

Attitudes towards immigrant children and their home languages within the Irish education system

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Courtney graduated with a Bachelor of Education (B. Ed.) from Marino Institute of Education in 2021. Her interest in the area of interculturalism and language diversity has emerged from her educational, personal, and professional experience.

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INTRODUCTION

This article explores the position and importance attributed to immigrant children's home languages within the Irish education system. In particular, it examines teachers' perceptions towards using immigrant children's home languages as an academic resource to support additional language learning. Additionally, it analyses the importance given to immigrant students' home languages as a marker of identity. The intent is to provide a brief synopsis from a larger piece of research conducted for an undergraduate dissertation. This article aims to identify:

- To what extent are immigrant children's home languages being integrated into the Irish education system's vision of Irishness and nationhood?
- The level of importance placed on immigrants' home languages within the education system as an academic resource and marker of identity.
- Teachers' perceptions towards diversity and immigrants' home languages.

The results present evidence that immigrant children's home languages are yet to be fully integrated into the Irish education system as a resource for additional language learning and are yet to be given full recognition as an important aspect of the child's identity. The hope is that providing a focus on immigrants' language education will encourage educators to adopt more inclusive approaches, as well as provide motivation to further their knowledge in the area. The ideal goal is to progress towards more inclusive and plurilingual educational policies and practices.

CONTEXT

Prior to the 1990s Ireland had limited experience of inward migration. This changed during the economic boom, where the number of immigrants entering Ireland accelerated rapidly (McGinnity, Grotti, Russell & Fahey, 2018). This event diversified the population to a degree not seen in modern Irish history, with 10% of primary school students now immigrants or children of immigrants (Heinz & Keane, 2018). Roughly 182 languages are spoken in Ireland, with 612,000 people speaking languages other than English or Irish at home, which translates to roughly three children in every classroom (CSO, 2017; O'Connor, 2018). The diverse cultures that immigrants bring are changing Ireland's demographics and creating an increasingly complex multilingual context in which to teach languages (Cummins & Ó Duibhir, 2012). Consequently, the Irish education system must adapt in congruence with the students for which it caters. However, evidence shows that more support is required, particularly surrounding immigrant children's integration and academic achievement.

Immigrants report feeling less like they belong in school than native Irish pupils (Schleicher, 2015). This feeling can be exacerbated by racist attitudes and beliefs (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2005) and the undervaluing of their home languages and identities. An example includes an interview with a second-generation immigrant in England, who describes his experience of multilingualism as "when I go down into town sometimes I don't speak Punjabi as loudly as I might like to do because I might get some funny comments from people in the street" (Conteh, 2018, p.36). This highlights the child's awareness of possible reactions towards their multilingual abilities. Additionally, academic achievement gaps are increasing between immigrants and native Irish pupils, particularly regarding literacy (Shiel, Kelleher, McKeown, & Denner, 2016). Upon entering the Irish education system, immigrants need to quickly attain the level of English competency required for academic success (Skinner & O'Toole, 2018). The longer it takes them to reach this required level, the more difficult it becomes

to succeed as the curriculum's language demands increase in successive years, forcing immigrants to chase a moving target.

The benefits and importance of maintaining children's home languages for their school experience and academic achievement are well documented. First, Little (2010, p. 16) states the "use of the home-language at school affirms the migrant pupil's identity and helps to counteract any tendency to stigmatise him or her for membership of a group that is perceived as linguistically inferior". Second, Sierens & Van Avermaet (2014) find that at a minimum, learning through two languages does not impede language skills development in the child's second language. At best, extensive research shows that these language skills are simultaneously progressed and sustained in the child's first language (Bialystok, 2016). This reflects Cummins' (2011) Interdependence of Languages Theory, where a strong base in the home language supports the acquisition of second language; as although on the surface languages appear different, underlying conceptual understandings can be transferred from one language to another. For instance, learning to use capital letters in one language can be applied in the second language (Conteh, 2018). Therefore, simultaneously learning both languages acts synergistically to develop each faster than if learned separately.

