



Departamento di  
Enseñansa Aruba

# Comprehensive Language Education Policy

## Summary

May 2024



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In March 2022, the minister of Education entrusted the Department of Education with the design of a comprehensive language education policy for the Aruban education system. In this context, a comprehensive approach means that different aspects related to language are considered, in every type and level of education, and that there should be a cohesive trajectory that extends from preschool education to higher education. The reason for this assignment was, on the one hand, the minister's strategic plan, *Education in Transition*, and on the other hand, recommendation number two in the report titled *Review of the Aruban Education System*, which states: 'Make a clear and consistent choice with regards to language education policy'.

Given the complexity and sensitivity of the topic, it was the minister's wish to hold a National Language Debate in which all stakeholders could express their opinions on the matter. In order to provide a well-considered advice on language education policy, the Department of Education established a committee to coordinate the entire process. In addition to organizing the debate, the committee also analyzed and evaluated existing basic documents, as well as policy documents. To ensure the committee remain sharp, a group of experts was established to act as a sounding board during the process.

Between April 2022 and January 2023, a total of 62 sessions were held with both internal and external stakeholders. Internal stakeholders included individuals from the field of education, such as teachers, school leaders, pupils and students from different types of schools, school boards, the Education Inspectorate, and internal experts from the Department of Education. External stakeholders included representatives from various government departments, the Standing Committee on Education in Parliament, and NGOs such as ATA, the Chamber of Commerce, Fundacion Lanta Papiamento, and the SIMAR union. Furthermore, there was an online questionnaire that could be filled out by the general public, and three meetings were held in various island districts. This provided everyone with an opportunity to express their opinion on the topic. Ultimately, conversations were held with over 500 stakeholders, and input was gathered from 110 respondents. All the above mentioned sessions, as well as the input from online respondents, altogether constituted the National Debate.

The language education policy concerns the role of languages in education; what languages ought to be included in the curriculum, as well as the role of a language of instruction. Literature research shows that language has an impact on the well-being of children, as well as on educational outcomes. Prominent institutions such as UNESCO and the World Bank emphasize the importance of building a strong foundation in students' mother tongue language. According to CBS figures from 2019, Papiamento is the mother tongue of 80% of the Aruban population. However, Dutch - and not Papiamento - is officially the language of instruction from grade 1 of primary school onwards, even though it is a foreign language for most students. An unnatural transition takes place after kindergarten, where Papiamento is the language of instruction. Students learn to read, write, and study all subjects in a language they do not understand and are not exposed to outside of a school setting. This affects the percentage of repeaters, dropouts, as well as students' sense of self-confidence. Although the issue has been raised since the early 19th century, the ongoing discussion on the language of instruction remains a sensitive subject to this day, both in primary and secondary education.

The consultation rounds revealed that in principle, it is not a question of 'if' literacy in Papiamento should take place, with most people indicating they are not opposed to the idea,

rather the question is ‘when’; up to which grade should Papiamentu remain the language of instruction, and should it be the only language of instruction? Ultimately, stakeholders agreed that at some point, a transition to another language is necessary. However, there was no consensus on how and when this should happen. Some advocated for English as the language of instruction, others for bilingual education (Papiamentu-Dutch or Papiamentu-English), and still others believe that parents should be able to choose. Most agreed that a transition to the use of Dutch in primary education makes sense, given the role the Dutch language plays in secondary and higher education.

Regarding the implementation of the multilingual model in the pilot schools of Proyecto Scol Multilingual (PSML), it was repeatedly mentioned during the consultation rounds that there is a lack of data regarding the results. PSML graduated its first cohort of students, who moved on to secondary education, in 2021. This would have been a good moment to measure whether the desired goals have been achieved. However, a 2016 study showed that for students in grade 4, Dutch proficiency remained the same in PSML schools compared to non-PSML schools. PSML students showed a higher development of critical learning ability, and PSML teachers indicated that students are better able to express themselves and are more confident. As for the implementation of the core objectives (SAM) in primary education, it was mainly noted that this did not go well, due to a lack of prerequisites.

Regarding languages as subjects, stakeholders agreed that a multilingual approach should be adopted. The four languages Papiamentu, Dutch, English, and Spanish should be introduced early in school, so that students can develop their multilingual skills. This is also in line with PEN 2030. Education must take into account the multilingual society and meet the needs of the labor market, further education, and basic competencies needed as citizens in Aruban society. However, the consultation rounds revealed that the multilingual competencies of pupils and students by the end of their education are currently inadequate, both for further education and the labor market.

