



NRT IRELAND 2019

Report

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**SIRIUS is co-funded by the
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Dublin, Teacher's Club - 11th June 2019



Context

Ireland's experience of migration has changed radically over the past two decades, with a shift from net emigration to net immigration. The 2016 Census indicates that 535,475 non-Irish nationals, from 200 different nationalities, are now living in Ireland. Of those counted in the 2016 Census, children aged 0 to 14 years comprised 12.5% of the non-Irish nationals counted. The same census also showed that 612,018 Irish residents spoke a language other than Irish or English at home, an increase of 19.1% since 2011. Of these, 363,715 were non-Irish nationals and the top languages spoken were Polish (113,225), Lithuanian (30,502) Romanian (26,645) and Portuguese (16,737). For the 2019 SIRIUS National Roundtable, we centred our discussion on the topic of linguistic diversity in Irish classrooms. This Roundtable focused on the experiences of bilingual children, the challenges they and teachers face, and the resources available to teachers in Ireland. At present, mainstream primary education system in Ireland currently tends to focus only on the curricular languages English and Irish (Gaelic); heritage language transmission (meaning the transmission of languages spoken by the children's parent(s)) is usually the responsibility of families, communities and local initiatives. However, the role heritage languages play for a child's development, for their academic skills as well as their psychosocial wellbeing is recognised in the Irish Primary Language Curriculum, which encourages teachers to enhance children's skills through their entire linguistic repertoire. The curriculum mentions that teachers should foster linguistic diversity and encourage children to develop skills in all of their languages. This includes home languages/heritage languages. However, teachers are not yet trained with a focus on linguistic diversity.

Linguistic diversity, and its inclusion in policy and training documents in education, is a key issue for migrant students in Ireland. There are huge benefits to encouraging linguistic diversity in classrooms: when pupils feel that their languages and cultures are affirmed, they are more likely to develop a strong sense of identity. Additionally, using heritage languages in the classroom also benefits children who only speak the majority language, as it helps them to gain a better understanding of how other people express themselves, resulting in more openness among pupils, respect and intercultural competence. In general, promoting a variety of languages in primary school education is of benefit to all. Heritage language speakers benefit from using their mother tongue because it eases the transition from home to school and because it values their identity and their experiences outside the school. For children who are new to the majority language, being able to use the heritage language allows them to rely on knowledge they have developed in their early childhood to transfer literacy skills and learning strategies.

Additionally, there is a huge positive effect to children from learning in a diverse environment, which presents a strong opportunity for schools to encourage curiosity and independent learning by taking advantage of all the languages children speak in the school. This is something that is incredibly achievable in a country the size of



Ireland; in Finland, which has a similar population size, it's normal for schools even in rural areas to be multilingual. This is definitely something Ireland could adopt to great effect for the benefit of all pupils.

Research shows that bilingualism does not hinder language development nor academic achievement, and it carries great cognitive benefits. However, currently the recognition of its benefits is not widely accepted among either schools or migrant communities in Ireland. In some cases, migrant parents actively discourage their children from adopting the heritage language. This is especially problematic when the heritage language is not perceived to be a "useful" one. There is the idea that some languages are more useful than others, so both parents and teachers have a bias towards languages that seem to be useful for travel, work, or languages that have a high status like French and Spanish, and often do not give enough value of home languages that are spoken by only a few and are not generally learned as foreign languages (such as Greek or Swahili or Tamil).

National Round Table

The National roundtable was titled Linguistic Diversity in Irish Classrooms and was held in the Teacher's Club Dublin on Tuesday 11th of June 2019 from 11.00 am to 2.30 pm. At the Roundtable, Dr. Francesca La Morgia, Assistant Professor in Clinical Speech and Language Studies at Trinity College Dublin, presented on the linguistic diversity of Irish classrooms, with a focus on the experiences of bilingual children as well as a focus on the challenges facing and resources available to teachers in Ireland. She also discussed the best practices developed in other European countries and how those are implemented. There were 21 stakeholders at the conference, from diverse backgrounds, such as policy makers, researchers, school principals and teachers, as well as parents of migrant students. Participants included representatives from the Department of Education and Skills, policymaker from TUSLA - The Child and Family Agency, Dublin-based school principals, representatives from migrant NGOs and researchers working in the fields of migration and education.

The aim of the Roundtable was to identify the challenges facing migrant students in Ireland in relation to bilingualism/multilingualism, and to discuss what steps may be taken to improve the ability of the Irish education system to address the particular needs of these students. As such, NCP invited participants from the educational sphere in Ireland as well as from state agencies to participate in the Roundtable. The ultimate goal is to influence changes in Irish policy that will improve the overall educational experience for migrant students and language usage is a major component of achieving an optimal educational experience. Policy changes might include measures to ease integration into the school system and assistance for migrant students to reach their full academic potential.



Inputs and debate points

The 2019 SIRIUS National Roundtable explored the positive effects of and best practices for multilingualism in schools. The roundtable was facilitated with a main keynote speech delivered by Dr. La Morgia. Additional presentations were provided by practitioners in the area, including a school teacher and a parent raising a bilingual child in Ireland.

The National Roundtable was introduced by Sevak Khachatryan, NCP Youth Project Coordinator and the national contact point for SIRIUS. Themes discussed on the day included: Language diversity in Europe, multilingual schools, and barriers to bilingualism. A presentation by Dr. La Morgia (including on the Mother Tongues project) was followed by interactive group discussions on the topic of multilingualism in Irish classroom. At the end, feedback was sought out of the workshop from all participants.

