



LEVEL
YOUTH POLICY PROGRAM

Language:
Our Heritage, Our Story

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The LEVEL Youth Policy Program takes place on the traditional and unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓ əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), & səliilwətaʔ (Tseilil-Waututh) Coast Salish peoples.

ABOUT THE LEVEL INITIATIVE

LEVEL is a youth-engagement initiative of Vancouver Foundation that aims to address racial inequity. We do this by investing in the leadership capacity of Indigenous, racialized, immigrant, and refugee youth to create more opportunities throughout the non-profit and charitable sector.

Despite being the fastest-growing youth population in British Columbia, Indigenous, immigrant, and refugee youth don't have the same opportunities as other young people. Race continues to be a factor that hinders their ability to have a say in decisions that impact their lives.

LEVEL empowers these youth by building their capacity to challenge and change those systems that hinder their ability to build a more just world.

LEVEL CONSISTS OF
THREE PILLARS OF
WORK TO ADVANCE
RACIAL EQUITY:



ABOUT THE LEVEL YOUTH POLICY PROGRAM

The LEVEL Youth Policy Program (LEVEL YPP) brings together young people between the ages of 19 and 29 from across British Columbia who identify as being Indigenous or racialized immigrants or refugees. Indigenous and racialized Newcomer youth are disproportionately impacted by certain public policies and are rarely included in the development and implementation of public policy process. The LEVEL YPP aims to provide these youth with equitable training and leadership opportunities to better navigate the public policy landscape, and to develop new tools and skills to influence, shape, and advocate for policy changes that are relevant in their own communities. Having young people directly involved in shaping policies that impact their lives is essential to creating systemic, meaningful change. The LEVEL YPP's training is grounded from and within Indigenous peoples' worldviews, which the program acknowledges, could vary from person-to-person or nation-to-nation. Indigenous worldviews place a large emphasis on connections to the land. This perspective views the land as sacred; where everything and everyone is related and connected; where the quality of the relationships formed are key in life; where what matters is the success and well-being of the community, and where there can be many truths as they are based on individual lived experiences.¹ As such, an important premise of this training is to centre and place a particular focus on the fact that the work that has gone into developing this training, as well as the training itself, has taken and will take place on unceded (never given away/stolen) territories of the hən̓d̓əmin̓əm̓-speaking Musqueam peoples, of the Halkomelem-speaking Tseilil-Waututh peoples, and of the sn̓íchim-speaking Skwx_wú7mesh (Squamish) peoples.

1 <https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/indigenous-peoples-worldviews-vs-western-worldviews>



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Maheshi Wanasundara moved to Toronto with her parents and brother from Ratnapura, Sri Lanka. She graduated from University of Toronto with an Honours Bachelor of Science degree focusing on Psychology and Women and Gender Studies. Following her post-graduate education, she worked for the Kingston Community Health Centre as a Project Coordinator introducing Social Determinants of Health into their client intake system. Maheshi moved to Vancouver to work as a Volunteer Experience and Engagement Coordinator with the Canadian Red Cross. Volunteering and building community have been her personal values, and she is currently volunteering with Battered Women's Support Services and Beyond the Conversation promoting social inclusivity and mental health.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

British Columbia is one of Canada's most diverse provinces. With European settler influence establishing English and French as Canada's national languages we have lost the richness of more than 30 different Indigenous languages and close to 60 dialects (42) in British Columbia, and more than 200 heritage languages (43) immigrants bring to Canada (a Heritage Language is a language that is not one of the official languages or Aboriginal languages). In this document I am discussing the importance and the right to preserve languages as well as the current state of language education in BC. This is an invitation for the BC government, especially the Ministries of Education, Child and Family Development, and Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation to take action towards preserving the diverse cultures we have.