The committee, in formulating the policy, tried to take into account the wishes and needs of stakeholders, as well as the results of (literature) research and existing policies. At the same time, the committee’s aim was to formulate realistic policies; as the advice must be implementable.

Aruba has (both in the past and recently) opted for Dutch exams in secondary education, to ensure the equivalence of HAVO and VWO diplomas. This must be taken into account in primary education, for a smooth transition to secondary education to take place. If the country were to opt for exams in another language, the entire education system would have to be changed. This would have significant implications, both financially and organizationally, in terms of teacher professionalization, development or purchase of materials and exams, etc.

After careful consideration, the committee made both comprehensive recommendations, as well as recommendations for each type of education. Most recommendations concern primary education, as it is necessary to work on achieving educational goals from the beginning. The advice is to come up with a combination model, with Papiamentu as the language of instruction in grades 1 and 2, and with Dutch gradually being used more and more as the language of instruction from grade 3 onwards. Papiamentu plays a crucial role in establishing a strong basis in the mother tongue of a majority of students; they learn to read, write, and do math in Papiamentu. In addition, part of the curriculum up to grade 6 remains in Papiamentu, to further foster proficiency in the mother tongue. Dutch, English, and Spanish are introduced in a playful manner, starting in kindergarten. Dutch is initially offered as a foreign language (rather than a mother tongue), with a gradual increase in its

usage. This can be achieved by expanding the range of subjects taught in Dutch, or by dedicating more instructional time to its study. Such measures are necessary, as relying solely on Dutch as a school subject is insufficient to adequately prepare students for secondary education. Most students only encounter the language within the confines of school, mainly through textbooks and exams. Providing a diverse and comprehensive language education is therefore of vital importance. Students are offered Papiamentu, Dutch, and English beginning in first grade, with Spanish being introduced from second grade onwards.

Based on feedback from the field of education, including Dutch as a foreign language in special education is recommended, as well as the English and Spanish languages, if so desired. As a result, special education students will also have the opportunity to develop their multilingual skills.

In secondary education (avo), it will be possible to utilize either Papiamentu or English as the language of instruction for subjects not subject to national testing, such as English for ICT, or Papiamentu for CKV. In addition, it is essential to establish Papiamentu as a core subject within the curriculum profiles, ensuring students can select it, irrespective of their chosen subject package. Language certificates may serve as evidence of proficiency in foreign languages. Equally important, is the cultivation of language skills needed for advancing in education, entering the workforce, and engaging as citizens.

The recommendations for vocational education concern the language of instruction. Papiamentu should be maintained for ABO level 1. Regarding the courses offered in English at EPI, offering them in English at EPB, as well, would create a through line. In addition, there is an opportunity to offer subjects in Papiamentu and English.

Papiamentu should have a role as a subject in all higher education courses, too. Ultimately, most graduates end up in the Aruban job market and society, where Papiamentu is the main spoken language, as well as an official language. Teaching Dutch as a foreign language should also continue in higher education, in order to better align with the reality of the educational needs of students in Aruba.

The comprehensive recommendations are valid for all types of education. It is recommended to formulate target levels for the various languages, and continuous learning trajectories for Dutch as a Foreign Language and for Papiamentu. School boards develop their own policy plan based on national guidelines. Languages as school subjects, and the language of instruction should be used to support students' language development. Promoting reading skills and fostering an enjoyment of reading are also essential. Efforts to support Papiamentu, as both a language of instruction and a school subject, must be sustained. Similarly, continued support for Dutch as a foreign language is needed. Teacher training programs should prioritize incorporating effective teaching strategies for Dutch as a foreign language, as well as ensuring proficiency across the various languages in their foundational education. Teachers must master both Papiamentu and Dutch at the B2/C1 levels, in order to effectively utilize them as language(s) of instruction in primary education. Similarly, English and Spanish should be mastered at the B2 level, with the possibility of obtaining a credential at the C1 level. Furthermore, all current teachers should be professionalized.

Important prerequisites for the implementation of a comprehensive language education policy include legislation, professional development initiatives, an implementation plan, and adequate financial resources.