Dr. La Morgia began her presentation by contextualising the landscape for language diversity in Europe, and by describing how schools are increasingly becoming multilingual. She then proceeded by discussing practice in Ireland. Debate points arose out of this, such as: the importance given to language in Irish schools, ways in which multilingualism can be further encouraged, facts and issues around language acquisition, as well as the relationship between parents, children, and language.

Policy makers from TUSLA commented on the bilingualism framework provided by Dr. La Morgia, while the representative from the Department of Education and Skills reflected on the current and forthcoming Primary Language curriculum implemented in schools. Further reflections were added by a French Language therapist recently relocated to Dublin, and by a local primary school teacher. They reflected on their own experiences with bilingualism. Questions from the audience included how to approach bilingualism in areas which lack diversity.

Many Speech and Language Therapists, psychologists, and teachers are telling the parents that their children need to speak English. However, Francesca's research shows that language development and mother tongue/ bilingualism are very important in acquiring other critical skills. Children who lose their mother tongue also experience a disconnect from their grandparents, extended family and friends in their country of origin and ultimately, loss of culture.

Amongst the main debate points, some consensus emerged within the group in relation to difficulties arising out of the lateness in which the study of languages has been introduced in Ireland. As agreed by the stakeholders, this has made very difficult for students in Ireland to be proficient in any language, including when Irish is taught as an additional language. Additionally, many children demonstrate a lack of interest in their mother tongue, and tend to lose this language only to have to learn it later in life. This may happen as a result of different circumstances, such as for employment reasons, traveling, returning to the country of origin, leaving cert, among others.



Conclusions

Conclusions included the need for more opportunities to give opportunities for children to develop their own languages, for further development of the good practices presented during the conference, and the need for more awareness around the importance of valuing multilingualism and heritage languages in Irish schools. Teachers should also receive further training about mother tongues/bilingualism and child development.

Being bilingual or proficient in another language should be encouraged and celebrated as this is a very important skill to have in terms of employability in the future of the young person. Parents, teachers, and the community can encourage bilingual children through everyday small things like having the radio on, having chats in that language, etc. The community and parents have a huge role to play in influencing/building up the interest of the child.

Dr. La Morgia said that in addition to a lack of training, a lack of confidence may be preventing some teachers from encouraging multilingualism in the primary school context. “A lack of diversity in the teaching force may mean that teachers often don't know much about the languages of their pupils,” she said. “Teachers are also sometimes scared of using these languages as a resource because they feel that if they can't speak them they can't use them.” Dr. La Morgia's recommendation is that teacher training should place more emphasis on techniques that make the most of children's heritage languages and that specific training be given to all teachers to encourage the adoption and facilitation of multilingual learning in Irish schools.

Continuity with the NRT 2018

One of the three topics were discussed at the 2018 National Roundtable in The Irish Human Right and Equality Commission was the promotion of the use of migrant children's mother tongues in Irish schools. At the 2018 Roundtable, there were several school principals present. Speaking at the first Roundtable was Dr. Francesca La Morgia, a linguistics academic and the founder of Mother Tongue Ireland, an organisation that works to promote bilingualism in Ireland. The inclusion of Dr. La Morgia was a hugely positive one; after the 2018 Roundtable, Dr. La Morgia continued to collaborate with several of the school principals. She further organised language-specific training for the teachers in St. Mary's Primary School in Dublin. That school also adopted Dr. La Morgia's book *Language Explorers*. The Language Explorers Activity book is an essential resource for teachers who want to embrace a multilingual approach in their teaching.

Given the favourable response to the linguistic diversity portion of the 2018 Roundtable, it was decided that the 2019 SIRIUS National Roundtable would mainly focus on linguistic diversity in Irish classrooms. Dr. La Morgia took a more central role in the 2019 Roundtable, providing training, context and information to the educational and state body representatives who attended.



Challenges

The main challenge at last year's National roundtable was to involve policy makers. For the 2019 National roundtable we ensured that we had policy makers from the Department of Education and Skills and TUSLA (The Child and Family Agency) attending. Moreover, not only we managed to have policy makers from both government departments, but we also agreed to continue the collaboration with them in regard to any future updates regarding SIRIUS. We therefore established a firm relationship in which to secure their involvement and support in the future.



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Participants

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Name	Organisation/ institution	Position in organisation/ institution
<i>POLICY MAKERS</i>		
Nicholas Cosgrave	Department of Education and Skills	Primary District Inspector
Anne Marie McGovern	TUSLA – Child and Family Agency	Integrated Services Manager
<i>MIGRANT-LED ORGANISATIONS</i>		
Sevak Khachatryan	New Communities Partnership	Project Coordinator
Laura Kersulyte	New Communities Partnership	Laura Kersulyte
Valéria Aquino	Immigrant Council of Ireland	Integration Officer
Erica Mills	New Communities Partnership	Communications Officer
<i>TEACHERS, TEACHER-TRAINERS, SCHOOL-LEADERS OR OTHER SCHOOL REPRESENTATIVES</i>		
Ruth Coghlan	St. Paul's Primary School	School Principal
John O'Brien	St Josephs' Secondary School	School Principal
Aoife Martin	St. Paul's Primary School	Home School Liaison
Simon Rouse	Mt. Carmel Secondary School	Teacher
<i>PARENTS- AND STUDENT REPRESENTATIVES</i>		
Asiya Al-Tawash	Muslim Primary Education Board	Asiya Al-Tawash
Jillian Frayne	Migrant Parent	Jillian Frayne
Charlotte Petit	Migrant Parent	Charlotte Petit
<i>OTHER RELEVANT STAKEHOLDERS</i>		
Francesca La Morgia	Trinity College Dublin	Professor
Diego Castillo	Trinity College Dublin	Doctoral researcher
Livia Fatone	Monther Tongues	Board member
Camille Dorangeville	Monther Tongues	Board member