



Minorities in a Democracy—Lesson Plan

Student Objectives

- Discuss the importance of diversity in any democratic society.
- Reflect on the relationships between language and culture and language and learning.
- Explore the tensions between national cohesion and the cultural identity of minority groups.
- Examine how democracies with different national histories respond to similar problems with different solutions.
- Explore the influence of history on the specific balance of values and legal protections in different democratic societies. Analyze the reasons supporting and opposing government funding of elementary education for children of minority groups in their own language.
- Identify areas of agreement and disagreement with other students.
- Decide, individually and as a group, whether the government should fund elementary education for children of minority groups in their own language; support decisions based on evidence and sound reasoning.
- Reflect on the value of deliberation when deciding issues in a democracy.

Question for Deliberation

Should our democracy fund elementary education for children of minority groups in their own language?

Materials

- Lesson Procedures
- Handout 1—Deliberation Guide
- Handout 2—Deliberation Activities
- Handout 3—Student Reflection on Deliberation
- Reading
- Selected Resources
- Deliberation Question with Arguments
(optional—use if students have difficulty extracting the arguments or time is limited)



Minorities in a Democracy—Reading

1 “Language is politics. And language is about power,” according to Australian language
2 professor Roly Sussex (1999). “You have to be in a minority situation to appreciate what it
3 means to have a language of your own, and what it means when someone threatens to take away
4 your right to use it when and where you please.”

5 Many democracies have minority populations who speak a different language from the
6 majority population. For example, English is the dominant official language in the Republic of
7 Ireland, but about two percent of Ireland’s population live in regions that recognize Irish
8 (sometimes called Gaelic) as the predominant language of the citizens in those regions. Another
9 example is the Basque-speaking linguistic minority in northern Spain, where about 600,000 to
10 700,000 people, or one quarter of the citizens of the Basque Country, speak that language instead
11 of Spanish.

12 Issues involving language—particularly how it is used—often ignite conflicts between
13 different cultural, religious, ethnic, or racial communities in a democracy. Language itself can
14 become a powerful symbol of political as well as cultural identity. As an extreme example, there
15 have been terrorist acts committed by Basque separatists in Spain to promote Basque autonomy,
16 for which Basque-language dominance is critically important.

17 Sometimes schools become flashpoints for conflicts about language and identity. One
18 challenge that many democracies face is whether to educate elementary students from minority
19 groups in their own language or in the dominant language of the state.

20 **Multilingualism and Its Effects on Education**

21 When confronted with children from minority groups who do not speak the dominant
22 language, democracies must decide how best to meet both the civic goals of schooling and the
23 personal needs of the child. Complicating this decision are the varied histories that led a region
24 to be multilingual. For example, some countries, like Switzerland, have had multiple language
25 groups inhabiting them for centuries. To help students become participants of its established
26 multilingual society, the Swiss government requires elementary schools to help their students
27 speak and write in at least two languages. Other countries have “immersion schools” in which
28 students and teachers communicate solely in a minority language in order to encourage
29 bilingualism (fluency in both majority and minority languages). In Ireland, for example, Irish-
30 language *gaelscoileanna* (“Gaelic schools”) educate about 35,000 students in the English-
31 dominant regions to speak both Gaelic and English.

32 Other countries have become multilingual more recently because of the voluntary or
33 involuntary migration of minority ethnic groups. Reasons for migration include economic
34 opportunities or a lack of them, persecution, and/or war, to name just a few. When people move
35 to a new country, they frequently settle with other people from their home country, often
36 meaning that they do not have to speak the language of their new country. However, schools
37 often require students to learn in the dominant language. Therefore, schools are left to figure out
38 how to educate children who do not speak the dominant language.

39 Some places, such as the Czech Republic and various U.S. locales, adopt bilingual or dual-
40 language “immersion” programs for all students so that everyone learns the dominant and
41 minority languages equally. In other places, schools often approach the teaching of minority
42 language children with one of two goals in mind: (1) to use the same language of instruction with

43 all students; or (2) to allow students to learn school subjects in their own languages. These goals
44 result in varied curricula, classes, and/or schools for children from different language groups.

