Eos CXII 2025
ISSN 0012-7825
DOI: 10.34616/e.2025.181.200

MULTILINGUAL AND MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION IN ANTIQUITY: WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM IT?*

by

ELEANOR DICKEY

ABSTRACT: Some ancient cultures included a second language and/or study of another culture in their education systems: why, and what difference did that make to their histories? And can ancient educational practices offer any useful lessons for the modern world? Based on seven examples of ancient language teaching (Latin speakers studying Greek, Roman-period Greek speakers studying Homeric Greek, Ptolemaic Egyptian speakers studying Greek, Greek speakers studying Latin, Gauls and Britons studying Latin, Akkadian speakers studying Sumerian, and Aramaic-speaking Jews studying Hebrew), this piece argues that ancient societies prioritised particular second languages for inclusion in the education system based largely on the importance to those societies of the texts composed in those languages. Although teaching a second language in school did not always lead to many adults having significant competence in that language, such teaching nevertheless allowed ancient societies to keep their identities intact and to ensure that their key texts remained important and relevant to successive generations.

KEYWORDS: multilingualism in antiquity, ancient language education, cultural identity, second-language learning

Today, we often see tensions between different goals for education. Should schooling give all children in a particular society a shared background in the language, literature, and culture historically associated with that society? Should it broaden children's understanding of the wider world by teaching them another language/literature/culture? If so, which language(s) and culture(s) should be prioritised, and why? How should school systems teach children with different linguistic and/or cultural backgrounds? How should school systems handle cultural change? These questions are not easy to answer, but insight into possible approaches and their possible results may be gained by investigating how ancient cultures handled such issues.

* I am grateful to the Münchner Zentrum für antike Welten of Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich for giving me the opportunity to do this research, to my students in the autumn 2024 MZAW seminar for helping me do it, to Agnieszka Kotlińska-Toma and Katarzyna Ochman for inviting me to turn it into a FIEC paper and article, and to Philomen Probert for holding it to higher standards than I would have managed on my own.