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Authors	Horgan, Deirdre;Martin, Shirley;O'Riordan, Jacqui;Maier, Reana
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University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Supporting languages: the socio-educational integration of migrant and refugee children and young people

Abstract

Recent unprecedented levels of migration, while adding cultural and linguistic diversity, places increased pressure on host countries to develop strategies for effectively integrating new arrivals into society. This article draws on data from [X] which uses participatory and co-creation methodologies with children, parents, educators and policymakers to examine and develop key indicators of migrant children's socio-educational integration. It discusses Irish findings related to language and migrant children's participation and belonging in school, highlighting children's concerns over the lack of a diverse language culture and low value placed on preserving heritage language in Ireland and across all six EU partner countries.

Key words: children and young people; migrant; language; integration; education.

Introduction

Child migration is a significant contemporary phenomenon (Bhabha & Abel, IOM, 2019). In 2020, 40.9 million people under the age of 19 were living in a country other than where they were born constituting 14.6% of the world's migrants and 1.6% of children globally (IOM, 2020). This reality has urgent implications for education, child welfare and migration authorities. It has placed increased pressure on host countries to develop strategies for effectively integrating these new arrivals into society. This includes short-term provisions, such as housing, language courses and food, but also requires consideration about mid- and long-term perspectives of social and structural participation (Koehler & Schneider, 2019).

Child migrants are a heterogeneous group with diverse backgrounds and circumstances (Author, 2019). In addition to migrant children, and of relevance to this research, are children with migrant backgrounds with at least one parent who is foreign-born. It is predicted that by the early 2020s more than one quarter of the school-age population in Europe will have a migrant background (Ahad & Benton, 2018).

How children navigate the migratory transition will be determined by a range of factors associated with their pre-migration circumstances, their age, the nature of the journey itself and their post-migration experiences (Bhabha, 2014; Martin et al. 2011). The contexts into which children and youth arrive—the economic, legal, neighbourhood, and school settings—will be in varying degrees welcoming and conducive to successful integration. While this article does not have the scope to engage with the wider discourse on integration, the authors acknowledge that integration can be a problematic concept. In this article integration is presented as a policy initiative of the European Commission, 'a two-way process whereby migrants and EU citizens with migrant backgrounds are offered help to integrate and they in turn make an active effort to become integrated. The integration process involves the host society, which should create the opportunities for the immigrants' full economic, social, cultural, and political participation. It also involves adaptation by migrants who all have rights and responsibilities in relation to their new country of residence (EC, 2020: 2).

Among these, schools are critically important drivers of integration for migrant children and their families (European Commission, 2015; Ahad & Benton, 2018; Martin et al., 2018). Not only does education generate transferable individual skills and capital that impact key aspects of the life course, it also provides the context for social inclusion, peer group encounters and new cultural and language acquisition (McGinnity et al., 2015; Bhabha & Abel, 2020). Education, then, is one of the most important sites of structural integration (Koehler & Schneider, 2019) but according to MIPEX is the greatest weakness in the integration policies of most countries (Solano & Huddleston, 2020). Furthermore, proficiency in the language of the host/receiving country has been found to play a key role in the migrant-native achievement gap (Turney & Kao, 2009; Solano & Huddleston, 2020). Central to many children's integration in host countries, then, is language support in schools.

There are many examples of innovative educational provision designed to generate robust multicultural environments responsive to different pedagogic and emotional needs (Ensor and Goz'dziak, 2016). However, challenges arise in identifying accurately the needs of migrant and refugee children, taking account of their prior educational experience and their linguistic competencies (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2017). Problems regarding gaps in formal education and lack of host country language are especially pronounced among youth who arrive during secondary school and have to race to catch up with their peers in the limited time before they must leave school (Ahad & Benton, 2018).

Peake-Hughes et al. (2021: 3) argue that language use and children's understandings and perspectives of their linguistic diversity and bilingualism are often not a focus of scholarship.

This article forefronts the perspectives of migrant children and young people and documents findings at local, national and transnational levels relating to their experiences of language and socio-educational integration.

Positioning Language: children's perspectives, cultural identity and integration

What limited literature there is highlights how language is central to migrant children's lives both as a link to their heritage and as a key to their future in their new home country.