45 When countries strive to meet the first goal, all students usually attend the same school.
46 Sometimes, as in the United States, the schools offer special classes that students in minority
47 languages attend in order to help them learn English better. These special classes are sometimes
48 taught in the student’s “home” language but are also often taught in English. Special classes for
49 “English Language Learners” aim to bring students into majority language classrooms as quickly
50 as possible. Similarly, Roma students attend schools in the Czech Republic where they are taught
51 in Czech, and schools in Ukraine teach their students in the official state language of Ukrainian,
52 even in areas with primarily Russian speakers.

53 In other countries, and even in certain school districts in the United States, minority
54 elementary students are taught consistently in their own languages. In Azerbaijan, for example,
55 there are separate schools for teaching Azeri- and non-Azeri-speaking students, and Estonia has
56 separate schools for Estonian-speaking and Russian-speaking students. These schools strive for
57 the second goal: to help students learn school subjects in their own languages.

58 **Should Minority Elementary Students Learn in Their Own Languages?**

59 The national or public school serves many purposes in a democracy. At school, students
60 often receive their first intensive learning about their nation’s history, economy, peoples, and
61 relationship to the larger world. School is also where students frequently have their first
62 encounter with people from traditions different from those of their family or neighborhood.
63 These interactions—in the classroom, during meals, and on the playground—are critical to how
64 young people think about themselves and their place in society. Elementary students are
65 particularly impressionable. Therefore, the adults and peers that they encounter in schools can

66 shape how they feel about education and the larger nation. If students feel accepted in the
67 classroom, think that school is important, and believe that their contributions are valued, then
68 they are more likely to become engaged students and citizens.

69 Supporters of teaching minority elementary students in their own languages argue that
70 language should be a tool, not a barrier, for learning. Since a key goal of elementary education is
71 to teach children the basic skills necessary for academic achievement, supporters say that
72 permitting young students to learn basic information and concepts in their own language will
73 better prepare them for success in later grades and in the larger society. They also argue that
74 students do best when they are motivated to excel and see school as a welcoming place.
75 Teaching young minority students in their own their language helps to make schools a safe place.
76 Students' positive attachments to school motivate them to continue their formal education.

77 Supporters argue that using state funds to support elementary education in the language of
78 minority students is a smart investment. Students from many minority groups drop out of school
79 at higher rates than students from the majority group, often due to feelings of not being accepted.
80 Students who drop out before completing their education earn less money, get into more trouble
81 with the law, and become a drain on the resources of the state. Therefore, teaching these students
82 in their own language is an effective way to keep them in school.

83 Supporters of this approach also assert that all students are entitled to realize the cultural
84 rights indispensable for their dignity and personal development. Language is the most basic
85 vehicle for maintaining cultural identity; teaching elementary students from minority groups in
86 their own language helps these children to retain their cultural heritage. Far from hurting national
87 identity, advocates say that creating strong cultural identity among young minority students
88 contributes to the cultural richness of the nation as a whole.

89 People who oppose paying for the education of young children from minority groups in their
90 own language argue that it is not a good use of state funds. All citizens must learn the national
91 language, and the sooner that students from minority groups learn how to use it, the better they
92 will be, and the more unified the nation will grow. Learning the national language is a way to
93 bring the nation closer together.

94 Opponents of teaching minority students in their own language note that students learn more
95 in school than just how to read, write, and add. School is where students learn their national
96 history and culture, and the national language is an essential part of this education. While a
97 person's particular cultural traditions are very important, the place to learn these traditions is at
98 home or in a privately funded supplemental school, not at a publicly funded school.

99 Opponents of teaching elementary minority students in their own language also argue that
100 teaching them in the dominant language will lead to greater social integration and acceptance.
101 When young children learn the national language from an early age, all students—from the
102 majority and minority groups—grow closer as friends and fellow citizens. By contrast, teaching
103 minority students in their own language not only isolates them from the larger society, it also
104 sows the seeds for national unrest.

105 Supporters of teaching elementary minority students in their own language argue that
106 concerns about minority language groups living in isolation from the larger society are
107 exaggerated. Students from minority groups have every incentive to learn and use the majority
108 language, and most develop for themselves the level of fluency they need to survive and succeed.
109 Teaching these students in their own languages at an early age will not prevent them from
110 integrating into the larger community as they grow older.

