

# Language teaching and learning in multilingual classrooms: an introduction to the report published by the European Commission

*By Ana-Maria Stan – European Commission, Directorate General 'Education and Culture'*

## ■ Introduction

In order to secure peace, prosperity, security and social cohesion in our societies, wherever we live on the globe, we need to get education right. Specialists tend to agree that we need to make a shift towards a more learner centred approach in education, and put children at the centre of a system where the whole community is involved, paying attention to each child's needs and talents.

In this context, languages have a special significance, since they play a double role of both subject matter and medium for learning, not to mention their intrinsic link to every learner's identity.

In most European big cities, people already live in super diverse societies, characterised by increased mobility of the population, with many people coming in from culturally different and/or remote regions.

Multilingual classrooms have thus become a reality in many European countries. However, do they get the attention they deserve? The Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong learning acknowledged already in 2006 that 'many Europeans live in bilingual or multilingual families and communities, and that the official language of the country in which they live may not be their mother tongue'.

Ten years later, this is a much more widespread phenomenon. Multilingual students and classrooms bring new challenges to education systems, but also new opportunities, as it is a way for all children to gain a deeper understanding of the wider world and prepare themselves for life in a globalised 21st century.

Despite growing research knowledge and evidence on bilingual children, there are still many myths that persist among both teachers and parents, about bilingualism and how to best deal with it. We need to put more effort into raising awareness about the benefits of supporting children's natural bilingualism.

Besides being a core issue for equity in education and social justice, we need to highlight the benefits of supporting bilingualism for all children: for a more harmonious development, for learning to learn competences, and mainly for the well-being of the children concerned.

Many dedicated resources for supporting bilingualism have been developed over the last years and are readily available to use. There is no excuse anymore for not offering appropriate education and care to every child. We can neither afford, nor tolerate our education system to be 'subtractive', in the sense that competences that have been acquired outside of school are actually suppressed, and the funds of knowledge that children with a mixed background bring to school is neglected.

Teachers are key players in this equation, and so are parents. But how do we prepare teachers and parents for these new challenges of the 21st century? Teaching culture needs to adapt to this new reality and extra support is needed in the schools for language learning and language sensitive teaching, in order to give these children a chance to find their place in society and succeed in life.

ICF International has been commissioned by the Directorate General for Education and Culture to carry out a study, based on existing research and a series of expert meetings and study visits, about what works to enable children with a migrant background achieve their potential in schools: Language Teaching and Learning in Multilingual Classrooms.

Multilingual classrooms appear in a variety of contexts, however the focus of this report has been children with migrant background. In most cases, learners have a different cultural background to the native/mainstream population, they speak a language at home different than the language at school, so the language of schooling is already a second language for these pupils.

The report shows precisely that supporting children's bilingualism is beneficial for their overall learning and development, and a healthy self-esteem. The report

brings forward research evidence and tested measures but also accounts of practitioners' wisdom and knowledge, and practical projects that have yielded positive results. It provides initial ideas for policy-makers, teachers, educators and parents, and is a good basis for getting an insight into how to turn multilingual classrooms into creative and nurturing environments for all children. However, much remains to be done, and everyone needs to get involved. It depends on every one of us if we are going to achieve a general shift to more inclusive learning environments.

The report also shows, besides providing information about research evidence and resources available, that attitudes and perceptions are equally crucial, this being a much wider issue than what happens in a school.

Recommendations are built around practitioners' conclusions that schools need to acknowledge and nurture each child's individual linguistic profile. This new approach to support children's individual bilingualism has beneficial effects for supporting their overall cognitive development, for supporting the mastery of the language of schooling, and for respecting children's well-being and integrity overall.

The report 'Language teaching and learning in multilingual classrooms' was prepared for the European Commission by ICF Consulting Services Ltd.

It is available on-line:

[http://ec.europa.eu/languages/policy/learning-languages/multilingual-classrooms\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/languages/policy/learning-languages/multilingual-classrooms_en.htm)

## **Language teaching and learning in multilingual classrooms Executive Summary of the report published by the European Commission**

### *What is the report about?*

For children with a migrant background, learning the language of schooling and assessment so that they can enter school or carry on their education is paramount. Education authorities in many parts of Europe are faced with this challenge because of growing levels of mobility. Enabling such children to access teaching and learning quickly is critical to ensuring they can reach their potential and progress to higher education and employment to the same degree as non-migrant

children. In the process the children themselves gain linguistic and meta-linguistic skills from learning the language of schooling and assessment in addition to their mother tongue.

