Towards a plurilingual Ireland: planting the seeds of linguistic social justice in Education

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Introduction

Ireland has an inherently multilingual history. Irish, or Gaeilge, has been spoken here since the 4th century, followed by the arrival of English in the 12th century, Ulster Scots in the early 17th century, the emergence of Shelta or Cant, spoken by the Traveller community, and the development of Irish Sign Language in the 1850s. Over the last 30 years, Ireland's linguistic profile has changed significantly, mirroring a newly diverse population. A new approach to education is needed to support our children and young people that recognises our multilingualism as an asset. Plurilingualism, at an individual level, describes a person's ability to use multiple languages across multiple contexts to support communication. At the societal level, plurilingualism contributes to social cohesion, respect and cultural richness (European Commission, 2008).

The existing approach to support learners that have English as an Additional Language (EAL) in Irish education places additional barriers on an already under-resourced group. It also denies children and young people full access to their own linguistic rights as described in Article 29.i.(c) and Article 30 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

This policy position paper sets out a vision for a plurilingual and linguistically socially-just Ireland, focusing on schools and education as the key context in which radical change can occur and also where it is most needed. It reviews the merits and gaps of current educational policy and suggests short, medium, and long-term actions that can achieve this vision.

Linguistic Social Justice

Linguistic social justice (Avineri et al., 2015) argues that all individuals and communities should have equal rights and opportunities to express themselves, access information, and participate in public life in their own language(s). Furthermore, it states that:

- Linguistic diversity should be respected and preserved
- No language should be given preferential treatment or marginalised

- Language-based discrimination should be eliminated
- Certain accents or dialects should not be devalued.

Without support for linguistic justice, unfair power structures based on language take hold (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1988).

Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Practice

Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Practice (CLP) is the validation and affirmation of a child's home culture and language for the purposes of building and bridging learner success in both school and mainstream society (Hollie, 2017). This definition includes **every child**: those born in Ireland to Irish parents, those born to mixed or non-Irish parents, and those born outside of Ireland but living here.

The provision of greater linguistic equity through **culturally and linguistically responsive practices and policies** throughout the education system challenges our biases and, importantly, supports the acceptance and inclusion of others. Language is the currency of culture and society. By fostering linguistic diversity, we are directly addressing wider issues of inclusion.

Ireland's linguistic landscape

Ireland has shifted from being a country of emigration to one of immigration. It is now estimated that 12% of the current population were born outside of Ireland, with 15% of people in Ireland speaking a language other than English at home (CSO, 2022). Geopolitical events in the Middle East, Ukraine and other regions have resulted in sharp increases in the last year, with over 140,000 people arriving to these shores between April 2022 and 2023 - the largest yearly increase since 2008 (CSO, 2023). This trend is likely to continue well into the future, given the political instability in areas of the Global South and the increased effect of climate change on these populations. Ireland's emerging plurilingual, multicultural society is clearly here to stay.

Plurilingual learners come from many different backgrounds: migrants, refugees, asylum seekers or displaced people. They may be fleeing war, poverty or persecution or have experienced trauma, either in their home country, or while travelling to seek a better life in Ireland. Unfortunately, many face further challenges on arrival, such as racism and discrimination, poverty, homelessness, unsuitable living conditions, and barriers to employment (Metzner et al. 2022).

Plurilingual learners and the Irish Education System

Irish schools will continue to see increases in the number of first and second generation plurilingual learners that walk through their doors. However, the distribution of these students is unbalanced. DEIS schools located in socio-economically disadvantaged areas tend to have

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more migrant students because they are less likely to have waiting lists, and can often offer school places straight away (Darmody et al. 2014; 2016). Furthermore, only 1% of Irish-medium primary and post-primary schools have students of nationalities other than Irish, whereas English-medium schools have around 10% (Department of Education, 2022, p. 22 and 31).

While DEIS schools receive governmental supports and are subject to lower teacher-student ratios than mainstream schools, their educational outcomes and school completion rates tend to be lower (Smyth et al. 2015). Additionally, teachers in these schools are often supporting students with complex needs who are living in areas of the country struggling with poverty, crime, and addiction. As such, they may be more limited in the support they can provide to plurilingual students than teachers in schools in more affluent areas.

