

Lay Summaries - VOICES OF HERITAGE LANGUAGES (2026/29)

<https://www.phbern.ch/forschung/projekte/voices-of-heritage-languages-researching-the-interplay-of-heritage-language-education-and-social-cohesion>

English

The project “Voices of Heritage Languages” looks at how heritage languages - languages spoken by individuals, families and communities that are not dominant languages - can help build fairer and more cohesive societies. As our societies are shaped by increasing mobility, migration, educational institutions are faced with the challenge of managing linguistically-diverse classrooms. Students and teachers often speak several languages, but not all of these languages are equally valued in schools. This can lead to exclusion and unequal opportunities.

The 3-year project focuses on heritage language education (HLE) in three multilingual regions: the Swiss cantons of Bern and Lucerne, and the Autonomous Province of Bolzano/Bozen in Italy. It examines how heritage languages such as Albanian, Urdu or Portuguese are supported - or marginalised - by educational policies and practices, how teachers and families view them, and how students experience learning and using these languages.

An international team of sociolinguists, social anthropologists and educational scientists will explore these aspects by using different methods, such as analysing policy documents, conducting interviews with policy-makers, educators and parents, and working with creative, arts-based activities with HL learners. These creative methods are especially important for including children’s voices and emotions and for giving space to communities whose languages are often overlooked and discriminated.

Our main goal is to recognise heritage languages as a central aspect of multilingual and plural societies, as a resource rather than a problem, which can promote social cohesion, inclusion, and linguistic fairness. The project brings together insights from linguistics and social sciences and aims to influence education policies and teaching practices, both in the studied regions and in other multilingual societies around the world.