Despite these benefits, the two most used language education models in Ireland are immersion and withdrawal approaches, neither of which encourages the development of the child's home language (Department of Education and Skills, 2012). Schools with few children learning English as an additional language commonly use immersion approaches as this is most practical (Wallen & Kelly-Holmes, 2006). These pupils are placed in a mainstream class and taught through the language of instruction. This is also known as the 'sink or swim' approach as few supports are in place for additional language learning (Skinner & O'Toole, 2018). In the Irish context, withdrawal approaches are where immigrant children are integrated in the mainstream class and learning support teachers withdraw them in small groups for weekly supplementary teaching (DES, 2012). Since the introduction of the new Special Education Teaching (SET) Model in 2017, provisions for EAL learners have been combined with support for Special Educational Needs (DES, 2017a). While the model was introduced to provide schools with greater autonomy, allowing them to divide allocations between language and learning support as they deem appropriate, Gardiner-Hyland & Burke (2018) highlight issues with this combined approach. These include the non-existent or limited inclusion of EAL learners in documents and guidelines aimed at supporting teachers under the new model. Fundamentally, they find a lack of support and emphasis on supporting EAL learners under the new model.

While immersion and withdrawal approaches are still most commonly used, Ireland is beginning to make positive progress in encouraging the transfer of skills between languages, with the introduction of the new Primary Language Curriculum. Prior to 2019, the teaching of English, Irish and foreign languages had been compartmentalised, with little emphasis on encouraging the transfer of skills between languages or the recognition of immigrants' prior language skills (Cummins & Ó Duibhir, 2012). The introduction of the new Primary Language Curriculum, aims to overcome these limitations by teaching the English and Irish language through similarly structured curricula, encouraging teachers to promote the transfer of skills between languages (NCCA, 2018). However, the introduction of this language curriculum is relatively new and requires further research to identify the level success in meeting its aims and placing a greater emphasis on first languages.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilises documentary analysis which is the “systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents—both printed and electronic” (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). It is a form of qualitative research, where data is collected from documents including published literature, curricula, and policies, which informed the findings and analysis of this article. These documents were collected from databases, search engines and libraries such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, Marino Institute of Education Library and Trinity College's TARA repository. The analytic procedure involved “finding, selecting, appraising, and synthesising data contained in documents” (Bowen, 2009, p. 28). Using a method of coding, the information gathered was then organised into themes which formed the article's main findings and discussion.

The results are used to explore the historical influences that affected the evolution of the current education system and to identify how this impacts the approaches taken towards multilingual education. It then evaluates the present multilingual policies and practices, including comparison against language education theory, international best practice, and their implementation within primary schools. Finally, immigrants' experiences within the classroom are explored

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Main Finding - The residual effects from historical nationalist ideology, and contemporary monolingual perspectives have reduced the emphasis placed on intercultural and multilingual education, as well as decelerated progress in adapting language policies (Barnett et al., 2007; Wallen & Kelly-Holmes, 2006; DES, 2005).

Hierarchical power relations within the Irish education system and society place immigrant children in subordinate positions, despite the evident importance of home languages to immigrant children's success. It is necessary to consider the concept of 'Power' when conducting research in relation to immigrant children's education. BouAynaya (2016) describes 'national identity' as a social construct created by political elites as a means of maintaining governance. This is normally achieved by enhancing social cohesion through the creation of a unified, homogenous national identity. The state and powerful elite have the sufficient levels of financial, social, and cultural capital needed to create self-advantageous identities (Schmidt & McDaid, 2015). Therefore, these groups have the power to include or exclude those that do not fit into this categorisation, creating societal barriers (Best, 2016). This tends to construct a narrow and exclusionary definition of "Irishness". Consequently, subordinate groups that do not match this identity frequently form in society. To be accepted, they must discard their own identity and assimilate. Cummins (1996) notes that schools replicate society's values and attitudes. This main finding is evident within several areas of the education system and society:

HISTORY AND STRUCTURING OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM.

These power-relations are evident in the history and structuring of the education system. Historical nationalist ideologies slowed the pace at which the Irish education system adapted to and addressed multilingual education. For instance, when Ireland became a free state in 1922, responsibility for the Irish cultural revival was placed on schools, in particular the promotion of the Irish-language and the Catholic religion, to provide a marked contrast against the colonial education system introduced in 1831 (Coolahan, 2012). The first attempt to create a new curriculum in 1922, had a large emphasis on the Irish language, often to the detriment of other subjects. This set the framework for all curricula for the next 50 years. Though each had modifications, none changed the underlying nationalist philosophy or ideologies. While there was call for reform around 1924, a report from the Council of Education supported the status quo, adding to the stagnation of the education system (Walsh, 2016).