The Irish education system tends to prioritise learning English because of its economic, social and cultural capital. This creates a **monolingual bias** that sees migrant students as lacking English skills, instead of recognizing their pre-existing knowledge, skills, languages and cultural awareness (Lyons, 2010). Terms such as EAL, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), English for speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) imply that learning English is preferable, normal, or inevitable, disregarding students' full linguistic repertoire. To acknowledge existing depths of linguistic knowledge, terms such as **emergent** or **advancing plurilingual learners** would be more appropriate. Such terms portray these learners as having added value rather than being 'in deficit'.

While the Irish government's policies have begun to introduce the concept of plurilingualism into educational policy and discourse, there is still no core pre-service or in-service training for teachers and no unified, official approach. As a result, plurilingual students are often taught English in an ad-hoc manner by teachers who are not properly trained (Rodríguez-Izquiero and Darmody, 2019). School inspections have also shown that assessment of plurilingual learners' language abilities were unsatisfactory in 44% or non-existent in 25% of post-primary schools. Many schools were found to have a limited knowledge of available language tests and resources. 63% had not accessed support from *Oide*, the national support service for teachers, and 28% of schools had not accessed any available resources at all (Department of Education, 2024). In 2023, University College Cork (UCC) ran the first postgraduate diploma course in EAL for teachers. However, this is not government-funded and is subject to teacher's own availability and the ability of schools to pay. If teachers do not have sufficient resources to work in culturally and linguistically diverse environments, they cannot support migrant learners or ensure their inclusion in school (Faas et al, 2015).

It was reported in 2018 that 99% of teachers in Irish schools identify as 'White Irish', meaning that students of minority-ethnic backgrounds have limited access to role models within an educational setting (Heinz and Keane, 2015; 2018). Minority-ethnic teachers can employ their cultural knowledge and experiences of disadvantage to support migrant students' educational outcomes and are more likely than white Irish teachers to confront issues of race and racism at school (Villegas and Irvine, 2010; Lesko and Bloom, 1998 in Bryan, 2012; O'Brien, 2009). In

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Ireland, the government and its agencies have provided funding for some programmes (i.e. New Avenues to Teaching Programme, UCC; Migrant Teacher Programme, Marino Institute of Education), which are seeking to diversify the teaching profession; however, the impact of these projects is relatively small.

Although the provision for student voice in Irish schools has improved in recent years, plurilingual learners do not have the same agency as their peers who are native English speakers, and schools are not yet equipped with the strategies to remedy this. In general, there is a lack of substantial data on the educational outcomes of migrant children in Irish schools, posing a challenge for creating evidence-based, inclusive policy and increasing the risk of further disadvantage for this cohort (Darmody and Smyth, 2018).

Existing Educational policy on plurilingualism

Irish educational policy has begun to embrace the concept of plurilingualism and the value of fostering learners' home languages. However, many of these supportive policies are still being developed (e.g. *The Primary Language Curriculum* and *Modern Foreign Languages 2024*), and there remains a distinct lack of robust educational policy aimed at plurilingual learners at second level. Current intercultural education policies (outlined below) are out of date, do not encompass plurilingualism or connect to EAL teaching and learning, and fall short of promoting a fully inclusive school environment. The Senior Cycle curriculum (for 4th-6th year students in secondary school) is currently under review, to include redevelopment of the Intercultural guidelines for post-primary. Research has shown that robust, genuine intercultural education must be integrated with, and delivered alongside, quality language support for plurilingual students to feel valued and be able to fully participate in their education. (Faas et al. 2015; Rodrigues and Darmody, 2019).

The table below outlines the merits and gaps of current educational policy documents that affect plurilingual learners, identifying those that support the provision of linguistically and culturally responsive practice and the pursuit of linguistic social justice in the Irish education system. While it is beneficial to have such a comprehensive set of policies that directly or indirectly support plurilingual learners, what is needed is a **targeted, integrative, stand-alone policy**.

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A. Curriculum-based policy

Policy	Merits and Gaps
Primary School Curriculum (1999)	• 20+ years old • New curriculum currently being developed –consultation stages
Primary Curriculum Framework (2023)	• Mentions 'Promoting responsive pedagogies and practices so that all children and families feel included, valued, and visible' • One of 8 Key competencies identified is 'Being a communicator and using language'
Primary Language Curriculum (2019)	• Supports learning multiple languages in the same classroom (plurilingual approaches) • Recognizes that learning one language helps with the learning of others • Values and fosters the use of home languages in the classroom
DRAFT Primary Language Curriculum and Modern Foreign Languages (2024)	• Significant updates to the existing Primary Language Curriculum including incorporation of a robust and clear plurilingual approach • Clear guidelines promoting the use of students' home language in the classroom and home • Advocates for a 'linguistically and culturally responsive pedagogy' • Advocates for the 'activation of language awareness' for the benefit of all students, including EAL students
Junior Cycle Curriculum (2015)	• Inclusive education is one of the eight framework principles • Makes provision for the development of an L1, L2 and one other language which could be a foreign or heritage language. However, the curriculum does not make provision for English as an additional language to be considered an L1/L2
Senior Cycle Curriculum	• Being redeveloped, including a review of the Intercultural Guidelines for second level

