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# Utilising pupils' plurilingual skills: a whole-school approach to language learning in a linguistically diverse Irish primary school

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*Since the mid-1990s, schools in many parts of Ireland have experienced an unprecedented increase in the level of linguistic and cultural diversity among pupils. This paper describes an innovative approach to integrated language learning that was developed in a primary school in West Dublin in response to this phenomenon. To ensure inclusion of all pupils and to support them in reaching their full potential, pupils' plurilingual repertoires are welcomed. Two overarching goals to language teaching and learning inform the whole-school language policy that seeks to:*

- ensure that **all** pupils become proficient<sup>1</sup> in the language of schooling
- exploit the linguistic diversity of the school for the benefit of **all** pupils (Council of Europe [CoE] 2001: 4; Garcia 2017: 18).

*Classroom procedures that facilitate inclusion of home languages in curriculum delivery and the needs of pupils who are endeavouring to learn English as an additional language are described. The importance of literacy is highlighted as is teacher, pupil, and parent cooperation. In addition to high levels of achievement in standardised tests of English and Maths, additional outcomes are identified including enhancement of the Irish language, a developing culture of learner autonomy, and the cultivation of pupil confidence and social cohesion.*

**Keywords:** education, social cohesion, learner autonomy, linguistic diversity, inclusive, whole-school approach, plurilingual

## 1 Introduction

In the 1990s, unprecedented levels of immigration to Ireland resulted in major change to the linguistic landscape of primary and post-primary schools (Central Statistics Office 2017: 8; 46). This presented a major challenge for pupils, teachers and parents. As neither linguistic nor cultural diversity were issues addressed in teachers' pre- or in-service courses, there were few answers as to how pupils might best be served in multilingual educational milieu.

This article describes the innovative approach taken in response to this changed demographic by Scoil Bhríde Cailíní (SBC) – St. Brigid's School for Girls – a primary school in west Dublin.<sup>2</sup> In Ireland, primary education consists of an eight-year programme. Children are normally enrolled in Junior Infants in the September following their fourth birthday and progress to Senior Infants the following year. A further six years of primary education ensues. In English-medium schools, Irish is a compulsory subject and is taught from the beginning of schooling. In SBC, French is introduced in the penultimate year.

In 1994, a young Bosnian speaker, whose family had been given refugee status, was registered in SBC along with 290 children who were English language speakers and native to the locality. Within 20

1. Proficiency here is not indicated in terms of a CEFR level. From an assessment perspective please see mention of standardised tests on p. 2.
2. A more detailed account of all these issues can be found in Little and Kirwan (2019) *Engaging with Linguistic Diversity: A Study of Educational Inclusion* in an Irish Primary School. Bloomsbury Academic.

years, 80% of the then 322 pupils were from backgrounds where English was not the language of the home. Most of the 80% had little or no English when they started school and more than fifty languages had been identified in addition to English and Irish<sup>3</sup>.

## 2 Whole-school language policy

In order to ensure that all pupils were fully included in the school and to support them in reaching their full potential, a whole-school language policy was formulated and endorsed by the Board of Management which includes parent representatives in its membership. Starting from the child-centred ethos of the Primary School Curriculum (Government of Ireland 1999), using the work of Integrate Ireland Language and Training (IILT 2006)<sup>4</sup>, and qualitative research undertaken by the principal in the school year 2005-06 (Kirwan 2009), SBC developed an approach to language education that sought to include the plurilingual repertoires of all its pupils in the teaching and learning process (CoE 2001: 4-5). This approach is in accord with the human rights basis of the Council of Europe's language education policy, with particular reference to plurilingual education (Beacco & Byram 2007; Beacco et al. 2015).

Two overarching educational goals were agreed:

- To ensure that *all* pupils gain full access to education, which means helping them to become proficient in the language of schooling
- To exploit linguistic diversity for the benefit of all pupils by implementing an integrated approach to language education that embraces the language of schooling, languages of the curriculum (Irish and French), and home languages.

Four principles informed the policy. The first was an inclusive ethos that welcomed the diversity of the pupil population, acknowledging that each pupil had much to contribute to her own education. Second was an open language policy that encouraged use of home languages in class and throughout the school. Third was a strong emphasis on language awareness that involved drawing on home languages as a resource for all learners. Lastly, a strong emphasis was placed on literacy skills in English, Irish, French, and home languages, and on parental involvement in their children's literacy development.