The report was designed to gather, analyse and synthesise existing data and research on:

- What works to enable children who use a language at home which is different to the language of schooling to participate in learning, attain language proficiency, and achieve results (qualifications, progress to higher education, progress to employment) that match their potential; and
- What works to maintain and develop the multilingual skills of migrant children which will enable them to use these competences for cultural and economic purposes.

### *The challenge*

With increased mobility levels of the population, multilingual classrooms are becoming more and more commonplace in many countries in Europe as is the range of languages that children speak.

It is clear that:

- Children with a migrant background, who are not proficient enough in the language of schooling, do not reach their potential and are more likely to leave school early and to have lower levels of attainment;
- Children are not always provided with support nor encouragement to learn or develop/ maintain their mother tongue;
- Schools can reduce the difference in attainment between native children and children without the language of schooling as they progress through their education.

It is accepted in this study that learning the language of schooling is necessary for children to reach their potential, that by supporting bilingualism, children's cognitive skills are enhanced, as is their ability to learn languages effectively.

### *Method*

To address these questions, the study has comprised:

- A literature review drawing on academic research and grey literature;
- A series of round table discussions involving practitioners and experts; and

- A study visit to Cologne to see what is happening on the ground and to have further discussion with practitioners and experts.

It was important for the study to include research which was based on empirical evidence and practitioners' experiences provided that:

- The methods and their limitations were understood so that the strength of evidence could be assessed;
- The context was known so its transferability could be considered; and
- Practitioners' experience was drawn on in a systematic way (such as through workshops and action research).

## ■ Key Findings

The study examined evidence in relation to four themes. The key findings on each of these is set out below.

### *Reception and integration*

#### **Participation in early childhood education and care (ECEC)**

There is conclusive research evidence which shows that ECEC can have positive learning and progression outcomes for migrant children which gives them the start they need to develop their skills in the language of schooling. Practitioners believe that better results are achieved where there is outreach to ensure migrant children take up free provision of ECEC and where ECEC providers have a systematic curriculum for language learning.

#### **Placement and admission**

While migrant children are segregated and schools with higher proportions of migrant children have lower attainment, there is no conclusive research evidence that segregation is a cause and that reducing it will improve attainment. Practitioners believe that reducing segregation does however help schools to manage and that the greatest benefit of this comes from increasing cultural awareness of all children. They also believe that it is more important for education authorities to ensure that the quality of leadership and teaching in schools with children without the language of schooling can meet the challenges of multilingual classrooms and that such schools need to have additional resources and funding.

### **Assessment of language support needs**

There is conclusive research evidence that poor measures of assessment on entering the school system have a detrimental impact on migrant children. They are more likely to be allocated to special education and lower ability tracks. Practitioners have developed better systems for assessing children's language skills and other knowledge and competencies during the early stages of their reception into the education system. These address the causes of poor assessment that have adversely affected children.

### **Learning the language of schooling for integration into the school system**

There is indicative research evidence that children without the language of schooling should be quickly moved to having targeted and continued language support provided in mainstream classrooms (immersion) rather than in separate classes. The amount of time needed in preparatory education should be linked to age and previous education. Practitioners strongly support a speedy transition with teaching support because they believe this supports integration, learning the language of schooling and learning in other subjects. Where separate classes are required, children should be enabled to make a transition to mainstream classes with a special curriculum and support from specialist teachers.

## *Access to the curriculum*

### **Support in the classroom**

There is indicative research evidence that the availability and level of support improves migrant children's educational attainment and that additional learning activities and support in school can improve their progress. Practitioners strongly believe that classroom support has to be maintained to develop their language skills as well as access to the curriculum with the support of teaching assistants, specialist teachers and resources.

### **Support outside the classroom**

There is indicative research evidence that formal and informal learning led by trained staff and volunteers outside school enhances migrant children's interest in education, their language skills and their aspirations. This is through a variety of measures: homework clubs, out of school activities, mentoring, coaching and advice. Practitioners believe that these help and can be targeted at children who need extra support which include migrant children. It helps to achieve positive

outcomes if some of the staff/volunteers have the same mother tongue/migrant background as the children and parents.

