

**Language Learning and Inclusive Diversity:
Plurilingual Competence in Integrated Primary Education**

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Situating Inclusion and Multilingualism

The issue of migration and inward population movements to Europe have become defining issues and concerns for the European Union, Member States and policy at present. The long history of ‘guest workers’ and economic migrants since the post-war economic boom of the 1950s, has now mutated into a new reality of embedded migrant populations with associated significant issues emerging around identity, assimilation and inclusion. The sense of a diverse and multicultural European Union shaped by a positive sense of diversity and respect for difference has been contradicted by strong and growing xenophobic and racist movements seeking not only to halt further inward migration but even to expel migrants to their countries of origin. Set against these disturbing developments, extreme forms of which can now be seen in the United States, is the vaunted EU policy of cultural diversity and linguistic policy. Multilingualism is highly valued in EU policy frameworks but is now positioned against a profoundly altered socio-economic external environment.

The global refugee crisis is a direct attack on the human condition, reflecting the resultant evils of war, natural disasters, autocratic dictatorships, and social, ethnic and racial hatred disguised under the cloak of nationalism. From Syria to Afghanistan and Ukraine to Myanmar – from South Sudan to Eritrea, the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of Congo to the Sudan and Somalia - global refugee crises continue to grow. This adds to the significant number of inward migrants who have travelled to Europe for economic reasons.

The United Nations Refugee Agency recently reported (ConcernUSA 2025):

In the past decade, the global refugee population has more than doubled. According to the UNHCR, over 84 million people around the world have been forced to flee their homes. Among them are over 26.6 million refugees, the highest population record. 68% of the world’s refugees come from just 5 countries.

In recent years, the Syrian crisis and now the Ukrainian War have accentuated the direct effects and magnitude of refugee crises. At first glance, the tendency for educators is to rightly focus on children. The data typically reflect refugee populations that are predominately children, mothers, and the elderly. For example, in the current Ukrainian crisis, males between the ages of 18 – 62 were asked to remain in the country. Undeniably, the over-riding desire of nearly all Ukrainians fleeing their country is to return as soon as possible. Conversely, in the

Syrian and Ukrainian crises, it was clear that many refugees would require assimilation and education for the long and medium terms, and that repatriation would not be feasible in the foreseeable future. The snapshot emerging is that receiving communities must adapt and this involves helping refugees meet basic needs integrated with educational assimilation of the children.

The issue of mass migration and population movement has dominated European discourse for at least 40 years. We are now entering a period of real transition. New problems arise around family fragmentation, emotional trauma, and the need to rebuild lives. Education provision for refugees is not being done in a consistent and qualitative manner, however, in Europe.

Moreover, this mass migration accentuates the critical importance of tapping the available human talent pool for economic and workforce development. Without question, the numbers of refugees across Europe will necessitate EU Member States effectively to integrate these displaced persons in the mainstream of European societies. Consistent with the Bologna process, refugee integration will as much be about economic mobility across borders as it will be about social inclusion, integration, and assimilation.

By June 2017, there were 5.5 million Syrian refugees (UNHCR statistics). The scale and intensity of the refugee problem caught the European Union by surprise. Responses were uncoordinated, fragmented and often counter-productive. For countries in the front line the impact is significant with the burden falling intensely on Greece, Italy and Malta. The situation has escalated with a rising tide of racism and discrimination in many Member States. The situation underlines many needs: as the numbers of refugees trapped for extended periods continues to grow, the need to develop concrete *supports* has emerged. In both the short-term responses, and in longer-term, the need for integration and conflict resolution, *Education, Training and Employment* offer most opportunities for inclusion.

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, published in Paris in 1948, affirms that education is a fundamental human right for everyone. However, while it may be a right, it is not a reality for most people in the world. Many education systems in Europe often do a poor job in providing opportunities for vast numbers of new (often traumatized) populations. The reality is that education systems in most EU countries are not inclusive. The development of Education, Training and Employment opportunities offers a strong model for successful integration. The use of advanced ICT supported learning in such environments offers new creative options for teaching and support. In this way, the tragedy of producing a “lost generation” can be avoided by constructing a proven example of linkage and innovation that can serve as a model for best practice throughout the EU.

Additional benefits include supporting the critical thinking and reflection needed to develop understanding of past trauma. This entails a deployment of principles of conflict resolution and diversity management within learning programs to encompass the need to adjust and integrate, intercultural competence, counselling support, cultural mediation, empathetic

communication and innovative adaptation of advanced digital learning platforms. The entire focus is designed to use the installation of ICT supported learning and digital resources to produce a resource of permanent value to educators dealing with migrant and refugee needs, enhancing self-sufficiency and autonomy, while at the same time delivering parallel training and upskilling methodology to provide permanent benefit to refugee participants. The secondary benefit is construction of a viable and transferable training system and content that enhances the career prospects and employability of trainee beneficiaries.