LANGUAGE EDUCATION MODELS.

perspective can still be seen in today i.e., the Irish education system is theoretically bilingual (English/Irish), in a largely English-monolingual society, that is becoming increasingly multilingual. Suitable language education models must be chosen to match the needs and abilities of the children it supports. However, this is frequently not the case in Ireland, with reasons for choosing a language education model often being ideological, logistical, or traditional (Barnett et al., 2007). This is seen in the most frequently chosen language education models, immersion, and withdrawal approaches, neither of which focus on developing or using the child's home language as an academic resource; a lack of emphasis compounded by the 2017 SET Model. A plurilingual classroom is one where multiple languages are learned to varying extents, linguistic tolerance is valued and intercultural experiences and communication across languages are promoted (CoE, 2007). However, despite plurilingual approaches being promoted internationally, the Council of Europe (DES, 2005, p.12) argues that the "emphasis noted elsewhere on plurilingualism is not as noticeable in Ireland, nor are the Council of Europe instruments such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and the European Language Portfolio (ELP) put to use or even known by the teaching profession at large". This highlights the somewhat slow pace at which the Irish education system has adapted to linguistic diversity, initially because of the emphasis placed on creating a homogenous Irish identity.

CONTEMPORARY MONOLINGUAL PERSPECTIVES.

Additionally, contemporary monolingual perspectives present within society and the education system, inhibit the emphasis placed on immigrant children's home languages. First, this can be seen where Hancock (2018) notes that teachers may perceive that diversity and children's home languages create problems, rather than viewing them as a resource from which to draw. This devalues home languages and positions them in a deficit perspective, with little importance given to plurilingual abilities. Schools can therefore reflect the idea of dominant and subordinate languages and identities. These language hierarchies may present themselves in multiple ways within the education system; for instance, in the idea that multilingualism is enrichment for majority groups but a threat for linguistic minorities (Sierens & Van Avermaet, 2014). This means that learning certain languages, such as English, are prioritised over others (Van Avermaet, 2018). Both majority and minority group children internalise these ways in which languages, cultures and identities are viewed. The importance of teacher-student relationships is emphasised repeatedly, where teachers can challenge or reinforce the status quo, either empowering or disempowering pupils (Cummins, 1996). Second, although intercultural and

multilingual aims are promoted in schools in Ireland, these are often viewed through a monolingual lens. Policies and guidelines can exacerbate this perspective. For instance, the language the Intercultural Guidelines use to describe one of its aims includes to raise “awareness within the educational community of issues that arise from increasing linguistic diversity” (NCCA, 2005, p.5). Third, this is reflected in how immigrant children’s language abilities are assessed (August, Shanahan, & Escamilla, 2009). Bialystok (2018) highlights that many linguistic assessments are carried out through children’s second language. This lack of mastery over the assessment language automatically places the children at a disadvantage, inhibiting them from performing well, inaccurately representing their true abilities (PISA, 2013). Hancock (2018) consequently finds a disproportionate number of immigrant children placed in low ability groups in classrooms.

Power imbalance may be most readily apparent during the interactions between society’s dominant and minority groups. McGinnity et al. (2018) suggests that social interactions between minority and majority groups greatly impact societal attitudes towards diversity, particularly the quality of such interactions. Overall, negative interactions are more influential than positive. Skinner & O’Toole (2018) emphasise Vygotsky’s research highlighting that learning is a social activity and it is therefore important that pupils are not segregated within schools, and that positive intercultural interactions are promoted. Separating pupils, for instance during withdrawal programmes or ability grouping, stigmatises the minority group, reinforcing social stratification as well as creating an identity of ‘Otherness’ (Van Avermaet, 2018). Consequently, during withdrawal programmes, these children are not getting full access to the mainstream curriculum, and the benefits of translanguaging and cross-language communication are not realised, issues compounded by the new 2017 SET Model (Sierens & Van Avermaet, 2014). Translanguaging is a process of combining the languages at one’s disposal to increase communicative ability (Conteh, 2018, p.37). Valuing linguistic diversity benefits both majority and minority pupils as it develops intercultural experiences and appreciation.