111 Opponents respond that separate is not equal. Teaching elementary students from minority
112 groups in their own languages will create a dual school system. Because students from minority
113 groups usually have less power than students in the majority language community, students in
114 majority language classes will get more resources, greater attention, and better teachers than
115 students in minority language classes. The result is that students from minority groups will get a
116 second-class education.

117 Opponents argue that schooling in minority languages is a well-intentioned but misguided
118 policy. Learning a language is easier the younger a person is. By contrast, teaching elementary
119 students from minority groups in their own language delays their proficiency in the national
120 language. As a result, many do not achieve fluency in the national language and, ultimately,
121 become marginalized second-class citizens. Ironically, a policy designed to help these students
122 will ultimately hurt them and their chances of becoming successful, productive citizens.

123 The freedom to express oneself in different ways—through music, culture, ideas, and
124 language—is at the heart of democracy. Such expressions by minority groups are often at odds
125 with the majority. Balancing the needs of both majority and minority communities with dignity
126 and respect is an enduring challenge for every democracy.



Minorities in a Democracy—Selected Resources

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<http://www.law.nyu.edu/clppt/program2003/readings/vanparijs.pdf>.
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Minorities in a Democracy—Deliberation Question with Arguments

Deliberation Question

Should our democracy fund the elementary education of students from minority communities in their own languages?

YES—Arguments to Support the Deliberation Question

1. Language should be a tool, not a barrier, for learning. A key goal of elementary education is to teach children the basic skills necessary for academic achievement. Permitting elementary students to learn basic information and concepts in their own language will better prepare them for success in later grades and in the larger society.
2. Language is the most basic vehicle for maintaining cultural identity. Teaching elementary students from minority groups in their own language helps these children to retain their cultural heritage, contributes to students' personal development, and adds to the cultural richness of the nation as a whole.
3. Students succeed academically when they are motivated to excel and when they see school as a welcoming place. Teaching elementary students from minority groups in their own language provides them with a "safe harbor" in which to develop positive attachments to school and increases the chances that they will continue their education.
4. Funding elementary education in the language of minority students is a smart investment. Students from many minority groups drop out of school at higher rates than students from the majority group, often due to feelings of not being accepted. Students who drop out before completing their education contribute less money to the economy and get into more trouble with the law than students who stay in school.
5. Concerns about minority language groups living in isolation from the larger society are overblown. Students from minority groups have every incentive to learn and use the majority language, and most develop the level of fluency they need to survive and succeed. Teaching students in their own languages at an early age will not prevent them from integrating into the larger community as they grow older.



Minorities in a Democracy—Deliberation Question with Arguments

Deliberation Question

Should our democracy fund the elementary education of students from minority communities in their own languages?

NO—Arguments to Oppose the Deliberation Question

1. The desire to educate young children from minority groups in their own language is well-intentioned but misguided. Learning a language is easier the younger a person is. Teaching elementary students from minority groups in their own language delays their proficiency in the national language. As a result, many do not achieve fluency in the national language and, ultimately, become marginalized second-class citizens.
2. Paying to educate elementary students from minority groups in their own language is not a good use of state funds. All citizens must learn the national language, and the sooner that students from minority groups learn how to use the national language, the better they will be.
3. Fluency in the national language will lead to greater acceptance of students from minority language groups and national unity. When young children learn the national language from an early age, everyone—from the majority and from minority groups—grows closer together as friends and fellow citizens. By contrast, teaching minority students in their own language not only isolates them from the larger society, but it also divides the nation.
4. Students learn more in school than just how to read, write, and add. School is where students learn their national history and culture. The national language is an essential part of this education. The place to learn one's personal culture and traditions is the home, not the school.
5. Separate is not equal. Teaching elementary students from minority groups in their own languages will create a dual school system. Because students from minority groups usually have less power than students in the majority language community, students in majority language classes will get more resources, greater attention, and better teachers than students in minority language classes. As a result, students from minority groups will receive a second-class education.