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B. General Educational Policy

Policy	Merits and Gaps
Department of Education Circulars: **Circular 0015/2009 (2009)** **Circular 0011/2024 (2024)** **Circular 0009/2024 (2024)**	• Reference to language learning theory - explanation of Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) in Circulars from 2024 for both primary and post-primary • No circulars solely dedicated to EAL learners at primary or second level since 2009 • References to EAL in other circulars are vague, brief and contain no practical resources for teachers • No allowances made for diverse needs of each school and its demographic - 'one size fits all' approach to EAL teaching and learning • Incorporates EAL teacher allocation into overall Special Education Teaching (SET) allocation for each school, conflating Special Educational Needs (SEN) and EAL learners
Meeting Additional Language Needs: Whole-school and Classroom Approaches for Inclusive Language Learning [Report] (2024)	• Acknowledges that allocation of SET and EAL hours together has not worked and conflation of EAL and SEN learners can be damaging to EAL learners • Identifies resources available for teachers • Clearly identifies features of existing good practice in Irish schools as well as gaps in practice, and provides guidance on how to address these, to some extent
Intercultural Guidelines in the Primary School (2005)	• Includes a section on language and recognises the importance of the child's first language • Acknowledges the classroom as a 'languages classroom' • Promotes a move away from specific cultural celebrations/events that can lead to a sense of othering • Out-of-date statistics and language • Uses the term 'English as a Second Language' • More needed on how to practically combine language and subject content teaching • A more integrated approach to plurilingualism and intercultural education is needed overall

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Intercultural Guidelines in the Post-primary School (2006)	• Acknowledges institutional racism in Irish society • Acknowledges importance of home language & monolingual/deficit perspective • Acknowledges how the Irish language can contribute to plurilingualism • Favours a tokenistic 'respect and celebrate diversity' approach to intercultural education • Out of date statistics & context
Intercultural Education Strategy, 2010- 2015 (2010)	• Promotes a conditional acceptance of diversity, other cultures, values and identities, only as long as they 'contribute to the social good...do not infringe on the overall good and wellbeing of Irish society...do not conflict with the fundamental democratic values of society'
An Intercultural Look at our Schools: A Toolkit for Self-evaluation and Support for Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Our School (2024)	• Includes helpful resources for teaching staff, school leaders, parents and students, including a questionnaire for teachers to reflect on their own practice • Acknowledgement that EAL learners are not learners with Special or Additional Educational Needs (SEN or AEN) • Includes more detailed explanation of how students with strong conversational skills can still struggle with academic language
Ireland's Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024--2033: Every Learner from Birth to Young Adulthood (2024)	• Acknowledgement of plurilingual society • One of 5 strategic pillars is dedicated to supporting diverse learners (including plurilingual learners) to achieve their potential • Objectives outlined to achieve this, but no concrete indicators identified to measure success

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C. Language Policy

Policy	Merits and Gaps
Languages Connect, Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026 (2017)	• Emphasises need to support learners' home languages • Acknowledges challenges of achieving fully plurilingual society • Identifies need for plurilingual learners to be acknowledged for their home language competence at Leaving Certificate level through provision of new languages as official subjects • Not enough references made to the connection between learning English and learning foreign languages and the opportunities for integrated learning therein
20-year strategy for the Irish Language (2010-2030) (2010)	• Promotion of the Irish language in all sectors of society, including for migrant children with a commitment to more objectivity around exemptions • The policy is non-committal, vague and underestimates the potential force for social inclusion that Irish could be (see Catalan *aula d'acollida* model)

Grassroots initiatives for plurilingual learners

Many community organisations in areas with large migrant communities have taken it upon themselves to develop innovative programmes for plurilingual learners, such as the *Talking Heads* programme, an afterschool conversation club delivered by the Early Learning Initiative at the National College of Ireland. *Mother Tongues* is a social enterprise working to promote multilingualism and intercultural dialogue and empower bilingual children through creativity and the arts (Mother Tongues, 2024). However, these initiatives often rely on irregular, once-off funding and are run with limited staff and resources, meaning that they are not a sustainable solution for plurilingual learners.