Language is fundamental to children and young people's sense of cultural identity as 'pluricultural individuals' (Little, 2020). It is also identified as a key facilitator of integration (Ager & Strang, 2008) and schools are recognised as chief among the social institutions impacted by migrant flows acting as key sites of integration (Suárez-Orozco, 2017). Yet, many migrant children experience a 'language gap' or deficit ideology within the education system (Curd-Christiansen, 2020). Children with migrant backgrounds, while sharing some commonalities, are not a homogenous group and their experiences are important, requiring political and policy action (James & Prout, 1997). It is essential, then, to attend to the lived realities of childhood (Tisdall & Punch, 2012; Horgan, 2017) through research which forefronts their perspectives. Such perspectives on language are often overlooked in research, as highlighted by Peake-Hughes et al. (2021).

Language, cultural identity and integration

Research on migrant children's language use and cultural identity is found in migration scholarship (Little, 2020; Moskal & Sime, 2016) as well as in sociological-based research and literature (Peake-Hughes et al., 2021, p.3). Valentine et al.'s (2008) work, on Somali children

living in the UK, argues that increasingly linguistic diversity is challenging traditional assumptions about the relationships between linguistic uniformity, cultural homogeneity and national identities as well as impacting on self-identities. Skeggs (2004, p. 91) notes that a considerable degree of ethnic self-monitoring underpins migrant children's positioning, reinforced by recognition of the minority status of their culture, language and traditions in school. Little (2020) argues that children are often responsible for facilitating the environmental or school language, rather than their heritage language. The children in her study were often invisible as heritage language speakers and did not necessarily showcase their heritage language skills at school, thus risking a negative influence on their constructed identities as plurilingual, pluricultural individuals.

A conceptual framework defining core domains of integration developed by Ager and Strang (2008) identifies language and culture as key facilitators. Being able to speak the main language of the host communities through, for example, the promotion of access to host country language classes, is a requirement consistently identified as central to effectively integrate within the wider community. In particular, academic language proficiency is central to successful educational trajectories of immigrant youth in high income countries (Suárez-Orozco, 2017). Yet, the literature identifies a general lack of support in schools for host-society language as a predominant barrier to the education and inclusion of migrant children and youth (Timm, 2016; Mohamed & Thomas, 2017; Ager & Strang; 2008).

Adopting a 'two-way' understanding of integration, the issue of language competence is a responsibility of receiving communities. Fostering community integration, then, includes reducing barriers to key information that migrant children and their parents may face through the provision of material translated into the languages of refugees and other

migrants (Turney & Kao, 2009). Such efforts are seen as part of a general move towards enhanced essential services in a multicultural context. Significant locations of such integration and support, as consistently identified in the literature, are schools (Suárez-Orozco, 2017; Dryden–Peterson et al, 2017).

Correa-Velez et al., (2010) emphasise how quickly children become competent in the language of the host country. Yet, the continuance of mother–tongue language alongside host language development is seen as important in providing opportunities for migrant children to participate and to belong to their family, ethnic community and the broader host community (Tingvold et al., 2012; Timm, 2016; Horgan & Ní Raghallaigh, 2019). Curdt-Christiansen (2020) refers to the ‘language gap’ ideology which legitimizes the host country language as the only language in education, allowing teachers to control not only language use in classes but also the educational practices at home. Such constructions may result in schools and teachers acting (overtly or covertly) to legitimize the dominant culture and thus contribute to the misrecognition of migrant social and cultural capital, including linguistic capital (Devine, 2009, 2011). Children themselves display an awareness of the lack of currency and recognition of their native languages in the classroom as reinforced through rules discouraging them from speaking to each other in their mother tongues (Devine, 2009).

Language, then, can be seen as an instrument of power and migrant students and their parents may experience considerable difficulties negotiating their way through the education system and establishing themselves as partners in the home–school interface (Rodriguez & Darmody, 2019).

The Irish context and language acquisition

Ireland is now a well-established migrant-receiving country, with one of the highest proportions of foreign-born residents in the EU (McGinnity et al., 2020). The increased ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity in Irish schools due to relatively recent large-scale immigration makes Ireland an interesting case study for a number of reasons. The profile of the migrant population in Ireland is mixed with varying levels of social and cultural capital and comprises nationals from EU countries (70%) and from non-EU countries (30%) (Census, 2016). It also includes unaccompanied minors, children who were granted refugee status, and asylum seekers (ESRI, 2019). The linguistic background of these migrants is very diverse, with most speaking a language other than that of the host country. Furthermore, the teaching body in Ireland is largely homogeneous in terms of the ethnic, socio-economic and linguistic backgrounds of teachers (McDaid & Walsh, 2016; Heinz & Keane, 2018; Rodriguez-Izquierdo & Darmody, 2019) with approximately 1% of primary teachers and 2% of post-primary teachers not from white Irish backgrounds.