The motto of the European Union (EU) “United in diversity” highlights languages as one of the most essential expressions of our culture. For EU policy, multilingualism is also a crucial component of Europe's competitiveness. One goal of EU language policy is having two languages in addition to the native tongue. Multilingualism is a valuable means to create personal and professional opportunities for citizens. It also develops cultural awareness, mutual understanding and cohesion. Employees with language and intercultural competences are an invaluable resource for development of trade and commerce.

The need to improve multilingual education can be found in the Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on a comprehensive approach to teaching and learning languages. In point 7, it states that “almost half of Europeans report that they are unable to hold a conversation in any language other than their first language. Therefore, the lack of plurilingual competence is a source of problems for many citizens.”

In 2018, the European Parliament’s Committee on Culture and Education presented the report “Language equality in the digital age – towards a Human Language project”. It depicted the negative impact of language barriers in social, political and economic dimensions of European life. On 11 September 2018, the resolution ‘Language equality in the digital age’ was adopted. It included recommendations regarding the protection of minority languages and promotion of cultural and linguistic diversity in the EU, including the promotion of language technologies.

The Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning establishes multilingual competence as one of the key competencies to be achieved. This competence includes ability to use different languages appropriately and effectively for communication. There are two main words to reflect a similar concept. The Council of Europe uses the term ‘plurilingualism’ in referring to multiple language competences of individuals. European Union official documents use ‘multilingualism’ to describe both individual competences and societal situations. This emphasizes the need to introduce as early as possible linguistic competencies in more than one language.

Towards meaningful participation

Participating in early childhood education and care is beneficial for all children and especially for children in **disadvantaged situations. It helps by preventing the formation of early skill gaps** and so it becomes an essential tool to fight inequalities and educational poverty. Actions

aiming at increasing the quality of preschool education therefore become tools for addressing inequalities and facilitating improved outcomes for those excluded or marginalized.

According to the World Bank Report on the European Union, *Education in the EU: Diverging Learning Opportunities?* (2018), education faces many important challenges. Among these is specific mention of immigration. Students from migrant backgrounds appear to face challenges within many European education systems, with a smaller gap observed for second generation students compared to first generation students. This suggests that successful integration into the education system is possible with forward looking policy, clear goals and adequately resourced methodologies. The significance of language barriers warrants additional research.

Preschool programs of high quality possess the ability to address early disadvantages. Although several EU Member States have successfully extended the commencement of preschool programs to include children up to the age of two or three, there is still a strong need for progress to be made, especially in ensuring access for the most vulnerable children who are able to derive the greatest benefits from these programs

In Europe, children are starting to acquire foreign languages at younger ages. To enhance the mastering of fundamental abilities in education, the Barcelona European Council of 2002 advocated for additional action, including "teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age."

In countries where generalist teachers, i.e. those qualified to teach all (or almost all subjects), are also expected to teach languages, the challenge may be for them to acquire a high level of competence in a foreign language. A high-quality input cannot be guaranteed if the teacher is not a competent speaker of the language or lacks the teaching skills to teach foreign languages.

Another need regarding plurilingualism can be found in Point 9 of the Recommendation. It states that "limited multilingual competence remains one of the main obstacles to benefit from the opportunities offered by the European education, training and youth programmes".

Plurilingual education environments go beyond language acquisition, including the ability to navigate and appreciate multiple cultures (Galante & Dela Cruz, 2024).

Language acquisition is a skill that we largely take for granted, despite the fact that it is estimated that 1 in 10 children have speech and language difficulties and are at serious risk of social isolation and real educational disadvantage. Language and communication are central to the development of social, emotional and academic development. While the majority of children acquire language without difficulty, there are some who struggle to develop language and may regularly experience frustration and even failure in their communication. Research

points to a very high incidence of speech, language, and communication needs in lower socioeconomic groups.

“between 40 and 50% of children growing up in social disadvantaged areas are starting school with delayed language” (Law, McBean and Rush, 2011).

The Hanen Centre in Canada developed an interesting motto: “children ‘learn to talk, then talk to learn’. (www.hanen.org). This underlines the critical importance of developing as wide a range of linguistic skills and abilities as soon as possible in a child’s life to maximise opportunities for inclusion.

