disadvantage.

For example, in Peterborough there are growing numbers of Eastern European New Arrivals. However, with the existing data available, we have no way of knowing how they are attaining. The published statistics on EAL attainment do not differentiate language, and in terms of ethnicity they are hidden in the 'White' category.

"Even if we use the more detailed 'White Other' category, with the growing number of New Arrivals from both Western and Eastern Europe, for example Polish, Czech, Portuguese, Spanish, all of whom speak a first language other than English, this category is almost useless as it masks language barriers and social class differences, but also potential discrimination faced by some of these groups", said Sumi Hollingworth, one of the authors of the study.

Additionally, from what we know of variation in Black African and Black Caribbean attainment, the conflation of these categories into 'Black' is not helpful and also tells us little about the role of language. Previous research by Von Ahn and colleagues about London found, if you analyse language and attainment, the Black African ethnic group has some of the highest and some of the lowest achieving language groups. For example, the three lowest achieving groups – Lingala, French and Somali speakers - tend to have low attainment well below that of the lowest attaining ethnic group overall (Black Caribbean), whilst Igbo, Yoruba and English speaking Black Africans achieve as well as the White British group. Black African ethnic groups need to be specified in relation to language to gain a fuller picture of their educational achievements; in particular, more recent migratory flows from Central and East Africa (e.g. Congo, Angola, and Zimbabwe).

This research thus illustrates the heterogeneous nature of current ethnic group categories and calls for a rethink of the categories we use to categorise and understand educational disadvantage.

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Notes to editors:

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Title: *Language Diversity and Attainment in English Secondary Schools: A Scoping Study*
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A report for Arvon and the Gulbenkian Foundation
www.arvonfoundation.org/
<http://www.gulbenkian.org.uk/>

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1. The report: The Institute for Policy Studies in Education (IPSE) was commissioned by Arvon's *(M)other Tongues* programme to identify which linguistic minorities are at a 'disadvantage' in education in England and to identify where they are located – paying particular attention to areas outside of London. Arvon's *(M)other Tongues* project seeks to promote and encourage bilingualism and multilingualism among England's increasingly multicultural and multilingual youth, through writing retreats, where young people are encouraged to write creatively in their 'mother tongue'. This report identifies and maps linguistic minority attainment in the secondary school population in England in 2011. This is the first scoping study of its kind with a national focus, and complements the excellent work of Eversley and colleagues (2010) who have examined, in-depth, the London context. The report draws on a combination of DfE published data on attainment by first language other than English; attainment by ethnicity and available local authority information on specific linguistic communities in select regions. In the report we make specific recommendations to Arvon regarding specific linguistic groups and localities on which to focus their work. <http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/research-units/ipse/research-projects/current-projects/p111.cfm>

2. IPSE is an interdisciplinary research institute committed to researching the social impacts of education policy and practice. With funding from international and national bodies including research councils, major charities and government departments, we have research expertise across all sectors and contexts, from early years to informal adult learning. Using innovative methodologies and interdisciplinary ideas we have found new ways to understand educational and social problems and to have a high impact on user communities and policy makers. We share our ideas widely through our books, articles, reports, conference keynotes and papers, seminar series and postgraduate teaching.

3. London Metropolitan University has been providing affordable quality education in London since 1848. The average starting salary of London Met graduates is now well above the UK average (DLHE, 2011). London Met has been ranked among the best universities in the country in terms of giving students the best "added-value" in helping them to secure well-paid jobs. (Parthenon 2011)
www.londonmet.ac.uk

4. In the 2008 UK Universities Research Assessment Exercise 50 per cent of the education research at London Metropolitan University has been rated as world leading (4*) or as internationally excellent (3*) Over a further third of our work was recognised internationally. This places London Metropolitan University's educational research in the top 20% of universities in the UK, and third in London.

5. Other References cited:

Stewart, W. (2012). Second Language, First Class Results. *Times Education Supplement*, <http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6179208> (17th February 2012).

Eversley, J. M., D.; Sanderson, A.; Tinsley, T.: von Ahn, M.: and Wiggins, R.D. (2010). *Language Capital - Mapping the languages of London's schoolchildren* London,: CILT.

Von Ahn, M., Lupton, R., Greenwood, C., & Wiggins, R. (2010). *Languages, Ethnicity, Education in London*. London: Department of Quantitative Social Science, Institute of Education. Von Ahn, M., Wiggins, R., Sanderson, A., Mayhew, L., & Eversley, J. (2011). *Using school census language data to understand language distribution and links to ethnicity, socio-economic status and educational attainment: a guide for local authority users*. London: Department of Quantitative Social Science, Institute of Education.

6. Arvon is a charity that works to ensure anyone can benefit from the transformative power of writing. Founded in 1968 by the writers [John Fairfax](#) and John Moat, who were close friends of the poet laureate Ted Hughes, Arvon today has a leading position in the world of creative writing. Arvon's programme centres around its residential creative writing courses for young people and adults, run at four rural centres: The Hurst in Shropshire (previously owned by playwright John Osborne); Moniack Mhor in Inverness-shire; Lumb Bank in Yorkshire (a property that once belonged to Ted Hughes); and Totleigh Barton in Devon. www.arvonfoundation.org

7. Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation is an international charitable foundation with cultural, educational, social and scientific interests. Based in Lisbon with offices in London and Paris, the Foundation is in a privileged position to support national and transnational work tackling contemporary issues. The purpose of the UK Branch in London is to help enrich and connect the experiences of individuals and secure lasting, beneficial change, with a special interest in supporting those who are most disadvantaged. (M)Other Tongues is supported under our Cultural Understanding theme, which aims to improve understanding *between* cultures and *through* culture.

www.gulbenkian.org.uk