Language plays a critical role in who we are, linking us to our culture and heritage. Learning additional languages helps children to be more innovative and improves critical thinking (15). We can own up to our global responsibility to preserve languages that are going extinct (20). Providing the opportunity to study one's mother tongue leads to an increased feeling of belonging amongst new immigrants. It is also an important step towards Reconciliation with First Nations communities.

The Canadian government has recognised the importance of language revitalization for the wellbeing of individuals and communities (36), and has created the perfect platform for the provinces to take action. There are mentions in the provincial laws and policies encouraging heritage language and Indigenous language learning. However, there is a lack of clear direction and implementation between these broad statements and what we see in classrooms. Only 15% of BC's Aboriginal population can speak their mother tongue (33). Close to 50% of BC's population come from families that speak languages other than English (43). There are many grassroots organizations that promote language education and provide opportunity for students to learn Indigenous and heritage languages (46). Some post-secondary institutions have also taken leadership (45).

In this document, I am suggesting some short-term strategies that can be implemented within the next year to encourage language education:

1. Reduce barriers for community organised language opportunities.
2. Provide credits for existing language knowledge.

Followed by some strategies that may take up to a few years:

3. Extend the opportunity to vote for trustees and participation in school boards to include Permanent Residents and lower the voting age to 16.
4. Include Indigenous and heritage languages in the K-12 core curriculum.

And the long-term goal:

5. Develop and implement an Indigenous Language Education Policy and a Heritage Language Education Policy in BC.

This document is an invitation to the education systems in BC to help students develop a well-rounded understanding of the world grounded in our history and heritage to prepare them to be better citizens of the world.

PROBLEM DEFINITION AND BACKGROUND

Why Language?

Providing the option to learn additional languages increases our ability to think critically and encourages open-mindedness. A University of Chicago study has shown that people who use a second language in decision-making think more systematically and make different choices than they would have using their native language only (15). Students who learn an additional language are proven to score better on standardized testing compared to their peers who speak only one language (17). According to professor Bialystok of York University, multilingual youth grow up to be better at perspective-taking tasks – prioritizing and focusing on what's important (18). Learning additional languages help some parts of our brain grow, leading to better reasoning, visual processing, planning, and memory (16). A study examining 650 dementia patients found that multilingual people experienced a later onset of Alzheimer's disease, vascular dementia, and frontotemporal dementia by up to five years. Learning additional languages make humans better learners, thinkers, and increases our quality of life.

Imagine living in a world where we all have the same story, thoughts, experiences, and similar perspectives. Does this sound interesting? Getting to know one another would no longer be something we do. Now imagine losing 50% of the world's currently spoken languages. That is what the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has estimated to happen by the turn of this century. Between 1950 and 2010, 230 languages went extinct (20). "In Canada alone, there are more than 70 Indigenous languages—most of which are considered to be endangered" (23). According to Leanne Hinton, a linguist at University of California, Berkeley, there are many examples in North America where First People's languages have been suppressed by the colonial influence of English and French including generations of disease, murder, and genocide (22). English is used as a language in business and education. Many communities learn English as a second or third language. Something similar happens with economic migration and refugees, where English is the language of the host country and children of migrant families are encouraged to prioritize English learning (21).

Language is much more than its vocabulary or grammar. It reflects the thinking traits of the speakers; therefore, we can lose meaning when we try to transliterate the idioms or phrases from one language to another. When losing a language, we lose culture, history, and knowledge of the local environment and people (21), we lose the thinking patterns, the ideas, and the uniqueness that comes with it.

Heritage and Belonging

Thanks to millions of years of evolution, and a few years of sociocultural research, we know that humans need to have a sense of belonging to feel secure. We react to social isolation similarly as we react to physical pain. According to a study from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), as far as your brain is concerned, a broken heart is not so different from a broken arm (10). Lack of belonging is taxing on the individual themselves as well as the society. People need to feel a sense of belonging and feel accepted to function optimally (37). With language comes culture, traditions, and a sense of community.

