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## Proceedings of Multilingualism in the Early Years Conference

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## Introduction

This special edition of *Teanga, the journal of the Irish Association of Applied Linguistics* contains selected papers from the Multilingualism in the Early Years conference held in the Dublin Institute of Technology in May 2017. The conference aimed to bring people together from diverse disciplines including early childhood education and applied linguistics and the papers reflect this diversity. A particular feature of the conference was the opportunity to hear insider perspectives from academics, teachers and early years practitioners of many nationalities and language backgrounds and this in turn provided opportunities for discussion and networking. A wide range of research methods were employed in the studies presented including qualitative and quantitative, impressionistic and positivist and these approaches enriched the quality and depth of the research presented.

As many are aware, a conference's keynote speakers ideally encapsulate and reflect the philosophy and scholarly objectives of its broader participants. This was certainly the case for the Multilingualism in the Early Years conference, the four keynote speakers for which embodied a spirit of community inclusivity, scholarly rigour and disciplinary diversity. This was first evidenced in Victoria Murphy's investigation of the impact of professional development on early childhood education development, the results of which suggest the strengths and potential of a longitudinal empiricist approach to the arguably overlooked realm of professional development. Moreover, Professor Murphy's contribution to this volume raises the importance of continued research in the under-developed area of effective early childcare teacher education in the pre-teaching and continued professional development setting.

The conference's particular interest in native language revitalization efforts was duly attended to by Siân Wyn Siencyn, whose keynote paper explores, in fascinating historical and sociolinguistic detail, the journey travelled by Welsh language advocate group Mudiad Meithrin in ensuring Welsh language provision in Welsh early childcare settings. The publication of Professor Wyn Siencyn's paper within this volume provides an important roadmap for the myriad of existing and newly emerging minority-language advocacy groups in Ireland, who will surely find inspiration for increased access to 'mother tongue' education through the Welsh language model. However, Wyn Siencyn's somber conclusion — "these are testing times" — is a grave reminder that we must remain alert to the inevitable challenges

faced by minority language groups in the face of alarming shifts in the local and global political landscape.

More optimistically, Déirdre Kirwan's paper calls attention to the potential for a whole-school approach to create and cultivate a culture of multilingualism in the Irish primary school setting. Showing insightful awareness of the importance of family and community engagement in language education, Dr. Kirwan's keynote address and subsequent paper suggests that the Irish primary school education landscape is indeed awake to the benefits brought by its multilingual student population and their extended families and communities.

The fourth keynote speaker, Sandie Mourão, provides fascinating teleological insight into the function and meaning of children's responses to shared story-time in the second language classroom. Dr. Mourão's theoretical and cognitive classification of a group of Portuguese children's seemingly ambiguous and spontaneous responses to an English language story-book highlights an immediate need to encourage and track student participation in storytime as a crucial aid in the second language learning journey.

'Multilingualism in the early years' was a specific theme of the conference, and was responded to in a myriad of ways. Ruth Harris proposed a re-assessment of 'the silent period', challenging a stage of linguistic development long instituted but rarely queried in terms of its socially isolating consequences, through a novel mixed-methods study. Notably, Dr. Harris' paper was voted by conference participants as deserving of the Irish Association for Applied Linguistics' Best Presentation Award.

Bozena Dubiel presents a highly innovative adaption of the HALA bilingual test to cater to the language testing needs of professionals in the Irish early childhood setting. Though an impressively scientific and technology-driven study, Dr. Dubiel's paper reflects new levels of commitment to accurately measuring children's first and second language development, in turn illustrating a dedication to meaningfully maintaining bilingualism amongst Ireland's language minority groups.

Frances Kane and colleagues' contribution to the 'Multilingualism in the early years' theme concentrates on the impact of an individually tailored language intervention programme on English language development amongst 'newcomer' children in a Northern Ireland education setting. The results not only illustrate the benefits of such programmes but also highlight the valuable role of language specialists in early childhood education settings.

The next four papers deal with different aspects of language learning in families and communities. Francesa La Morgia and Jo Billington compare and contrast the size and composition of vocabulary and early sentence between two groups of young bilingual children acquiring Italian as a majority or minority language respectively. While the results show that majority language children have a larger and more complex vocabulary, there is no simple correlation between input and production and the research describes some characteristics of early simultaneous bilingual development.