The acquisition of a first language is the most complex skill anyone ever learns. And this task needs to be virtually complete by the time a child reaches school age. (Crystal, 1987)

Experts warn that the window to stimulate brain development closes quickly. In the first three years of life, the brain grows from 25% to 90% of its adult weight. And nearly 50% of a child’s learning occurs in the first four years of life... Brain development is largely a function of stimulus. The more stimulus babies and young children get in terms of being read and talked to, the greater their capacity for language and literacy. (www.earlywords.net)

The acquisition of a second language is increasingly recognised as a means to build inclusion and integration, and stimulate cognitive development, while the recognition of their home language in the classroom fosters a positive plurilingual environment that enhances integration.

Valuing the different cultural and linguistic backgrounds of migrant children in their classrooms contributes to their social emotional and educational development (Krumm, 2010).

Several studies have shown that bilingual or plurilingual individuals exhibit enhanced executive functions, including cognitive flexibility, problem solving and working memory (Xia, An, & Guo, 2022).

European countries have differing approaches to second language acquisition, with the teaching of additional languages often commencing in the latter years of primary school. However, with the recognition of the neuroplasticity of the brains of younger children, the affording of opportunities for learning a second language will be of considerable benefit if begun in the earlier stages of education, such as in pre-school and early primary classrooms.

Early childhood education, specifically the preschool level (Nipiagogeio), is recognized as a critical period for language development, identity formation, and social integration, making the study of plurilingualism and bilingualism in this context particularly relevant (Beridze, 2023)

In Europe, children are starting to acquire foreign languages at younger ages. To enhance the mastering of fundamental abilities in education, the Barcelona European Council of 2002 advocated for additional action, including "teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age (TAPPEO, 2025)

For example, in Greece (Platon School, in TAPPEO 2025), a notable policy development has been the introduction of English language instruction into the compulsory morning program of public preschools, implemented nationally from the 2021-2022 school year (Eurydice, 2023). This is delivered through creative, experiential activities, often involving a team-teaching approach with both a kindergarten teacher and an English language teacher (Gkaintartzi, Kostoulas, & Vitsou, 2024). The stated aim is to enhance multilingual awareness and intercultural communication, rather than focusing solely on high language proficiency (Gkaintartzi, Kostoulas, & Vitsou, 2024). The approach of using creative, experiential activities reflects the optimum approach to learning for younger children, through play-based discovery learning which approach is considered most effective, for example in Ireland, through the national early years curriculum, Aistear (2025).

Ireland presents a useful description of the growing diversity of languages being spoken by children. Máire MacMathuna (Barnardos, 2015) describes the recent developments, stating that Ireland is a multilingual country with over 180 languages recorded in the 2011 census (<http://www.cso.ie>). Over half a million residents spoke a language other than Irish or English at home in 2011. These included Irish families who chose to speak French, German or Spanish at home and over 350,000 non-nationals who spoke another language, of which Polish was the most common European language. The most common Asian languages were Filipino and Mandarin and Cantonese Chinese. The most common African language was Yoruba (Nigeria) and Portuguese was the most common language from the Americas, spoken mainly by Brazilian nationals. When the figures for speakers of the Irish language are taken into account, it is clear that there is a wealth of languages being spoken on a daily basis in the country, an important source of social, cultural and linguistic enrichment for children of all ages. This obviously raises the question of how we value languages within the early years sector and the place we accord them in our work. This article will discuss the value of fostering positive attitudes towards all languages, including Irish, local English and children's other home languages, and the increasing emphasis on the importance of developing children's oral language in government documents.

Conclusion: Developing Plurilingualism in Teacher Training

Teachers are the conduit for fostering such plurilingual environments. Teachers face challenges and opportunities. There are expectations placed on them through, for example, the OECD, who state, among their key concepts in *Anchoring the Compass* (OECD, 2025), that navigating change without losing focus – grounding teaching practices in a strong professional identity and clear ethical values that guide educators through complexity, supporting improved student learning and well-being, that teachers face a growing list of expectations –

to deliver curriculum, nurture well-being, adapt to digital and AI-assisted learning, support inclusion, and build critical 21st-century competencies. Yet they are often left without the tools, recognition, or systemic support to succeed, and, in addition, teachers face a growing list of expectations – to deliver curriculum, nurture well-being, adapt to digital and AI-assisted learning, support inclusion, and build critical 21st-century competencies.

The EU recommendations, recognising the value of multilingualism, have led to the Teacher Academy project, TAPPEO: Teacher Academy for Plurilingual preschools. A path towards equal opportunities. TAPPEO states that preschool programs of high quality possess the ability to address early disadvantages. Although several countries in the EU have successfully extended the commencement of preschool programs to include children up to the age of two or three, there is still progress to be made, especially in ensuring access for the most vulnerable children who derive the greatest benefits from these programs.

TAPPEO seeks to harness the opportunity of developing plurilingualism from an early age by providing tools, supports, ideas and resources which can be shared across Europe by universities educating teachers, in primary schools and in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC).

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