

How languages can unite the kingdom

At Language World 2009, Sir Keith Ajegbo gave a fascinating talk about community cohesion, and how language learning can unite different cultural and socioeconomic groups

Words Keith Ajegbo, Anna Scrivenger



Modern Britain is one of the most multicultural societies in the world; a densely populated urban mix of hundreds of races, languages, creeds and cultures living virtually on top of each other. Yet we often co-exist even at close quarters without knowing or understanding anything about each other, and this can create a general culture of misconception and segregation, and at worst, pockets of tension and discord.

Sir Keith Ajegbo believes that languages can be an answer to the task of uniting Britain's diverse peoples. His work on community cohesion is fascinating, and being of mixed race himself, he knows first-hand how important this is.

Talking at the ALL's Language World 2009 event on 3 April, Keith emphasised the role of education in community cohesion. He placed community cohesion in the context of outward-facing schools being at the heart of the community and described the 'rings of citizenship and community' that take us from the local community, to being a citizen of the United Kingdom, to being a European and finally a global citizen.

His point is that schools need to educate to understand and celebrate difference, but also to celebrate what we hold in common. The curriculum is at the heart of understanding – and language teaching has a key role to play on a number of levels.

Keith says that community cohesion is "about how people of different cultures,

religions and ethnicities get along within our society. It is about understanding and appreciating differences, but also about what we have in common and what can bind us together. Language is an important part of who we are.

"This is true in terms of dialect, class and speaking a new language. Through beginning to understand a new language, students inevitably learn more about the culture of the people who speak the language, and how they live. Learning languages also enables students to look at their own culture from a new perspective. It can bring an awareness of different ways of seeing the world. A school in which language learning is at the centre, is giving clear signals of how important it is to study other cultures. Clearly, schools that can broaden the provision beyond the traditional European languages and touch upon the languages that are spoken in the school, extend the possibilities."

For 20 years, Sir Keith was headteacher of Deptford Green, a mixed comprehensive in North Lewisham, with a multicultural intake in a socio-economically deprived part of the borough.

"As a headteacher I did not recognise all the possibilities that languages held for building community cohesion," he admits. "We had an excellent languages department teaching mainly French, and a good record of enabling students to sit GCSEs in heritage languages. But I didn't create enough opportunities for bilingual students to share

their expertise in their first language as part of the intellectual life of the school.

"We often had multicultural activities and festivals, but neither through after-school clubs, nor through extended schooling, did we really provide opportunities for students to taste a wider range of languages.

"When I wrote the report on Diversity & Citizenship for the DCSF, I saw examples of schools, like Valentines School in Redbridge, which had built language diversity more firmly into the school curriculum," he adds.

Making language relevant

"Schools should celebrate the rich diversity and the intellectual challenge of having speakers of many different languages in their community. Being bilingual in European languages is often seen as a great advantage, but I'm not sure we always recognise the talents of many of our pupils who are bilingual across a wide variety of other languages. Sometimes, having a large proportion of EAL students is framed only as a problem. Schools are now finding a variety of ways of exploiting the variety of languages spoken by their pupils.

"In one school they had a week in which one Year 7 child would teach another child some basics of their language. In other schools, they use parents and the community to provide classes across a range of languages.

"In Enfield, where there are large Greek- and Turkish-speaking communities, they



are moving their language teaching away from French and Spanish to better meet the needs of the community. It will be interesting to see if over time this has real benefits for community cohesion.

"Any school that takes the concept of pupil voice seriously has to recognise the language of students as an important part of their identity, whether this is dealing with a heritage language or the language of class."

Keith points out that these issues are clearly easier to deal with in schools that have a range of languages spoken within them. "Schools in largely white areas have to consider carefully how to make the connections with other communities both nationally and globally, to give context to other languages. But with the range of links that are now possible electronically these connections can be made," he continues.

Unity through languages promotion

"Of all the teachers in the school, language teachers should be most understanding of different cultures and know how to make links across cultures. To students, languages are often seen as demanding and other languages as strange and unnecessary, because everyone speaks English!"

"Confronting the difficulty and strangeness of another language is a way in to confronting those differences and teasing out the similarities. If community cohesion is about culture, then it also has to be about languages, and heads of language departments need to

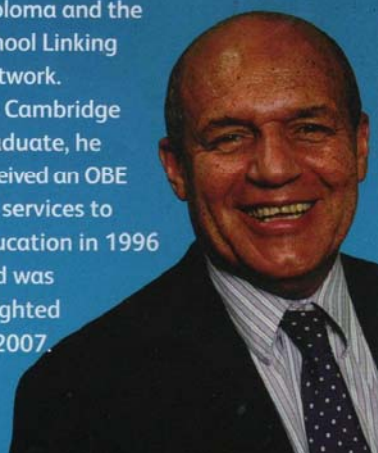
About Keith Ajegbo

Sir Keith Ajegbo was born in England to a Nigerian father and a white mother, at a time when this was unusual – so has been long interested in community cohesion from a personal perspective as well as an academic one.

Sir Keith was the head of Deptford Green School for 20 years until he retired in 2006. During his time there the school gained a national reputation for citizenship education.

He was the author of the 2007 report to the Secretary of State for Education and Science on 'Diversity & Citizenship' within the school curriculum. He currently works as an adviser for the DCSF, school improvement partner for Newham LA, and chairs the 14-19 Humanities Diploma and the School Linking Network.

A Cambridge graduate, he received an OBE for services to education in 1996 and was knighted in 2007.



be making these points. This is particularly important when there's been a drop over the years in the uptake of languages in schools. The world is on the move, both in terms of migration and travel. This isn't just about the spread of the English language, but about how different cultures and languages accommodate to each other, and ensuring we do not live alongside each other in separate ghettos."

Sir Keith adds that Heads of Department also need to make the point about how languages relate across the curriculum. His government report on diversity and citizenship proposed a new strand to the citizenship curriculum, 'Identity & Diversity: Living together in the UK'.

"An aspect of this was looking at recent British history in the light of the values Britain has committed itself to. If you look at our relationship with the British Empire, with the Commonwealth and with the European Union, there are many opportunities to look at issues around language and identity and the relationship of English to other languages around the world," he says.

"In the light of the work I've done on community cohesion, my main message to heads would be that a commitment to teaching a range of languages, and making language teaching a pivotal aspect of a school, is a commitment to opening the school up to a range of cultures and different ways of seeing the world. It is a tangible and honest way of celebrating difference, but also working to understand what can bring people together." ●