Significance of findings

This study contributes to existing knowledge of influences on the structure of the education system, by enhancing understanding of its long-standing interest in maintaining and promoting the Irish identity. While it is desirable to foster strong national identity, care is needed to ensure it does not become exclusionary towards minority groups in society. Additionally, by drawing connections between Ireland’s language education models and the value placed on home-languages, the findings suggest the two most chosen language education models do not fully

support schools' in incorporating children's home-languages. The desire to promote the Irish identity and the prevailing language models in use, identify two inhibitors for the education system's progress in developing its intercultural and multilingual policies.

Recommendations

Ireland should accelerate from its monolingual perspective to a more intercultural and inclusive mindset. To achieve this, greater emphasis needs to be placed on providing all teachers with thorough and in-depth training on diversity, interculturalism, and language developments. This would provide teachers with the skills to support immigrant children's education. First, successful implementation of this would enhance the valuing of diversity and home-languages (Cummins, 2011). Second, it would encourage teachers to critically reflect on their conception of diversity (Rezai Rashti & Martino, 2010). Finally, it would enhance their cultural awareness and understanding of barriers immigrants may face (IDEC, 2015). This education should be provided during initial teacher education (ITE) and throughout all teachers' careers. This can be promoted through sustained funding of initiatives such as the Development & Intercultural Education programme which encourages inclusive practices within ITE. While this is the State's responsibility, it is also teachers' professional responsibility to supplement their own education through continuing professional development as required to meet their students' needs.

Incentives or requirements should be introduced, encouraging teachers to learn additional languages, specifically those most spoken by immigrants in Ireland. Supports for this should include specialised education or relaxation of barriers preventing the hiring of teachers who speak foreign languages. Moreover, financial rewards and professional recognition could be introduced to encourage this language development.

Further research is required to identify feasible methods to support immigrants' home-languages through the new Primary Language Curriculum. Presently, there is limited inclusion of immigrant's home-languages within educational policy, requiring greater attention from the Irish education system (DES, 2005). The education system should move from its monolingual and quasi-bilingual models towards internationally recommended plurilingual and intercultural approaches, through use of the new Primary Language-Curriculum (DES, 2017b). These approaches work towards creating a more inclusive society and education system, counteracting monolingual views and deficit perspectives of immigrant children.

CONCLUSION

This article highlights experiences immigrants may have in the education system, including facing deficit perspectives from teachers, fellow-students, schools, and society. Additionally, it shows the importance of teacher-pupil relationships and encouraging positive social and intercultural interactions with their peers. Finally, it emphasises the ability of schools to positively contribute to pupils' sense of identity. The main findings are summarised as follows:

Historical nationalist ideologies and contemporary monolingual perspectives remain influential. This has hindered the pace at which the education system has adopted more inclusive, intercultural, and multilingual policies, because of continued emphasis on creating a homogenous identity. This has frequently resulted in schools choosing language education models for ideological or traditional reasons. As a result, Ireland has been somewhat slow to respond to the rapid change in demographics since the Celtic Tiger era. Consequently, Ireland's current policies and approaches towards multilingualism are still evolving to meet their full potential in supporting immigrant children in the Irish education system.

Greater emphasis needs to be placed on introducing and developing plurilingual approaches within the classroom. Intercultural education and plurilingualism emphasise a more nuanced understanding of Irish identity and encourage intercultural interactions and acceptance. The language approach chosen should be designed in response to pupils' specific needs. One of the article's more significant findings is that the language education models most used in Ireland i.e., immersion and quasi-bilingual models, often undervalue children's home-languages. For instance, immersion education approaches children's home-languages as a hindrance to their learning, while the limited availability of personnel who can speak multiple languages inhibits teaching immigrants through their home-languages. A solution to this is emerging through Ireland's Languages Connect Strategy, which aims to improve the language ability of all students in Ireland, as well as providing upskilling programmes for secondary-school teachers (DES, 2017). Additionally, the new Primary Language Curriculum encourages transferring skills between languages (Cummins & Ó Duibhir, 2012).

Schools have significant ability to influence perceptions towards immigrants' home-languages. Immigrant children may face deficit perspectives towards their academic abilities and home-languages (Skinner & O'Toole, 2018). Considering this, the research indicates the significant influence schools can have in tackling these perspectives and fostering immigrant's sense of belonging and identity (PISA, 2013). Finally, the study and shows the importance of

teacher-pupil relationships and encouraging positive social and intercultural interactions with their peers.

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