A vision for Linguistic Social Justice in Ireland

Below are features of effective Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Practice that, if adopted, would support and foster Linguistic Social Justice in an Irish context:

- Embed the concept that **every teacher is a language teacher** in initial teacher education (Céim, 2023).
- Teachers regularly assess their **monolingual** and **other unconscious biases** and critique their positions of power in the classroom (Bowman, 2020) so that they can be **agents of change.**

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- All learners (including those born in Ireland) are seen as **language learners of English** on the same trajectory, but at different points.
- Plurilingual learners' **funds of knowledge** are fostered, valued and used to diversify and decentre learning in the classroom. An ethos of **linguistic hospitality** (Ricoeur, 2004) is adopted that supports greater inclusion and supports for languages other than English and Irish.
- SEN and EAL are seen as **different types of support**. A child can access one or both.
- Innovative approaches to student participation are adopted to ensure that all students **have their voice heard**, whatever language they speak.
- Teachers adopt **trauma-informed practices** to support plurilingual learners who have experienced trauma, including those suffering from the loss of language or culture, an integral part of a child's identity (Baker and Wright, 2021).
- Adopt **non-deficit terms** such as emergent/advancing plurilingual learners over deficit terms such as EAL, that acknowledge students **entire linguistic repertoire** and challenge the monolingual bias (Baker and Wright, 2021).
- **Increase access to interpreters** for families, to avoid relying on children as translators, particularly in sensitive scenarios such as doctor's appointments.
- Plurilingual learners are assessed both in terms of their **use of content and language** in ways that are proportionate to their relative starting points (Herrera, Murray, & Cabral, 2014).
- End the **overrepresentation of plurilingual learners** in DEIS settings and increase plurilingual learners in Irish-Medium settings.
- Plurilingual learner provision (e.g. English Language Support Teachers; ELSTs) should be guided by the research-informed needs of the school rather than centrally by the Department of Education. **No 'one size fits all' approach.**

Conclusion: Actions to further Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Practice

Based on the features of quality practice outlined above, below is a list of recommended short-, medium- and long-term actions that will foster effective CLP and advance linguistic social justice in Ireland.

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Action	Short-term	Medium-term	Long-term
Policy-based actions	• Ensure all educational policy decisions are linguistically and culturally responsive and supported by input from current educators. • Replace 'EAL' label in favour of 'emergent/ advancing plurilingual learner'.	• Establish a specialist unit in the Department of Education to lead on the redevelopment of language proficiency assessment in schools, moving towards a model that focuses on their ability to use English for their learning.	• Develop Individualised Educational Plans for plurilingual learners to support and record their evolving linguistic competence. • Evaluate schools based on their delivery of CLP.
Educator training and capacity building	• Undertake an awareness-raising campaign for educators around linguistic social justice and combatting monolingual bias.	• Develop specific, robust training for teachers that focuses on linguistically and culturally responsive pedagogy, inclusion and assessment that is rooted in social justice. • Support ELSTs to develop closer planning and preparation links with classroom teachers and curriculum leaders to ensure their input contributes directly to EAL learners' needs.	• Build teacher professional networks that are supported in top-down and bottom-up ways at the local level to support educators to develop CLP.
Assessment	• Teachers adopt a more equitable approach to low-stakes assessment	• State Examinations Commission adopts a more equitable approach to high-	• Establishment of a qualification or provision of additional CAO points that

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	(e.g. class tests/ quizzes) in school and celebrate learners' achievements in the acquisition of English/Irish.	stakes assessment to recognise plurilingual learners' levels of English/Irish.	recognises the progress that plurilingual learners make.
Actions to achieve linguistic social justice	• Gather population data across all schools in Ireland including the number of plurilingual learners in each setting to create a nationwide picture. • Develop a media campaign promoting gaelscoileanna/ gaelcholáistí for *all* learners, promoting plurilingualism to include Gaeilge.	• Conduct a robust reflective critique of Irish-language exemptions among plurilingual learners and a review of this policy. • Develop rigorous data collection of learners' evolving language profile. • Develop more sustainable funding models implanted for bottom-up initiatives that have proven to provide effective support for plurilingual learners such as *Talking Heads* and *Mother Tongues.*	• Develop ways in which the imbalance of EAL learners in DEIS settings and Irish-Medium settings could be addressed. • Develop learning and use of Irish among non-traditional speakers as a form of social inclusion.

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