Multiculturalism

Canadians take pride in the fact that we are a multicultural society. The Government of Canada webpage states (2), “Discover the significance of multiculturalism in Canada – ensuring that all citizens keep their identities, take pride in their ancestry, and have a sense of belonging.” We want to encourage all Canadians to cherish their identities. Community Support, Multiculturalism, and Anti-Racism Initiatives Program supports building an integrated, socially cohesive society by building bridges to promote intercultural understanding, promoting equal opportunity for individuals of all origins, and promoting citizenship, civic engagement, and a healthy democracy (3). At the forefront of this work, building an inclusive community, is language (35). Learning a language helps us take a closer look at how the native speakers process emotions. It helps us understand them better and feel more connected to them. According to Patricia A. Duff and Duanduan Li of the University of British Columbia (UBC), “the Canadian government has begun to recognize the importance of language revitalization for the health and well-being of individuals and communities, and is providing support for innovative language immersion programs, language teaching, teacher education, and language documentation and digitization activities” (36). This recognition lays the groundwork to create policies and procedures that encourages language education.

CURRENT SITUATION

By 2016, nearly seven percent of British Columbians self-identified by their Aboriginal heritage. However, only 0.2% identified Indigenous languages as their mother tongue (33). From the total of 1,673,785 Indigenous people reported in the 2016 Canadian census, only 15% reported that they can speak their mother tongue. British Columbia had 33,744 students enrolled in regular Indigenous language programs, but there are no Indigenous language immersion programs (1).

“In Vancouver, 712,000 people reported speaking an immigrant language most often at home (43).” Immigration and Settlement Services of BC provides services in more than 40 languages (40) and 27.4% of British Columbians reported a mother tongue that is a heritage language. These populations are even more saturated in the urban centres of metro Vancouver.

It is also important to remember that population census cannot always tell the full story (38). Most marginalized people may not be captured in the census, especially people who may not trust government fully due to past trauma – for example Indigenous peoples and refugees – to say the least the groups we are discussing here maybe underrepresented.

Language Education - Related Laws and Policies

Let’s look at the current policies and procedures in BC that facilitate language learning and education. The multiculturalism policy (1971) and Act (1988) have provided some support for ethnolinguistic groups to promote their languages (39). There are broad policies that outline peoples’ right to preserve and learn their mother tongue and the responsibility of the government to facilitate that. However, we lack clear direction and procedures that outline the responsibilities.

BC School Act

The only policy document in BC that talks about teaching Heritage Languages in public schools is the Language Education Policy (14). Languages offered other than English are subject to the approval of the minister, and the responsibility of requesting a language falls on the school board. We can draw the conclusion that the way for a student to learn their mother tongue is to request

to do so from the school. Then it will be forwarded to the school district and then depending on availability, resources, number of students, the request may or may not be granted. This is quite contrary to the broad statements of support in language learning. Could we make it easier on the students to access their language education?

Language Appetite

There is a greater interest in learning languages, not only in people born with the heritage, but also in the general public. There are efforts to learn and preserve languages in Universities; a Simon Fraser University affiliated Indigenous language immersion program in Squamish (45), University of British Columbia -Chinese extended learning program. Most of the current efforts to learn and preserve language are locally organized community efforts that are in grassroots levels. There are efforts from conversation groups in cultural centres (46) to private language learning schools (47). However, even these efforts are only visible in the dominant heritage language groups that have high numbers of immigrants and resources. Do we want all these parallel programs where the price of education gets more competitive by the day? The province of BC should take the lead in providing better options for language learning for its residents.

OPPORTUNITY

Why Should the System Change?

Meaningful representation of one’s culture and traditions in schools and the surrounding communities helps students feel connected to their learning environment. There is a sense of self-esteem that comes with acknowledging students’ cultural identity. Positive self-esteem is a key factor in success for Indigenous students and first- and second-generation students just as it is for third- to tenth-generation migrant families that makes up dominant systemic representation in Canada (6). Schools and educational systems need to embrace and honour the Indigenous people, their traditions, and their ways of knowing. Students should be encouraged to learn and participate in their traditional ways of living, where they come from, and their ancestral contributions to the world.

