

INTO Education Conference: 21–22 November 2025

Ar Scáth a Chéile a Mhaireann na Daoine

Inclusion of plurilingual skills in linguistically diverse classrooms: benefits for all learners

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Overview

- Inclusion
 - Belonging, Identity, Agency
- Using a plurilingual approach to foster inclusion
- Inclusive plurilingual and intercultural education in action
- Council of Europe CM/ Recommendation (2022)¹ on the importance of plurilingual and intercultural education for democratic culture

Inclusion

- What do we mean by *inclusion*?
- **BELONGING**: is knowing that we are accepted for who we are in the family, community, classroom, society in which we find ourselves. We need language to belong actively.
- **IDENTITY**: this is our sense of who we are that arises from where we belong, the language(s) we speak, the experiences we have had. Language is central to our identity.
- **AGENCY**: is our ability to set and follow our own agenda in life and in learning: making choices, acting on them, and evaluating the outcomes. We cannot set our own agenda without language.

What is plurilingualism?

- The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR; Council of Europe 2001: 4), defines plurilingualism as “a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact”
- According to the CEFR, individuals are plurilingual and societies are multilingual
- Plurilingualism describes an individual’s capacity to communicate in two or more languages
- Competence in one language skill (Listening; Speaking; Reading; Writing) is not the same in all the languages we know
- We each have our own individual plurilingual repertoire
- Each new language takes root in the soil provided by the language(s) already present
- If we want pupils to develop integrated plurilingual repertoires we must find ways of
 - enabling learners to make use of the languages they already know when they are learning a new language
 - ensuring that home languages play a central role in learners’ educational experience

The kind of pedagogy needed to support the development of plurilingual skills:

- is grounded in language use
- engages learners' identities and agency
- activates pupils' existing linguistic repertoire to support the learning of new languages

What the teachers said

*It's not always about what I bring to this group. It's about what I can find that **they** have to offer, to themselves and to others. This changes the way I approach teaching. I could never go back to the way I used to teach before* (Little & Kirwan, 2024: 17)

When you bring in the home languages the lights come on! (Ibid.: 17)

Plurilingual approaches

- **Create an inclusive atmosphere** in which mutual interest, respect, collaboration and social cohesion flourish
- **Motivate learners:** by including home languages and other languages they already know, we are drawing our learners' identities into the centre of the teaching/learning process
- **Foster learner autonomy:** when we encourage our learners to draw on their identity, we allow them to make a unique contribution to the life of the classroom and the learning of their peers
- **Achieve very effective language learning:** by including all the languages our learners know, we create an environment in which languages are used in order to learn and learnt because they are used

By their nature, plurilingual approaches are learner-centred

Inclusive plurilingual and intercultural education in action

Guiding principle

The child is the starting point, the centre, and the end

His development, his growth, is the ideal....

To the growth of the child all studies are subservient...

Personality, character, is more than subject matter.

Not knowledge or information, but **self-realization, is the goal**

(Dewey, 1902)

"... the child's existing knowledge and experience form the basis for learning"

(PSC, 1999: 8; PLC (MFL), 2025: 15)

Historical Influence - introduction of National schools 1830. Curriculum delivered through English to Irish-speaking pupils

Scoil Bhríde's version of the plurilingual approach in 2015

Basic pedagogical principles 1. Plurilingual pupils will learn most effectively if they are encouraged to use all the languages at their disposal whenever they want to and for whatever purposes seem to them appropriate 2. Even very young children can be trusted to know how to use their home language as a tool of learning 3. Teaching and learning proceed via exploratory dialogue: pupils share the initiative in classroom discourse 4. Strong emphasis on development of literacy skills in English, Irish, French and home languages 5. The involvement of immigrant parents in the development of their daughters' home language literacy	"Teachers use ... pedagogical approaches and strategies [that] connect with children's life experience, circumstances, strengths, and interests" (PCF, 2025: 6) Because the pupil's home language is her principal cognitive tool, the medium of her discursive thinking and her consciousness The role of the teacher is to support and develop children's talk during the processes of exploration, discovery and problem-solving" (PLC, 2025: 10) The goal was to develop pupils' writing skills to the highest levels of age-appropriate proficiency in all the languages in their developing plurilingual repertoires For children with (EAL), partnerships between home and school are critical for planning for and supporting their language learning" (PLC, 2025: 12)
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Home languages benefit all learners

Home languages can perform three functions in a classroom:

- In reciprocal communication with other pupils who have the same or a closely related home language
 - Play at the beginning of the school day and in the yard
 - Pair and group work (may use home language but report to larger group in English)
- For non-reciprocal purposes of display: "This what we say in my language"
 - In the most junior classes learning to count, working with shapes and colours, and action games are multilingual activities
 - Use of home languages scaffolds the learning of English and Irish
- As a source of intuitive linguistic knowledge that individual pupils make available to the teacher and the rest of the class
 - Enrichment of curriculum content and consolidation of curriculum learning

Language awareness

Early emergence of language awareness – First Class(6½+)

A pupil from a Chinese family recognized and translated a number of words in a children's publication from China, but translated *gate* as *door*

Explained that in her language, *door* is used to describe a means of entry both indoors and outdoors, while in English two different words are needed to take account of the different locations

Introduction of fractions in Third Class (8½+)