### **Adapted teaching approaches by class teachers**

There is indicative research evidence that adapting teaching approaches to accommodate children without the same level of language ability as native children has a beneficial effect. The adaptations they effectively employ are similar to those used in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) settings. There is some evidence that providing children without the same level of language competency as native children with tools and materials assists them to achieve their potential in assessment tests.

Simplification of the language used in tests has been found to be beneficial. Practitioners believe that teaching approaches need to be adapted in multilingual classrooms, teachers need to be aware of this, and have strategies and resources to manage. Practitioners also believe that teachers need to have positive attitudes towards migrant children if they are to achieve their potential and overcome language barriers. There is evidence that not all teachers have these positive attitudes.

### **Parental engagement**

There is some indicative research evidence that equipping migrant families with skills to develop their children's language skills in ECEC helps to accelerate their learning. Practitioners believe that engaging migrant parents is necessary throughout their children's education to build their emotional support for their children and their cooperation with the school. These are believed to improve their children's attendance, behaviours and attitudes to learning as well as mutual trust and understanding between teachers and parents.

### *Developing mother tongue competences*

#### **Non-formal and informal learning of mother tongues**

Practitioners believe that informal learning of mother tongues should be provided and encouraged both in the absence of formal learning opportunities and where formal learning of mother tongues is available. The opportunities for children to use and develop their mother tongue skills enable them to gain recognition for these skills and see they are of equal value to other language skills. Children's

bilingualism needs to be stimulated. Parents, schools and the community have been shown to play an effective part in this. Resources are available for non-formal and informal learning.

### **Formal learning of mother tongues**

There is conclusive research evidence that learning mother tongues alongside the language of schooling enhances competences for both languages equally.

There is indicative research evidence that this has:

- Longer term benefits for educational attainment and reducing the gap between migrant children and native born children;
- Wider benefits in enhancing children's confidence and their cultural awareness and pride in their mixed identity and culture;
- Longer term benefits in increasing employment opportunities.

Practitioners generally support the benefits of mother tongue learning although not all teachers are always aware of these. Some schools and teachers continue to discourage children to use their mother tongues. Bringing mother tongues into language learning and the language curriculum as well as offering formal learning of mother tongues as foreign languages through language classes and CLIL throughout primary and secondary education appear to be efficient and effective approaches to achieving the benefits described in the research evidence. This is facilitated where pluri-lingual approaches to language learning are adopted, qualified mother tongue teachers are available and mother tongues are recognised in the curriculum and school examinations.

### *Teacher education*

#### **Teacher education in language teaching skills and cultural competences**

Practitioners believe that teachers who provide language support should have specialist training and qualifications in second-language acquisition that is aligned with the approaches implemented in practice. Alongside this practitioners believe that all teachers require specific preparation to be able to work with children without the language of schooling and to be able to value diversity by incorporating a positive attitude towards it.



## **Teacher education to develop skills to support children without the language of schooling in the classroom**

There is some indicative research evidence that in-service training helps teachers to build their capability and resources to teach children without the language of schooling, which improves the attainment of those children. Practitioners strongly support this and also believe that initial teacher training ought to be adapted given the significant and growing proportion of teachers who will work in multilingual classrooms.

Schools and teachers benefit from the resources, networking and training provided by specialist centres in many countries and cities in the EU. Practitioners have found that networking between and within schools facilitates non-formal learning by teachers to support migrant children's learning.

### **Conclusions: What will make a difference?**

While the research evidence is not comprehensive in covering all the aspects of the educational system which can improve migrant children's educational achievements, it goes a long way to supporting measures targeted at children without the language of schooling to enable them to reach their potential.

There is a considerable consensus among practitioners about the causes of such children not reaching their potential and broad agreement to the types of solution which have been tested and in some cases embedded in policy and practice.

### **What are the factors working against migrant children achieving their potential?**

The evidence here broadly confirms earlier research published by the Commission that the factors which inhibit these children are:

- Schools without sufficient resources and lack of staff with the appropriate competencies to support the learning of children;
- Assessment tools and assessors with negative perceptions of migrant children's abilities which allocate more of them to lower ability tracks and special education classes;
- A lack of opportunities to develop mother tongue competences to higher levels;
- Although the segregation of migrant children occurs widely in the EU, this is not by itself a factor.