Bronagh Ćatibušić compares the acquisition of Bosnian by two children in Ireland from an ecological perspective and explores the steps parents can take to support minority language development, particularly within the family and the community. The level of attention paid to multilingualism within the Irish school system is discussed in depth and the need for promotion as well as acknowledgement of multilingualism in the early years is emphasised.

Agnieszka Pędrak also considers the role of the community in facilitating the development of Polish as a minority language. She gives an overview of Polish supplementary schools in Ireland and highlights the strengths and challenges of these schools. Her findings highlight positive attitudes towards Polish culture and bilingualism for children of Polish immigrants and also describes the potential benefits for these children of attending supplementary schools.

The fourth paper on the role of the family and community focuses on the moral socialisation of a Polish child in Ireland. Malgorzata Machowska-Kosciak posits that cultural ideologies can have a profound effect on learning and living through two languages and describes the tensions a child and her family feel between different social and religious practices in Poland and Ireland. This micro-analysis of language socialisation is contextualized within a more holistic account of the Polish community in Ireland.

The final tranche of papers deals with second language learning in the more structured environments of preschools and schools. Gail Ellis reflects on the changes to teacher beliefs and attitudes that came about in the course of a project on early years foreign language pedagogy in an organisation that provides out-of-school English language classes in Europe. The project involved professional development in early years pedagogy and encouraged teachers to re-examine their existing beliefs and attitudes in order to recognise children's reflective capacities when given appropriate support and scaffolding, and to rethink the power dynamics in the adult-child relationship moving to one of more shared control.

Eibhlín Nic Aoidh examined factors which impact on the transition from pre-primary *naíscoil* to primary school *bunscoil* in Northern Ireland. The research explored which core components lead to optimum readiness for transition from preprimary to Irish-medium primary school and the extent to which these components are present in Irish-medium preschools in the statutory and voluntary sector in the north of Ireland. A range of transition practices in Irish-medium settings are described in their wider educational contexts and recommendations made to improve quality across the sector.

Tugann Pádraig Ó Duibhir agus Laoise Ní Thuairisg suimiú ar na moltaí a dhein líon mór coistí agus coimisiúin faoin oideachas Gaeltachta ó 1926 i leith. Ardaíonn an doiciméad is déanaí, an *Polasaí don Oideachas Gaeltachta 2016* ceisteanna faoi riachtanais oideachais teanga na gcainteoirí óga Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht agus an t-am ar chóir tosú ar mhúineadh an Bhéarla i mbunscoileanna na Gaeltachta. Míníonn na húdair an bonn atá faoin moladh múineadh an Bhéarla a chur siar dhá bhliain, is é sin an buntáiste a bheadh ann breis ama a thabhairt do na páistí sealbhú níos doimhne a dhéanamh ar an nGaeilge.

Pádraig Ó Duibhir and Laoise Ní Thuairisg summarise the recommendations made by the many government committees and commissions that investigated the Gaeltacht education system since 1926. The most recent document, *Policy for Gaeltacht Education 2016* raises questions about the language education needs of Irish speakers in Gaeltacht schools and the optimum time to introduce the teaching of English. The authors explain the reasons they agree with the recommendation to postpone the teaching of English for two years, until the children have acquired a firmer foundation in Irish.

Teresa Fleta examines the potential of picturebooks (use of this word is explained in the article) to elicit children's spontaneous speech production in an early bilingual immersion school in Spain. The study focused on children's production of spontaneous speech in conversations based on the picturebooks. The children used the illustrations as a language scaffold and their oral English skills developed over time. The author concludes that picturebooks are an ideal tool to elicit oral language from young children and to support the natural acquisition of language.

The above papers illustrate the vibrant nature of research and practice in regard to multilingualism in the early years and acknowledge the right of multilingual children to be heard and to receive high quality early childhood education and language supports. The official

launch of Mother Tongues (<https://mothertongues.ie/>), the organisation that raises awareness of the benefits and challenge of bilingualism, was a fitting end to the conference.

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