Teacher associated *fraction* with *fracture* and elicited synonyms (*break, split*) and words for *break* in other languages

Romanian pupil offered *rupt*, which pupils quickly linked to the *eruption* of a volcano, *interruption* and *disruption*

New languages are always interesting (Fifth Class – 10½+)

An Irish pupil whose parents had been on holiday in Italy brought an Italian newspaper to school that contained a report on a rugby match between Italy and Ireland

The Special Needs Assistant, who was Italian, read part of the article aloud to the class

The pupils were able to understand many words in the article even though they had not learnt Italian

verde y bianchi, azzurra, stadio olympico a Roma, ovale, prendo coraggio

Plurilingual literacy

Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na teangacha: Language Interdependence (Cummins, 1981)

Minority children develop literacy in English, Irish, French (5th and 6th) and in their Home Language

- **Senior Infants:** Emerging plurilingual writing skills
- First Class: dual language texts
- Second Class: dual language texts become more elaborate
- Third Class: writing in three languages ("Not Homework")
- Fourth Class: writing in three languages continues
- Fifth Class: writing in four languages
- Sixth Class: writing in four (and more) languages

What the teachers said

A number of years ago if you had asked me about this I would have had a different answer because I would have said ... written work, no, the oral is the most important [But now] I think that if they form their thoughts with pen and paper first, it gives them the confidence then to go and speak (Little & Kirwan, 2019: 124)

...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... their interest increases if it is something to do with home or their own language or their own experience; they respond with much more developed thought... equally in writing (Little & Kirwan, 2024: 17)

Plurilingual literacy: Resources

The following resources are freely available online:

- Little, D. & D. Kirwan (2024) Revised edition ***Language and Languages in the Primary School: some guidelines for teachers***. PPLI. Hardcopies provided to schools. Also available free to access and download at: <https://ppli.ie/ppli-primary-guidelines/>
- Laois Education Support Centre Toolkit (2025): ***Mind your Language!***
Rphost/Email: info@laoisedcentre.ie
- European Centre for Modern Languages website (2019): ***Inspiring Language Learning in the Early Years (ILLEY)*** <https://www.ecml.at/en/ECML-Programme/Programme-2016-2019/Inspiring-language-learning-in-the-early-years>
- European Centre for Modern Languages website (2025): ***Young Children's Language Learning Pathways (PALINGUI)*** <https://www.ecml.at/en/ECML-Programme-2020-2023/Young-learner-pathways>
- Council of Europe: **Cm/Recommendation (2022)1 on plurilingual and intercultural education for democratic culture**. This publication contains the Recommendation itself and an Explanatory Memorandum <https://rm.coe.int/prems-013522-gbr-2508-cmrec-2022-1-et-expose-motifs-couv-a5-bat-web/1680a967b4>

Pupils' reflections on the benefits of HLs in their education

- *When I use my home language in class, I have a smile on my face. I feel excited, I feel like I really want to do it.*
- *Using our home languages helps us to get personal into each other's cultures and languages: it's 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*
- *It's great because at a very young age you can...learn from each other...and just to be able to say that I went to a school that supports all different languages and cultures is a great thing to have*
- *Don't hide away from your own language because it's what makes you, you, and it's special and it's...it's like having an arm or a leg, you can't take it away from you (Little & Kirwan, 2024: 6)*

What the parents said

- *...It makes them want to speak the Irish more at home. I think it spurs them on'*
- *[happy about] the school's interest in our language. Before, my daughter was ashamed to hear us speaking it. Now she wants to read and write in it*
- *When my child came home and told me that the teacher asked her to say something in [our home language] I sat down and cried because I thought 'someone wants to know about our language'*
- *A weight was lifted off my shoulders when I heard that it was alright to speak my language at home (Little & Kirwan, 2024: 18)*

Learning Outcomes

- The inclusion of home languages promotes well-being, self-esteem and social cohesion
- Positive impact on the learning of Irish
 - Use of Irish increased in school; Scoil Bhríde ranked nationally among top 12% of primary schools for achievement in Irish
- Thanks to the strong emphasis on writing, pupils developed high levels of age-appropriate literacy in English, Irish and French
- Pupils from immigrant families also developed age-appropriate literacy in their home language
- From an early age pupils undertake ambitious autonomous learning initiatives – examples Third and Sixth Classes
- Because multiple languages were continuously in focus, pupils acquired unusually high levels of metalinguistic awareness
- In the standardized tests that pupils took each year from First Class (6½+) to Sixth Class (11½+), the school performed consistently above the national average

Council of Europe CM/ Recommendation (2022)¹ on *The importance of plurilingual and intercultural education for democratic culture ((Recommendation plus Explanatory Memorandum)*

<https://rm.coe.int/prems-013522-qbr-2508-cmrec-2022-1-et-expose-motifs-couv-a5-bat-web/1680a967b4>

When pupils and students speak a minority or migrant language at home, it is necessary to find ways of including those languages in the individual's educational experience in ways that benefit all pupils/students. Only when this is done can education be considered fully inclusive (CoE, 2022: 4.i, 25)

...plurilingual and intercultural education for democratic culture depends crucially on teachers, regardless of the subject/s they are teaching; they are the agents of change (CoE, 2022: 5.c.i, 34)

When two people speak the same language there's a kind of bond between both of them (Little & Kirwan, 2024: 6)

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