Schools in Ireland have students from over 160 nationalities, with 14.4% of students having an immigrant background, a slightly higher proportion than the average across OECD countries (12.5%) (Shiel et al., 2016 in McGinnity et al., 2020). There is evidence of segregated schooling with black and ethnic minority students overrepresented in larger disadvantaged urban schools along with concerns about how children in direct provision accommodation [Ireland's collective accommodation system for refugees and asylum seekers] integrate and are supported by the mainstream schooling system (Ní Dhuinn & Keane, 2021). Previous studies have highlighted how important language spoken in the home is for academic achievement (Darmody & Smyth, 2017). Amongst primary school

pupils in Ireland, 8.7% said that neither English nor Irish was one of their mother tongues and 16% didn't respond to the question (DES, 2017). A large proportion of newly arrived migrants in the Irish education sector have been found to have very low English proficiency (Faas et al., 2015). In most schools, instruction is through English, with a smaller number of Irish-medium schools. Typically, the Irish language is taught alongside English in Irish primary schools as a compulsory subject until Leaving Certificate, unless an exemption had been granted [typically for those with special needs, learning disabilities or if a child has spent a long period outside the State]. Furthermore, there has been low investment and inadequate provision of English language training for adults in Ireland, (McGinnity et al., 2020) which has a knock-on effect for parents supporting their children and communicating with schools.

Educational Integration policy in Ireland

Irish policy has been to mainstream children with migrant backgrounds in the education system, apart from a few specialised services for newly arrived migrants and refugees including unaccompanied minors or children arriving through the Irish Refugee Protection Programme. In fact, access for children to primary and post-primary education in the same manner as Irish citizen children long predates the adoption of the European Communities (Reception Conditions) Regulations in 2018.

The important role of schools in integrating migrant students underpins Irish policy. The Irish government previously developed the *Intercultural Education Strategy 2010-2015* (2010, p. 56) which set goals around intercultural learning, capacity building for schools and teachers, language support, parent and community engagement, and gathering data for monitoring purposes. However, this has been seen as ineffective, given the lack of training

for teachers with respect to its implementation (Ní Dhuinn & Keane, 2021) and migrant children continue to be recognised as being vulnerable to educational disadvantage in the current Department of Education's Statement of Strategy 2021-2023.

The *Migrant Integration Strategy*, published in 2017, sets out the Irish Government's approach to the issue of migrant integration. The primary objective of the Strategy is 'to ensure that barriers to full participation in Irish society by migrants or their Irish-born children are identified and addressed' (DJE, p.8). The strategy stresses the importance of and action around key issues, such as language support, enrolment policies, teacher training, addressing racism, promoting intercultural attitudes, curriculum reform, and encouraging parent participation. More recently, *Languages Connect - Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026* was published highlighting the need for greater diversification in the range of languages offered by schools, support for the languages of immigrant communities and for some heritage languages to be offered as full curricular languages.

While measures were put in place in 2012/13 to support English as an Additional Language (EAL) based on need, McGinnity et al (2018) found that monitoring spending trends on EAL specifically is not possible as assignment of teachers for special educational needs and language supports are combined.

A recent government report on education inequality identified asylum seekers as a group who "are destined to struggle" and recommended training and guidance for teachers on equality for vulnerable groups along with consideration as to how the education system could be made inclusive and culturally respectful to all, including ethnic minorities (House of the Oireachtas, 2019, p.21). The most immediate education need of many children living in

Direct Provision is acquiring English language skills. The Ombudsman for Children's Office recommends attention to the specific language needs and vulnerabilities of these children (OCO, 2020).

The European context and language acquisition

States are mandated to provide education to all children in their jurisdictions without discrimination (Ensor and Goz'dziak, 2016). Despite this, concerns about access and the quality of education for refugee and asylum-seeking children in particular have surfaced. Most EU-countries have been facing challenges in providing decent opportunities for integrating newly arriving refugees and immigrants into mainstream education for several decades. But these challenges have intensified since 2015 with the arrival of larger numbers of refugees and asylum seekers (Koehler et al., 2019). There is some difference in approach to integration of migrant children among EU countries ranging from immersion to segregation, with some favouring an initial phase of catch-up classes and intensive host language training before transfer to mainstream classes, while others promote linguistically diverse classrooms to encourage foreign-language proficiency (Ahad & Benton, 2018; Koehler & Schneider, 2019; Rodríguez-Izquierdo & Darmody, 2019). Often the responsibility of meeting individual student needs is concentrated with designated language teachers, however, this is no longer viewed as sufficient given the rising levels of student diversity (MIPE, 2018).

