

Language Explorers

An Interview with Soraya Sobrevía (Mother Tongues)

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Below, Inmaculada Gómez Soler (co-editor of Teanga) interviews Soraya Sobrevía, Education Projects Coordinator for the organisation, Mother Tongues. Soraya tells us about *Language Explorers*, a project that aims to foster multilingualism and a positive attitude towards languages from the early years. In this interview, we learn how the Mother Tongues team accompanies children, parents and teachers in their multilingual journey by engaging the community in multilingual creative workshops.

Inma: Welcome, Soraya and thank you for being here today. The first thing I want to ask you is to tell us a bit about Mother Tongues and what Mother Tongues does.

Soraya: Thank you so much. My name is Soraya and I oversee the education and learning projects in Mother Tongues, a child focused social enterprise. We are a not-for-profit organisation, and work to inspire everyone in Ireland to be open to linguistic and cultural diversity. The ideal society, and the one that we work towards, is one that is open, and embraces different cultures and languages, seeing them as valuable and an asset to the broader society. We know that the most important stage in a child's linguistic development is the early years, from birth up to about 6 years old. That's when children learn to speak and to communicate, and that's when they register and develop attitudes towards their languages. I emphasise “register” as much as “develop” because they also realise people's attitudes towards the languages they speak, and they pick up on those attitudes. In fact, we've realised that, by the

¹ Mother Tongues is an active and dynamic organisation. This interview took place on 7th April 2022 and reflects some of the projects Mother Tongues was carrying out at that time. For the most up to date information and latest developments from Mother Tongues, please see their [website](#).

time a child goes to Junior Infants, they have a pretty broad idea of other people's assumptions and attitudes towards their culture or cultures, and language, or languages, which is quite interesting.

In Mother Tongues we offer creative multilingual workshops for children in the early years, engaging the parents as well. We also run information sessions for parents who are raising children with more than one language and provide continuous professional development courses on language development and bilingualism for practitioners who work with all children, not only multilingual children. [This is] because obviously all children can benefit from a mindset of openness towards cultural and linguistic diversity. The work we do is not only for multilingual families, it is for the community.

I'm very excited to find out the results of the latest Census that's currently ongoing. The previous Census pointed out that there were about 180 languages spoken in Ireland. I'm looking forward to the updated results.

Currently we run an education network for practitioners and primary school teachers where good practices are shared about cultural, linguistic, and responsive practice. We also have the Mother Tongues podcast with RTÉ Junior, which is a platform for children's voices where their experiences of cultural and linguistic diversity are heard.

To summarise, the ingredients of Mother Tongues are: children, creativity, parental engagement and spreading knowledge on how to embrace cultural and linguistic diversity to foster positive attitudes towards each other and towards bilingualism.

Inma: That's very interesting, Soraya. You really are a very active organisation. I wish we had time to talk about everything that you are doing. But, as you know, today we can only focus on one project. So I want you to think about one project that you feel has a lot of potential, and maybe tell us a bit about that one project.

Soraya: Sure. One of the things that we do and that I oversee are the creative multilingual workshops for children, called **Language Explorers**. This programme has been running since 2018 and won a European Award in 2018 and was short-listed last year for the HundrED, a global education non profit which spotlights highly impactful initiatives worldwide, and Language Explorers was one of them.

Mother Tongues has run these creative workshops in primary school settings for four years and we are starting to offer them to 3 and 4 year old children. The workshops offer high quality creative and multilingual experiences to develop children's confidence speaking their home language. They also promote interest in overall language learning from a young age, boosting parents' and childrens' confidence in speaking their language in a creative and fun environment outside the home. The workshops raise awareness of the different languages spoken in our communities and embrace all languages and cultures. There is a strong focus on art and creativity in the workshops as well as parent-child bond and communication, literacy, storytelling, arts and crafts, drama, movement and music.

We have two strands to these workshops which are facilitated in English, although everyone is welcome to use and share their experiences in the language they feel most comfortable with. The first strand involves creative family workshops, with an artist facilitator in a community setting. We work in libraries and community art centres or with parent facilitators in primary schools. The second strand involves Mother Tongues enabling parents and teachers to work together in order to facilitate the workshops which are led by the parents. I'll tell you briefly about the benefits of both starting with the second strand. I've seen both in action and it's very powerful to witness a child seeing the parent coming to the school at that age.

Inma: At that age they're probably really excited, right?

Soraya: Their faces light up. The parents come, and they read a story in their language. It can be a language that's represented among the children in the classroom or the parent goes to different classrooms. Before the storytelling, some of the parents come to the school and create a set and props for the story through arts and crafts and, while they are doing that, they chat about the story. Therefore, before the main storytelling day, the story is already known to the children. The feedback we have received from parents is that children who were reluctant to speak the home language begin to speak it at home after the storytelling sessions. Seeing the parent coming into the school changes the child's perception of that language, and then, all of a sudden, they started speaking the language at home again. I think that's just so powerful. It shows value, it validates it.

Inma: There is a sense of pride.

