Education and integration

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A chara,

– [Fintan](http://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/fintan-o-toole-how-ireland-is-dis-integrating-1.2132345) O’Toole (“State is sleepwalking into school segregation”, Opinion & Analysis, March 10th) makes the point that Irish society rose to the challenge of the changing demographic in our country over the last two decades. I am principal of a primary school with a large cohort of non-native speakers of English. I have seen this positive response in action at local level and tribute must be paid to all our people, indigenous and newcomer alike, for the manner in which they have co-operated and, in many instances, supported each other.

Mr O’Toole rightly speaks of schools where all children are welcomed equally. A worthy aspiration but how do we do it? How do we respond and show all the children in our school that they are equally valued? We start by valuing who they are and what they bring with them. Appreciating their culture and traditions empowers them personally and socially. Valuing their home language – the power-house of their thinking and learning processes – empowers their educational development.

In a school such as mine, where almost 80 per cent of the pupils are non-native speakers of English, we cannot formally teach all their home languages, of which there are more than 40. What we can do is encourage their parents to maintain and develop their home language while we incorporate it in our approach to teaching and learning in school.

By valuing every language in the classroom, we cultivate a plurilingual milieu where children are encouraged to use all the languages within their repertoire.

The cognitive benefits of such an approach are well documented. The skills learned are transferable and so inform all areas of learning. Appreciating that their knowledge is valued allows children to take pride in their ability, making them confident and motivated to learn more.

There are huge benefits for monolingual children in such a learning environment, too. From a very early age, they begin to realise that there are different ways to say the same thing, other ways to view the world.

As their newcomer peers learn English and Irish, indigenous Irish children learn that a plurilingual milieu is an exciting and interesting place to be. There are many obvious educational benefits, one of which is an increase in status for the Irish language. Children see Irish as a means of communication, just like any other language, so it is learned and used with enthusiasm. This leads to exploration of additional languages to which they are attracted. In a large intercultural milieu, where all languages are valued, they have a wide variety of languages to choose from and friends to help them learn, thus contributing to social cohesion. With the introduction of a modern language in fifth and sixth classes, children begin to develop the ability to express themselves in three, four and more languages. Far from this being a deficit model of education, every child in this country should have the benefits and enrichment of growing and learning in such a socially cohesive, diverse, plurilingual milieu.

While it is true, as Mr O’Toole asserts, that official complacency can lead to disaster, credit must be given to the Department of Education and Science for the supports – admittedly severely reduced in recent years – given to children whose home language is neither English nor Irish. However, it is also true that the inability to see the opportunity inherent in challenge can result in neglect of some of our potentially richest assets. This is where we need an approach to teaching and learning that allows the attributes of all to be utilised for the benefit of all. For this to happen, it is vitally important that teachers are prepared both at pre-service and in-service levels and given the skills to harness these benefits. Language is, after all, the conduit through which learning takes place.

Why have monolinguals graduating from our schools, when we could have people with facility in a diversity of languages? – Is mise,

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