Methods

The findings presented in this article are based on phase 1 of a wider European Commission funded project. The project is informed by an ecological systems theory approach to

understanding wellbeing and socio-educational integration of refugee and migrant children with research methods designed to include data collection with participants at micro, meso and macro levels (Correa-Velez et al., 2010).

In-line with this approach the research consisted of five micro-level workshops with 35 refugee and migrant children (20 boys and 15 girls), aged 6 to 18 years. Four workshops were with children enrolled in a range of types of primary and second-level schools in Ireland and the fifth was with unaccompanied minors. The children comprised a very diverse mix of first-generation migrant children born in Africa, Eastern Europe, South America, Canada, Belgium and Germany as well as second generation migrants from Poland, Croatia, Nigeria, Hungary, Lithuania, Czech and Slovakia. Children in the workshop with unaccompanied minors were from Albania, Afghanistan, China, Iraq and Africa and were part of an education integration programme in Dublin. All children's workshops were gender balanced. The workshops used participatory research methods designed to reflect the ages and language competencies of the children in each group. These were facilitated by between two to five experienced team members, depending on the ages of participants. All participants were functionally fluent in English and therefore interpreters were not necessary. Language difficulties were dealt with through supportive visual materials and the use of simple language throughout. A multiple methods approach including talk and draw methods, lifeline and voting facilitated multiple modes of communication.

One workshop was held with 25 migrant parents who were not related to the children in the workshops. The research process took into account their level of proficiency in English to ensure they were comfortable in the focus group setting. Parents were also offered the opportunity to write on post-its in their primary language which we could then translate. At

the meso-level, two workshops were held with 14 education and migrant organisation professionals. Finally, at the macro level, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 9 key representatives of the Irish Education sector, NGO and community sector. Fieldwork was conducted between May and August 2019 (Martin et al., 2019). In addition to the data collection in Ireland, fieldwork using the same research methodologies was collected by partners in Belgium, Germany, Greece, Italy and Spain.

Ethical issues

Ethical approval was obtained from the Social Research Ethics Committee at University [name]. One of the key ethical issues was ensuring that specific people and settings were not identified, and that any sensitive issues arising were anonymised in publications arising. Confidentiality can be challenging in group interviews with children, but the research team have experience and competence in researching with children. Agreement to maintain confidentiality was part of the consent process and ensured through developing ground rules with the children at the outset and ongoing monitoring of the group process. The research adhered to child protection guidelines in operation in the educational settings and nationally. The researchers had police clearance and access to relevant child-safety and well-being expertise in the form of trained designated liaison personnel with responsibility for child protection in each of the educational settings and local support agency contact details to share with the participants as part of the debriefing process.

Data analysis

Analysis of data from the workshops and interviews was undertaken using a systematic thematic method (Nowell, 2017). Verbatim quotes from the raw data transcriptions were

used to support the write-up of findings in relation to the children, young people and other stakeholders. In conducting the preliminary analysis, the authors aimed to identify the relevant issues/themes that related, in particular, to the assumptions of the conceptual framework (Correa-Velez et al., 2010) already produced based on the literature review. Following initial coding, commonalities and differences of participants views were examined.

Findings

The findings on socio-educational integration of children with a migrant background from each of the six partner EU countries were not only highly aligned with each other, but also correspond with and support much of the existing research literature. Language and support for language learning, a central concern in integration research, was unsurprisingly a significant topic. The article will now focus in-depth on the findings from the Irish fieldwork and the perspectives of children, parents, educators and policymakers on migrant children's language and socio-educational integration.

Micro-level data

Children's views on language

The children pointed to English as an Additional Language (EAL) support as helpful to their integration, but access to such resources appeared to vary depending on when the participant arrived in Ireland and the school grade to which they were assigned. While acknowledging the importance of learning English, some of them also highlighted the advantages of being bi-lingual.

Having a second language will help me get into a better college and will allow me to interact with people in general (Second-level, 13-16 yrs.)