Most children in first- and second-generation immigrant families come home to parents and caregivers who speak their mother tongue. While this is used as a rationale to place these Canadian-born children in English Language Learners (ELL) classes, they rarely get to experience the benefits of coming from multilingual families. They can feel “othered” and left out at school. Somewhere along the process of trying to educate our children, we have started to assimilate them into the most dominant culture. One of the key findings of the Middle Years Development Instrument (2014) developed through the UBC Human Early Learning Partnership is that children’s health and well-being is directly related to the presence of supportive relationships with adults (13). So, instead of isolating them and implying that they are less than the mainstream cultures, we should encourage these students to bring in their heritage, their stories, and their language into the classroom.

Educational systems in BC can help students develop a well-rounded understanding of the world and its history by increasing their knowledge, awareness and participation of Indigenous and world heritage. By increasing knowledge and reducing the fear for the unknown, we can start eliminating institutional, cultural and individual racism (6).

RECOMMENDATION AND NEXT STEPS

I am suggesting the following solutions to increase language-learning opportunities in British Columbia.

Strategies That Can be Implemented Within the Next Year

1. Reducing barriers – The current Language Education Policy puts the responsibility of organising heritage language learning on the students. There is a lack of resources, comprehensive training, and funding to make these efforts successful. I recommend the Ministry of Education respond to this need of leadership. Developing methodology to share existing curriculum across the province, connecting students to online language education, providing free spaces, and offering teachers the opportunity for growth are a few of the ways the Ministry can contribute.
2. Credits for existing knowledge – The methods for receiving credits for existing language knowledge has some gaps in its delivery. It is up to the students to know the policy, and ask for the credit, and then it is up to the teachers/ individual school board to pursue their request and arrange the testing methods. I suggest that the province offer a more strategic assessment system at the acceptance of the student to the school.

Strategies That May Take a Few Years

3. Inclusive participation in decision-making – School boards and trustees determine most opportunities provided for the students. However only citizens over the age of 18 who have the right to run for election and/ or vote. We lose the voices of many brilliant young people and immigrant families due to these restrictions. I recommend amending the current voting policies for school boards to include Permanent Residents and lower the voting age to 16.
4. Include Indigenous and heritage languages in K-12 core curriculum – in BC English is the only language that is offered as a core subject for K-12 (14). Students get the opportunity to study and elective second language for grades 5-8. This creates a disruptive pattern in a child's language acquisition. I am recommending the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Children and Family Development to collaborate to support continuous language learning for the children in BC.

Longer-term Goal

5. Indigenous Language Education Policy and Heritage Language Education Policy – Province of British Columbia should take leadership to create these policies inclusive of everyone's voices. The policies should outline the education strategies, provision of resources (funding and experts), and inclusion/ consultation of our diverse communities.

1. REDUCE BARRIERS

Current Situation

By 2005, there were approximately 35,000+ second-language learners in supplementary schools/programs and over 1,000 instructors and volunteers involved in the delivery of these language programs (12). One of the main barriers with the current heritage language learning opportunities is the reduced access. Many additional language courses are offered through the support of community groups after school or on weekends and often not-for-credit. They must go above and beyond to receive their rights to language learning. This also discourages any students who don't belong to the core cultural groups from participating in these learnings.

Strengths

The Ministry of Education in BC can make language learning more accessible. This provides a welcoming place for immigrants and diverse cultural groups.

Challenges

British Columbia schools provide education in English first, then French, and then other languages. School districts with less resources may find creating opportunities for Indigenous languages and heritage languages difficult. By addressing these issues at a provincial level and sharing resources we would be able to increase opportunities.

Assumptions

We are assuming that minority communities have interest and resources to collaborate in building curriculum that is provincially adaptable.