### **What brings about higher attainment and reduced gaps in achievement and progression?**

There is conclusive evidence here that ECEC for children without the language of schooling not only increases language competences but also long term educational achievements; that language competences are related to achievement in other competences; and that targeted and continued support in language learning enables this.

There is indicative evidence supported by practitioners that the following contribute to raising the attainment of children without the language of schooling:

- Supplementary education (both formal and non-formal) in school and out of school which includes help with homework, language learning (including mother tongue learning), and mentoring during activities;
- Immersion in mainstream classrooms with support from specialists and with teachers who have the competences and experience to tailor teaching to children in the class without the same level of competency in the language of schooling;
- Increasing their parents' support and encouragement in their education, including their development of language competences;
- Developing their mother tongue competences.

There is no conclusive evidence about the length of time that children without the language of schooling should spend in preparation classes but there is indicative evidence that this should be limited and should include a transition to immersion with support. It should be greater for older children (NAMS) so that they make the transition once they have a basic competency.

### **What increases children's development of their multi-lingual skills?**

There is indicative evidence that children without the language of schooling can increase these skills to higher levels where:

- ECEC enables them to learn and/ or their mother tongue along with the language of schooling;
- Non-formal and informal learning opportunities enable them to use their mother tongue;
- Formal learning opportunities are available either in school or out of school to develop their mother tongue skills so that they can achieve recognition of these skills in school examinations.

## *Recommendations: What will facilitate making a difference?*

For **policy makers** in national and local government, these are:

- Establish a curriculum for language learning in ECEC and a curriculum in primary and secondary education for second language learning;
- Establish unbiased assessment tools for testing and monitoring competences and cognitive skills of children without the language of schooling;
- Enable the dispersal of children without the language of schooling to reduce segregation and pressure on a small number of schools having large proportions of children without the language of schooling;
- Provide schools with core funding to cover extra costs of reception and immersion of children without the language of schooling, a minimum of formal mother tongue support, and in-service training that supports all teachers to teach children whose competence in the language of schooling is lower than native children;
- Provide project funding assistance for out of school activities providing additional education and support;
- Establish language simplification in assessment tests;
- Establish flexible policies towards foreign language learning which include the most frequently spoken mother tongues and their recognition in school qualifications and examinations of foreign language competences;
- Establish an initial teacher training curriculum to prepare teachers to work in multilingual classrooms and provide qualified mother tongue teachers.

For **policy implementers** in national and local government and schools, these are:

- Establish outreach to engage migrant parents in ECEC and in their children's education;
- Recruit bilingual staff in ECEC, outreach, and reception as well as mentors and teaching assistants;
- Establish procedures to enable a rapid transition from reception classes to immersion in mainstream classes with support which reflects children's age and the language competences they need to participate with support;
- Provide additional teaching and allocate support from teaching assistants and specialist teachers for children without the language of schooling;
- Support out of school activities for children without the language of schooling with trained mentors/volunteers;
- Provide materials and resources for mainstream class teachers to adapt pedagogies and for mother tongue learning;

- Promote CLIL teaching approaches in multilingual classrooms and longer school days/CLIL approaches to accommodate formal mother tongue learning;
- Promote positive attitudes about the potential of migrant children;
- Establish whole school approaches to learning cultural awareness through the curriculum including language learning;
- Support non-formal and informal learning of mother tongues where it is not possible to provide formal learning;
- Train staff in reception centres/schools to use good assessment methods which cover language as well as other subject competences;
- Ensure initial teacher training includes intercultural training, experience in multilingual classrooms and approaches to teaching children whose competence in the language of schooling is lower than native children;
- Build the capacity and resources of classroom teachers through in-service training and support from specialist centres, specialist teachers in second language acquisition, and networking opportunities.

For the **Commission**, these are:

- Disseminate the evidence brought together in this report of what works to enable children without the language of schooling to reach their potential and provide the benefits of increasing their mother tongue competences;
- Disseminate the good practices which exist in many parts of the EU to address these challenges successfully;
- Support research which could fill gaps in the evidence base around assessment approaches during and after reception and the extent to which children should be educated in preparatory classes before immersion and the amount/duration of support required for immersion;
- Promote evaluative research which will provide a better evidence base in this area of education policy and practice.
- Use EU funding instruments to support cooperation between Member States in order to develop any of the recommendations above.