They discussed having to practice with other English speakers, and expressed some fears around getting things wrong. For example, being asked by teachers to read aloud in class led to anxiety and discomfort among the older students, as they felt they could not express themselves properly in English;

“When someone is uncomfortable speaking English, so they would rather speak their own language and then you can’t talk to them as they don’t want to embarrass themselves or something” (Second-level, 16-18 yrs.).

Some students spoke about being actively discouraged from speaking their native language, for example one boy from an asylum-seeking background commented that

‘[teachers] tell you to stop talking in the language. I was speaking to my Italian friend and a teacher said stop speaking Italian. I needed to speak English’ (Second-level, 16-18 yrs.).

Some spoke about experiencing incidences of bullying and racism,

Irish students would make fun of your language and call you foreigner. A student came recently they would make fun of his accent level” (Second-level, 13-16 yrs.).

I mean it would rarely happen but if they come from a different country they could be treated differently because ... they might not know how to speak the language or if they have a strong accent people could ... Yeah. Bully them (Primary, 8-12 yrs.).

Language support across all the educational levels is focused on acquiring English but many of the young participants felt there should be more EAL support, especially for newcomer students.

Maybe because of language problem the extra English class wasn't too good, and the teacher wasn't really working with us. (Unaccompanied Minor, 16-18 yrs.).

The participants identified a lack of support for their mother tongue at school as a barrier to their integration and would like to have seen their schools embrace a multi-language culture. Some of the youth participants suggested broader structural changes in relation to language provision through inclusion of additional languages for state examinations.

My language does not count in the Leaving Certificate (Persian). My language is more popular in the Middle East. I gave up Spanish. I had no clue what it was in English how was I going to learn Spanish? I did my primary in Afghanistan.

(Unaccompanied Minor, 16-18 yrs.)

Some children attended cultural or language schools outside of school at weekends to support the development of their mother tongue and referred to the importance of this in enabling them to communicate with their relations and extended family.

On the weekends I go to a school for my mum's language and my dad's language. So, on Saturday I go for five hours to a school that, like, my mum's country, the Czech Republic. And on Sunday I spend six hours in a Russian school with my cousin.

When this participant was asked if she does other languages at her regular school, she replied: "No, just Irish." Later in the conversation, she says, "I go there so that I can speak with my grandparents and so if my grandma or my dad's friends visit, then I'll know the language." (Primary school, 6-7 yrs.).

While there appeared to be little curriculum support for mother tongue in schools, one of the children talked about having a Polish teacher in preschool who helped him with his language development: "There was one Polish teacher in Early Start. She spoke Polish and if

there was something I couldn't say in English, she would be able to help me and that was nice" (Primary school, 6-7 yrs.).

The children also felt that there should be more exemptions from learning the Irish language or having to do Irish language exams, as this was impacted by arrival age in Irish schools. As discussed, it is compulsory for most children to learn the Irish language. One boy said

My brother and sister were born in Italy because my mom is Italian, but I was born in Ireland, so they don't have to do Irish for their Leaving Cert. My brother didn't, but I do because I was born in Ireland. It's sad ... I feel that we should have the choice if we want to do it (Irish). Like the way we have a choice in secondary school. (Primary school, 8-12 yrs.)

The older children felt that not supporting a more diverse language culture within schools led to students only interacting socially with students who speak the same language, leading to a lack of peer interaction and potential social isolation for the newcomer children.

'People who can't speak English usually go for other people who speak their language which is bad in the long term' (Second-level, 16-18 yrs.). Such a focus on English speaking is a potentially exclusionary practice and one that does not adhere to Irish Integration policy, generally or with specific reference to education.

Parents' views on language

A number of parents mentioned language barriers in their workshop and felt that learning the Irish language was difficult for their children, and that additional education supports were necessary to integrate their children into the Irish education system. However, accessing such support was not always possible and information on sourcing it was ad hoc.

There could be more [language support]. When we came here first, she knew nothing in Irish and then one of the directors from her nursery helped me to source someone to come in, and she taught her how to speak, and one day when I went to collect her, she was with all the other kids and they were playing in Irish, you know (Parent 1).

This comment highlights that some migrant parents may need additional social and cultural capital to support their children in the Irish education system.

Parents also commented that some of the children experienced peer exclusion because their English was poor. For example, one mother described other children not wanting to play with her children 'because she can't talk well' (Parent 9) and another described other children 'making fun of them because of language' (Parent 17). Some of the parents also felt that their children generally lacked confidence and were uncertain while they were in school. As their children's English improved, however, parents commented that so did their academic achievements and integration, 'Talking more and interacting with others. Can express themselves now' (Parent 21).