Soraya: Exactly.

Inma: That's very interesting.

Soraya: The other strand that we are piloting at the moment is an artistic facilitator facilitating family workshops. We're running them in Tallaght Library and the parents come with their child. We go on an adventure related to a theme for the workshops. Instructions are given by the facilitator who is leading the workshop. But when you're working with your child, you are speaking whatever language you usually speak to your child, so firstly, the child realises *we're speaking the language outside the home*, which is highly beneficial. It's not just something we

speak at home; it's also okay to speak in a public space. And secondly, they also hear other people speaking other languages, and last but not least, they're having fun with their parents or relatives and the language of play for that amount of time is the home language. I think this has a big impact because often the home language is confined to the home.

Inma: This is very important and, for some children, when you take them to some kind of Saturday school, it can be seen as more work, more homework. This is something very different, as you say, very engaging, a lot of fun. So that's really great. We're talking about multilingual children but I assume in these classes there are also monolingual children. What do these children think? What are their reactions?

Soraya: As I said, we are starting to offer it in the early years, and we will share the results through case studies via our website. However, what I've observed in the primary school setting is that two things happen: one is that ultimately it's about what we are creating together so it's not really about language. Language is the means and nobody's left out because the experience is not in a language that a child cannot understand, it's through English. It's just the fact that we are open to saying other words or hearing people speaking their languages while doing the activity. A child might realise: "Oh, I didn't know my friend also speaks another language at home", or maybe I already knew this, and now it's an opportunity for me to learn a word or two in that language.

The second thing that happens is children realise: "Wait a second. So, wait, my friend speaks this.....the child that I'm beside has this other language. What other language do I have?" And, if they are already in Junior Infants, they are being exposed to the Irish language, and sometimes I have seen something click and they realise: "Oh, that's also my native tongue, the

language of Ireland” and this fosters more positive attitudes towards languages in general. It's about bringing languages to life and it's certainly beneficial for all children.

Inma: I also want to ask you about teachers' reactions. We're talking about children but how do the teachers react when you do this kind of workshop at schools? I am assuming that, for some teachers, being in a multilingual environment is something new or something that they are trying to handle, and this may open a new way of doing things for them.

Soraya: Definitely. I've seen the workshops work in schools which are very aware of their diversity. For example, there are a few schools we work with which are really diverse and they would already be embracing this linguistic and cultural diversity. For them it is just an extension of what they do on a day to day basis. Sometimes, we also challenge stereotypes of what a teacher looks like, or the teacher persona. That's one element that I think is beneficial for the children. The teacher's reaction might be just that it's an extension of what they already do, or if they are new in their journey to embracing multilingualism and cultural diversity, I find that what they report a lot of the time is surprise. Children and teachers find out that some students speak other languages at home. I think of these children as hidden bilinguals, the children who sound native, because they are growing up with two languages from birth.

Sometimes, when we speak about embracing multilingualism in the classroom, teachers report a fear of allowing children to speak their home language among themselves if there is a group of them, or in the yard. However, teachers who are already doing this, report no problems, only advantages.

For example, there is an activity task where children pick a language and do a pop-up dictionary. They choose words they like, and the teachers are often surprised that the children not only chose their home languages to do that, but they actually choose the languages of their

friends. They would say: “Oh, this is my favourite word. How would you say it in the language you speak at home?” It is good to remember we all want to connect, belong, find common ground.

Inma: Are you doing this just in Dublin right now?

Soraya: At the moment we are but we are working on a framework so that Language Explorers workshops can be delivered in other parts of the country and outside of Ireland.

Inma: Do you think there is a value in doing this type of workshops with secondary school students or is it too late?

Soraya: It's never too late to work on embracing [linguistic and cultural] diversity, in fact, it really is a lifelong process in my opinion. Nobody has all the answers and we all learn as we go along and experience things. The Language Explorers philosophy and values are applicable to any age group. However, Mother Tongues is really a child focused organisation. Children are at the centre of what we do. We work with the children's most important people in their lives, the parents, the early years practitioners, the teachers around them and their communities. Having a cultural and linguistically responsive attitude is a journey that you decide to embark on and whatever your reason is, it might come early when you're training to become an early years educator or a teacher, or it might come later on in life. None of us have all the answers but it's about trying to hold the space for children to be allowed to be who they are without having to choose one identity over another.

Inma: Wonderful. I love the little things they do in my daughter's crèche. When it is someone's birthday, they sing happy birthday in different languages. Even that small gesture means so much to children and promotes a positive attitude and that curiosity that you were talking about.

Soraya: Yes, it is definitely important to do those things. You do not need to be bilingual or multilingual yourself to have an open mind and create a safe space for children to be who they are and bring all of their identities into the setting. It is about being curious, open and receptive. This is very important to understand, as it is something I hear a lot from people who are concerned that they don't speak another language fluently.

Inma: It's wonderful that Mother Tongues is doing this, creating this safe and powerful community of teachers and families who are committed to multilingualism. Thank you for the interview and thank you for all the work you are doing for the community.