### 2.1 Outcomes

Implementation of this policy has resulted in high levels of pupil achievement in English, Irish, French, and home languages (in the case of immigrant pupils). In standardised tests of Maths and English, the school regularly performs above the national average<sup>5</sup>. In 2014, following a whole-school evaluation by Department of Education inspectors, the school was judged to be in the highest category for the teaching and learning of Irish, a category in which only 12% of primary schools nationally are included (Department of Education and Skills 2018: 9). SBC has had no additional resources or support other than what is normally provided to schools with pupils who learn English as an Additional Language (EAL).

3. Afrikaans, Amharic, Arabic, Bangla, Benin, Bosnian, Cantonese, Dari, Cebuano, Estonian, Farsi Foola, French, German, Hebrew, Hindi, Hungarian, Igbo, Ilonggo, Indonesian, Itshekiri, Isoko, Italian, Kannada, Kinyarwanda, Konkani, Kurdish, Latvian, Lingala, Lithuanian, Malay, Malayalam, Mandarin, Marathi, Moldovan, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Shona, Slovakian, Spanish, Swahili, Tagalog, Tamil, Ukrainian, Urdu, Vietnamese, Visaya, Xhosa, Yoruba.
4. This was a very welcome initiative that helped to answer many of the questions above and provide assistance for Language Support teachers working with EAL pupils. At IILT seminars principals and teachers were introduced to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR; CoE 2001); all the resources developed by IILT subsequently published in *Up and Away* (2006); *Primary School Assessment Kit* (2007). Funding was withdrawn from IILT in 2008.
5. Annual standardised test results carried out in all Irish state primary schools are not published but kept on file by the Department of Education and Skills (DES). Because they are not published, there is no reference here.

The approach has also brought unexpected benefits. The first concerns the Irish language. Fears that it might be swamped by the presence of such a multitude of languages turned out to be unfounded. In fact, the opposite was the case. The status of Irish was raised and its use increased within the school as pupils came to see that Irish, like any other language, could be used as a means of communication. Another welcome outcome was a developing culture of learner autonomy within the school (Little 1991; Little et al. 2017). Levels of motivation increased with many pupils working on their own initiative, devising ambitious language projects for themselves. Pupils' awareness of language, and how languages interact with each other, was enhanced. A further outcome was the cultivation of self-confidence, well-being, and social cohesion through pupils' developing awareness and understanding of each other's languages and cultures.

### 3 Curriculum delivery

In keeping with the idea of a whole-school, integrated approach to language learning, it is important that not only the language of schooling and curricular languages are seen and heard throughout the school, but home languages as well. If "the child's existing knowledge and experience form the basis for learning" (Government of Ireland 1999: 8), it is important to include the language that is "the default medium of [children's] self-concept, their self-awareness, their consciousness, their discursive thinking, and their agency [and] is thus the cognitive tool that they cannot help but apply to formal learning, which includes mastering the language of schooling" (Little et al. 2017: 202). Teachers encourage pupils to explore similarities and differences between home languages, being aware that "the cognate connections between the languages provide enormous possibilities for linguistic enrichment" (Cummins 2000: 21).

Home languages are used in three ways in SBC's classrooms:

- In reciprocal communication with other pupils who have the same or a closely related home language during play at the beginning of the school day or in the yard; pair and group work.
- For non-reciprocal purposes of display: *This is how we say it in my language* when learning to count, working with shapes and colours, and later when discussing more complex aspects of structure and vocabulary where home languages scaffold the learning of English, Irish and later, French.
- As a source of intuitive linguistic knowledge that individual pupils make available to the teacher and the rest of the class to enrich curriculum content and consolidate curriculum learning (for further discussion see Kirwan 2014).

Parents were positive in their reaction to the valuing and encouragement of their home languages. A Ukrainian parent told the principal that 'a weight was lifted off my shoulders when I heard that it was alright to speak my language at home'. An Indian parent was happy with 'the school's interest in our language. Before, my daughter was ashamed to hear us speaking Malayalam. Now she wants to read and write in it'. And an Irish parent who appreciated her daughter's developing communication skills commented that 'it makes them want to speak the Irish more at home'.

From Junior Infants onwards, children engage in dialogic interaction with their teachers. During curriculum delivery pupils are encouraged to contribute in their home language(s), in Irish and in English. Teachers ensure that Irish, and later French, is part of each pupil's daily communicative experience. In this way, ordinary activities become multilingual activities and *vice versa*. Language awareness is enriched, and pupils' implicit understanding of language is made explicit. From the formal curriculum to highlighting different languages on wall displays, multilingual greetings in the school's annual Christmas cards, concerts, art exhibitions, and religious ceremonies, a culture of language awareness is nurtured at all class levels.