[Meso-level data: perspectives of education professionals](#)

Language was the most discussed topic of the focus group with education and migrant organisation professionals and clearly takes up a great deal of integration attention. Among the main concerns of the professionals working with migrant families either in schools or in the community was language barriers. Language barriers can prevent effective communication with parents of migrant children who often do not speak English fluently,

preventing back-and-forth flows of information regarding the child's background and education. Participants were critical of the lack of funds for translation services, so school staff must improvise often resorting to translation apps or an intermediary like the child, a friend, or another parent. One participant noted that even when her school went to the trouble of getting important pamphlets and leaflets translated into multiple languages, the parents did not always have the necessary level of literacy to read them. Parent's lack of English is also a concern in terms of their ability to help with their children's homework, especially at secondary level, when subjects become more difficult.

Education professionals in the meso focus groups reported that at the time of data collection schools were undergoing extensive annual testing procedures to prove that EAL supports are needed which they identified as bureaucratic and a time and resource intensive process. Indeed, lack of funding and cumbersome, inflexible bureaucratic procedures as obstacles to integration was a recurring theme. The testing process is further confounded when there is a possibility that the child also has a learning disability or does not yet have a full grasp of their home language, leaving teachers frustrated as they try to guess what kind of support is needed.

Another language-related challenge teachers faced was striking a balance between getting their migrant students to an adequate level of English fluency as quickly as possible, so as to enable them to succeed academically and integrate with their peers, and ensuring the migrant students do not lose their heritage languages, which are an important part of their identity. Participants spoke about the importance of academic success for migrant children, but always in combination with at least one other wellbeing outcome, underlining the

connections between them. They noted that lack of success in school can contribute to mental health problems, distress, low self-confidence, and poor self-image. Conversely, succeeding at school can help boost confidence and promote belonging. Participants were eager for teachers and schools to shift away from a deficit approach to language, where speaking a different language is perceived as a disadvantage, almost like a special education need, and work instead from the premise that having multiple languages is an advantage and something to be celebrated.

Macro-level data: perspectives of key education, NGO and community sector representatives

Given the policy and practice focus on English Language Acquisition in the Irish education system, it is unsurprising that a number of the macro-level participants identified EAL as the most important support for migrant children's integration, after welcoming them to a school and supporting them to make friends, because it enables social engagement. The policy for Irish schools, as one interviewee explains, is 'to prioritise the host language to ensure there can be maximum participation in the education system and broader life of Ireland' (Prof 5). However, the resources to engage refugee and migrant children in language learning and cultural transition were experienced, in the macro and meso focus groups, as being generally inadequate. Frequent cuts to EAL supports impact integration resulting in a situation where, as one participant put it, 'I think it is pretty ad hoc' (Prof. 9). Another challenge identified by a number of macro level participants is the homogeneity of teaching staff in Irish schools, and one spoke of the need to,

get more cultures teaching so it is represented across the board. We need to look at if there is something that is making it more difficult for the new children that are coming through the system and are here 15-20 years who want to teach. Can they

move into that profession? Is there something stopping them that we can fix? It would make a huge difference. (Prof 1)

Another participant spoke of curricular innovations which support inclusion more broadly and in particular the use of Universal Design, a set of principles for curriculum development that give all individuals equal opportunities to learn, for developing an inclusive curriculum.

Very often people tend to think that ... their connotation goes to special education needs but actually no, cultural diversity, ethnic diversity and, of course, English as an additional language, are all major tenants of that as well. (Prof. 8)

This is especially evident in the Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) as an inclusive curriculum which emphasises child-centred practice helping children reach their language learning outcomes. Central to the curriculum is the 'curriculum in practice' highlighting the 'big ideas' underpinning language and learning in the classroom, including appropriate language learning experiences through second language learning, cultural and linguistic diversity, and pedagogies for integration and for literacy.

According to this participant, while some teachers have identified challenges in implementing the new language curriculum,

what the curriculum does is it gives indications of how teachers can do this in very practical and simple ways by supporting children to do their homework in their home language and come in and present on that or bring in a storybook in their home language. Really simple ways of supporting children's linguistic diversity in the classroom. (Prof. 8).