Next Steps

Few suggestions can be made to reduce existing barriers for learning heritage languages and Indigenous languages.

1. Provide space - School spaces should be available for free to cultural groups, charities, and grassroots organizations that are teaching languages. Booking these resources are now limited by funding and the ability to follow through a lengthy process of requesting online.
2. Train and support teachers - The teachers of these programs, who are subject-matter experts, should be given the opportunity to earn a wage and receive comprehensive training and further education if they are interested. They should be able to own their work by participating in creating additional language curriculum for public schools.
3. Increase funding - The multilingual centres that are established and operate in high schools (12) should receive recognition and funding opportunities to continue their work.
4. Use technology - Students could be provided with the opportunity to participate in language courses offered in other parts of the province/ country to earn credit. I recommend establishing an online platform to facilitate language learning in school districts that do not have the relevant resources or number of students to conduct their own courses.
5. Create resource guides – School districts should collaborate to create intensive databases of current resources and language education that is offered so people have easier access.

2. CREDITS FOR EXISTING KNOWLEDGE

Current Situation

To earn the credit for one's language abilities, students must take the same course that is offered to domestic students. Because the domestic curriculum is made for a second- or third-language level intensity (14) – for new learners, the material and course objectives are lower than the abilities of a migrant student. It is recommended that the Ministry of Education in BC introduce testing for language abilities, which will allow students to earn a credit for their existing knowledge.

The British Columbia School Act (24) states that, "Courses taken outside of .C may be eligible for equivalency credit if they closely match the learning outcomes of some Grades 10, 11, or 12 courses." Students can request credits for subjects that are offered through the specific school board, earning Credit through Equivalency, Challenge, External Credentials, Post Secondary Credit, and Independent Directed Studies (25) " ... all students enrolled with a board of education are entitled to undertake a free challenge process to assess their prior learning for any Ministry-developed graduation program course offered by any BC board that school year...." In this way, it is up to the individual school districts to present courses that are relevant to their learners. This limits language learning to regional demand and resources. The process could be much smoother and more accessible if the responsibility was shifted to the provincial government.

Strengths

The Ministry can show that they are responsive to the needs and the demographics of their students. The students will be able to focus on subjects they are keen in learning and would have the opportunity to advance their education. Students will feel rewarded and welcomed into the new school systems since they will no longer feel as if they are starting with an empty slate.

Challenges

Developing standardized tests to capture Indigenous and heritage languages would take an extensive amount of time and research. However, by including the communities to help design these tests we would be able to make the process more inclusive while opening to a multitude of subject matter experts.

Assumptions

The students and communities are interested in earning credits for their native language and they are able to demonstrate their knowledge and skill level in a way that is accepted by standardized language testing. The language knowledge is testable through a written and/or oral standardized process.

Next Steps

- Research more about how other provinces and countries credit Indigenous and heritage languages.
- Conduct focus groups including students, communities, Native scholars, and teachers.
- Pilot with a few languages in a few school districts.

3. INCLUSIVE SCHOOL BOARDS

School boards and trustees make important decisions directly related to children's education including language learning (29). "BC Schools are encouraged to offer a second language based on community demand...." (12) What is "community demand"? Who qualifies to be a trustee? "• An individual who is or will be on general voting day or effective date of appointment, age 18 or older; • a Canadian citizen;" (1). This means parents who are Newcomers – refugees or economic migrants – are not allowed to become a school trustee or have a say in selecting them. Many voices go unheard for up to five years (31) of their child's school years. Campaigns such as #lostvotesyvr (49) advocate for Permanent Residents right to vote in municipal elections and there has been positive public support. Lowering the voting age to 16, would allow students that are living through these suggested policies an ability to voice their opinions (50).

By inviting more voices to the table, BC school districts have the chance to drastically improve BC children's education and better prepare them for the increasingly competitive global marketplace. All children should have the opportunity to be represented by someone who has similar cultural values as they do.