Literacy is central to all language learning in SBC, with parallel texts in Irish/English, home language/English or Irish being a regular activity (Little and Kirwan 2019; Kirwan 2020). These texts develop

from words and simple sentences in two languages in the early years, to more complex trilingual and multilingual texts as children progress through the school. As children's literacy in the language of schooling progresses, the skills they acquire are transferred to their home language. Parental involvement in fostering children's literacy in the home language is essential. Encouraging parents to take an active part in educational initiatives in the school where their language skills can be highlighted also contributes to the development of inclusivity and confidence among immigrant families (Kirwan 2015). Teachers, too, have expressed positive views as regards use of home languages, the integrated approach to language teaching that they have been instrumental in developing, and children's learning. For example:

Children are responding very positively to the open language policy – even their body language, demeanour within class; the speed and accuracy with which they answer questions when their own language is involved; regardless of subject, their interest increases if it is something to do with home or their own language or their own experience; therefore when they respond it is with much more developed thought ... equally in writing (Little and Kirwan 2019: 50).

A further aspect of the approach taken concerns issues of identity and social cohesion. Pupils themselves have shared their views about the way in which they were being taught and the valuing of their home languages:

[It helps pupils to get] personal into each other's cultures and languages [and] is very useful for friendship, for knowledge, so in many ways we're all expanding ... it makes you feel closer because you have a perspective on that person's point of view (speaker of Kurdish) (Kirwan 2019: 43).

Sometimes it's, like, when we learn a language it's easier to learn other ones; sometimes it's not really about which language you're learning it's, like, how to learn a language (speaker of English) (Kirwan 2019: 45).

It's like when two people speak the same language there's a kind of a bond between both of them (speaker A of Yoruba) (Little and Kirwan 2018: 335).

In contrast, when asked how they might feel in a situation where their home languages had been excluded from their education they said:

It's so, so sad because it's like blocking a huge doorway ... it's like taking away an advantage of exploring (speaker of Kurdish) (Kirwan 2019: 42).

Don't hide away from your own language because it's what makes you, you, and it's special and it's, you can't, it's like having an arm or a leg, you can't take it away from you (speaker of German) (Little and Kirwan 2019: 49).

A child without a language is a child without a soul (speaker B of Yoruba) (Little and Kirwan 2019: 152, 153).

Growing proficiency in literacy provides the confidence for learners to embark on their own initiatives and many of them begin to produce work in all the languages at their disposal. This autonomous learning can operate at both an individual and cooperative level. It also paves the way for the introduction of self-assessment which happens in SBC in the penultimate year of schooling and focuses on the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing (for further explanation see Little and Kirwan 2019: 137, 138). It can also be argued that had the teaching staff in SBC been in a position to teach pupils through the home languages present in the school, children would have been empowered to drive their own learning to a much lesser degree. Because teachers lacked proficiency in these languages, they used

their flexibility and creativity to engage in an approach to education that encouraged the development of autonomous skills that might not otherwise have been nurtured.

## 4 Conclusion

There are four assumptions underlying the approach to teaching and learning in SBC. The first is that the most effective way for plurilingual pupils to learn is to encourage them to use all the languages at their disposal autonomously – whenever and however they want to. Secondly, even very young children can be trusted to know how to use their home language autonomously as a tool of learning. The third assumption is that developing oral proficiency, literacy and language awareness is a complex process, in which reading and writing support listening and speaking and *vice versa*. The fourth assumption sees language awareness as a tool to support learning but also one of learning's most valuable outcomes, and it develops spontaneously when pupils make autonomous use of the languages at their disposal.

The key features of this approach are rooted in a view of primary education that is child-centred so that reflective and analytical dimensions of learning are firmly rooted in what pupils themselves contribute. Because classroom interaction takes account of their existing knowledge, skills and interests, pupils tend to be fully engaged. When pupils are activated to be agents of their own learning, their ability to direct and evaluate their learning becomes increasingly apparent as they move through the school. Finally, the development of literacy in English as the principal language of schooling feeds into, but also depends on, the development of pupils' literacy in their home language, Irish and (in Fifth and Sixth Class) French.

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## 6 Biography

**Déirdre Kirwan** was principal of a linguistically diverse primary school in Ireland (1987-2015), Scoil Bhríde Cailíní, where she led the integrated approach to language teaching and learning that supported the use of pupils' home languages. Déirdre was awarded: *European Ambassador for Languages* (Léargas, 2008); PhD (Trinity College Dublin, 2009) for her research in language education. She has contributed to the new *Primary Language Curriculum* (Government of Ireland) and the *European Centre for Modern Languages*. Her most recent publication, co-authored with David Little, is entitled *Engaging with Linguistic Diversity: A Study of Educational Inclusion in an Irish Primary School* (2019) Bloomsbury Academic.



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