Discussion

Here, the opportunity is taken to discuss the Irish findings in light of language findings across the cross-national project as a whole (Serrano, 2021). There is no doubt from the data that schools act as key sites of integration and predictors of wellbeing for migrant children after settlement (Correa-Velez et al., 2010; Suárez-Orozco, 2017). Findings from this research reflect the literature indicating that support for host language, home language, and linguistic diversity are important elements in facilitating migrant children's integration (Ager & Strang, 2008; Little, 2020). In fact, the findings on the theme of language across all 6 European research partner countries on this research project reveal some consistent themes. Children were concerned about the level of English language supports. Both children and parents appreciated extra supports for learning the host country language, which was crucial for academic achievement and developing friendships, though parents were sometimes frustrated with the lack of information on how to obtain such supports. Children had concerns regarding the lack of a diverse language culture and especially the poor support for retention of their mother tongue at school. This is reflected in other research where the heritage language did not feature in communications with the school (Little, 2020) and where there was no evidence of a school actively facilitating the heritage language (Author et al., 2018; Tinsley & Board, 2016). This is despite evidence that students who lack proficiency in a school's primary language of instruction can learn to speak it more quickly when their mother-tongues are used to supplement instruction (MIPE, 2018). A high value was placed on both the preservation of the respective mother tongue and acquisition of host country languages by children in all the European partner country's findings. Some child participants in Ireland also spoke of fears regarding exposure of their inadequate levels of English in the classroom. These, combined with other factors, contributed to students

often only interacting socially with students who speak the same language. Evidence of in-school peer clusters of same heritage language speakers was found elsewhere across the European partners' research, with children's own immigrant community most readily called upon in the early phases of transition, as highlighted by Devine (2009). Avoiding such isolation is important for migrant children's social integration. Our findings are also in line with research highlighting that prejudice by native peers towards migrants who lack fluency in the host language can have a negative impact on host language learning (Portes & Rivas, 2011).

Children's language concerns point to the need for the development of a more culturally sensitive and flexible curriculum supporting diverse language culture within schools. Educators and policymakers emphasised that language acquisition becomes more difficult the older the child at age of arrival in the host country, something found across the European partners. This is well supported in the literature citing age at onset of second language learning as a strong predictor of ultimate attainment in second language learning (Stevens, 2012). Despite policy-makers identifying important curricular and teacher support developments, and evidence of a strengths-based view of bilingualism from educators, there is clear evidence that teachers and school principals on the ground are often faced with poor resourcing and inflexible centralised structures as obstacles to integration, something also evident in other partner countries (Mock-Muñoz de Luna et al., 2020). Further, the homogeneity of teaching staff in Ireland might impact the roll out of some of these curricular innovations.

Educators also discussed how language barriers can prevent effective communication with parents of migrant children often resulting in children acting as, what Little (2020, p, 204) calls 'language brokers'. Filling this translator/mediator role between the family and other actors can be a burden for children and emerged as a key barrier to their socio-educational integration in all partner country findings. Curdt- Christiansen's (2020) work on 'language gap' is reflected in the awareness among educators in this research of the need to shift away from a deficit approach to language, where speaking a different language is a disadvantage, almost like a special education need, and work instead from the premise that having multiple languages is an advantage and something to be celebrated.

Conclusion

This article deals with the themes of how language impacts on children and young people's local-national-and-transnational belonging and participation. The child and youth participants, as well as adult stakeholders, highlighted that accessing language support from arrival facilitates the integration process of migrant children as they acquire linguistic skills that help them communicate with their peers and increase their opportunities of being successful academically and socially. Language emerges as one of the key tools to facilitate their sense of belonging to the new school and to the host country. Also, of fundamental importance for children is acknowledgement and support of their heritage language rather than being accorded minority status in school. In considering the findings, however, these elements - support for heritage languages, for learning the host country's language(s) and foreign language learning - are often experienced as being in tension.

In order to tackle some of these challenges, a number of potential solutions arise from the research including improved language supports for children and a broadening of subject languages for state examinations in Ireland as well as language courses and translation supports for parents in schools, schemes in which migrant students and their parents act as tutors for the newly arrived, greater diversity in the teaching staff at schools and state initiatives around registration and training to facilitate this. There are curricular and pedagogical innovations in relation to language provision currently underway in the Irish education system, but our research participants had not experienced the full benefits of these at the time of data collection. In conclusion, greater recognition of children's linguistic diversity reflected in education structures and practices and improved resourcing are required for stronger socio-educational integration of migrant children.

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