4. INCLUDE INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES AND HERITAGE LANGUAGES INTO CORE CURRICULUM K-12

The Ministry of Education provides enhanced funding for culturally appropriate educational programs and services to support the success of Indigenous students. (5) Living and learning on unceded territories of the Coast Salish Peoples in BC (and other First Nations peoples across Canada), Indigenous studies and heritage should be a part of curriculum for all learners. Especially for immigrants and new Canadians. The current language education policy (14) outlines secondary language learning for Grades 5 to 8. The children who gain their additional language knowledge from home, and their parents, lose an opportunity to build on these language abilities in the K-5 years, stunting their learning potential and wasting crucial language-learning years. By moving to incorporate more languages as core subjects into the curriculum, students will have a more continuous learning experience.

This incorporation of more languages into the core curriculum will strengthen the public-school curriculum and encourage higher participation in language programs. The cultural groups that did not have the abilities to organise themselves would be able to participate. Students at the school will have these opportunities to grow, build, cooperate, and learn together and from each other, creating a more interconnected and economically viable population, more readily prepared for our shared future.

5. INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE EDUCATION POLICY AND HERITAGE LANGUAGE EDUCATION POLICY

British Columbia should create a Heritage Language Education Policy and an Indigenous Language Education Policy that is inclusive of opinions from all the peoples that represent BC. We are not taking advantage of our linguistic resources (39). "Canadian government recently tabled the Indigenous Languages Act, which seeks to protect and revitalize Indigenous languages in Canada (40)." This has created the ideal timing to build provincial processes and policies on how BC is going to contribute to the preservation of Indigenous languages and support heritage language learning.

CONCLUSION

Supporting Indigenous language learning and heritage language learning in BC's school system is an opportunity to increase inclusiveness and prepare our students for the global economy.

I am suggesting some short-term strategies that can be implemented within the next year to encourage language education:

1. Reduce barriers for community organised language opportunities.
2. Provide credits for existing language knowledge.

Followed by some strategies that may take up to a few years:

3. Extend the opportunity to vote for trustees and participation in school boards to include Permanent Residents, and lower the voting age to 16.
4. Include Indigenous and heritage languages in K-12 core curriculum.

And the long-term goal:

5. Develop and implement an Indigenous Language Education Policy and a Heritage Language Education Policy in BC.

There are few steps in bringing these suggestions to action. The most important component is making sure the voices of the populations that we are talking about here are heard and included in the decision-making tables. The vast base of diverse academics and scholars who have already taken lead in developing methodologies to sustain language learning in BC are a great resource to draw support into designing these policies.

There needs to be focus groups and consultations with First Nations communities, First- and Second-generation immigrants, and other settlers including the youth. We need to come from a well-grounded understanding that not all immigrant groups or families are the same, and that none of the groups are homogenous within themselves. It is important to make sure that the minority languages among the heritage languages are captured and ensuring these communities have a voice. We must be mindful of "gatekeepers" of cultural societies and values and ensure that student interests are represented.

This document is an invitation to the education systems in BC to help students develop a well-rounded understanding of the world grounded in our history and heritage to prepare them to be better citizens of the world.

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ABOUT VANCOUVER FOUNDATION

Vancouver Foundation is Community Inspired. We are a community foundation that connects the generosity of donors with the energy, ideas, and time of people in the community. Together, we've been making meaningful and lasting impacts in neighborhoods and communities since 1943. We work with individuals, corporations, and charitable agencies to create permanent endowment funds and then use the income to support thousands of charities. We recognize that communities are complex and that collaboration between multiple stakeholders is needed to help everyone thrive and evolve. Vancouver Foundation brings together donors, non-profits and charities, government, media and academic institutions, local leaders, and passionate individuals to build meaningful and lasting change in the province of British Columbia. We see young people, their voices and experiences as part of that vision to building meaningful change.



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