# Language Teaching and Learning in Multilingual Classrooms

*How schools and communities can help learners with different linguistic backgrounds strengthen their language skills in order to succeed better in school and life*

# Table of Contents

# Introduction

## Background

Multilingual schools are a feature of Europe's diverse and complex linguistic landscape. They operate in many different contexts: international schools for expat communities; schools providing instruction in regional, minority or indigenous languages; or schools having opted for a degree of bilingual education, where another language is partly used for instruction, common for example in border regions and more recently often with the objective of teaching English.

Increasingly, the focus has been shifting towards schools welcoming large numbers of newcomers who arrive as immigrants or refugees. This category of multilingual schools and classrooms are places where learners have different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, where they speak one language at home and another language at school, where teachers and pupils do not share a common language or cultural background, where some or all of the pupils are learning the language of instruction as a second language.

While there are many Member States that have accommodated wave after wave of immigrants throughout the 20th century, large-scale immigration is a relatively recent phenomenon in many areas of Europe. Today however, there is no country in the EU where education systems are not under extreme pressure through the arrival of refugees from countries torn apart by civil war. Therefore, teaching culture urgently needs to adapt to the presence of several languages in the classrooms. In schools, extra support is needed for language learning in order for all children to develop their ability to learn and achieve the best they are capable of.

## Purpose of the project on multilingual classrooms

ICF International has carried out a study based on existing research and a series of expert meetings and visits facilitated by the European Commission in order to gather and analyse existing data on:

- What works to enable migrant children who use a language at home different to the language of school instruction to participate in learning, attain proficiency in the language of instruction, 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, as well as strengthening their overall cognitive abilities.

This note summarises the main conclusions of the evidence found and their policy implications for language teaching and learning in Europe.

# Main conclusions

## Critical factors

The evidence broadly confirms earlier research published by the European Commission that the factors which prevents children without the language of instruction from reaching their potential are:

- Schools without sufficient resources and staff with competencies to support the learning of migrant 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 their mother tongue competences to higher levels.

## Keys to unlock the potential of multilingual children

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

- 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 instruction;
- Increasing their parents' support and encouragement in their education, including their development of language competences;
- Developing their mother tongue competences.

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) for children without the language of instruction not only increases language competences but also long term educational achievements; language competences are related to achievement in other competences; and targeted and continued support in language learning enables this.

There is indicative evidence that the length of time that children without the language of instruction should spend in preparation classes should be limited and should include a transition to immersion with support. It should be greater for older children so that they make the transition once they have a basic competency.

## Success factors outside compulsory education

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

- ECEC enables them to learn their mother tongue as well as the language of instruction;

- 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 which progress towards recognition of educational achievements.

## Attitudes and perceptions are crucial

Intercultural education is more likely to be achieved and achieved more quickly where schools are less segregated and children are more rapidly immersed in mainstream classrooms. This provides greater opportunities for cultural awareness and valuing diversity through teaching and learning.

There is indicative evidence that the following are beneficial:

- Increasing all children's cultural and linguistic awareness through both language learning and other parts of the curriculum;
- Engaging parents in the school's activities and their children's education;
- Increasing teachers' positive attitudes towards migrant children's prospects and their use of their mother tongues to learn.

The report presents a wide array of recommendations about concrete measures to take in order to change fundamental elements of reception, integration and teaching in line with the conclusions above. These measures are likely to have an immediate effect on creating a more constructive learning environment in multilingual classrooms.

# Policy implications

## At Member State level

The conclusions and recommendations in the report are to be seen as a guidance note for policy makers throughout the various levels of decision making and implementation, including every school where multilingualism and diversity are factors to take into account.

The recommendations are built around practitioners' conclusions that schools need to take the mother tongue of every child into account. The new approach is to support the development of the children's individual multilingualism as a means of fostering their competences in the main language of instruction along with the development of other cognitive skills. This is presumed to strengthen their self-confidence and help them feel at ease with their mixed identity.

The discussion about how to prevent migrants from becoming linguistically impaired is closely linked to the strategy to prevent early school leaving and the work carried out in the European Commission's Working Group on Schools, within the framework of Education and Training 2020. As discussed during the symposium organised by the Luxembourg Presidency on 10-11 September 2015 in "Diversity and multilingualism in Early Childhood Education and Care", social, cultural and linguistic diversity must also

be taken into consideration when implementing the Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care. Quality in this respect also means supporting the language development of children with different individual starting points and valuing their diversity.

Many recommendations concern language teaching and learning in general and encompass not only advice for swift and efficient learning of the main language of instruction and mother tongue support but also foreign language learning as foreseen in the school curriculum.

There are recommendations that do not call for any particular financial investments, whereas others require a re-allocation of funding and sometimes an increase in budgetary resources.

Member States are invited to consider to what extent the core messages in the guidance note are applicable to their school strategies and current challenges.

## At EU level

The European Commission is committed to use the instruments available at European level to continue supporting schools in their efforts to adapt to diversity and multilingualism in the classrooms.

Measures managed and/or supported by the European Commission which will be carried out at short to medium term include:

- An increased focus on intercultural learning, diversity management and anti-discrimination measures through e-twinning.

- A tool kit including resources and good practices, links and especially tailor made material for use in multilingual classrooms will soon be available on the School Education Gateway.

Additional studies will be carried out with leading experts in the field of multilingual learning in order to follow up the results of teaching carried out following the principles of the conclusions listed above.

European cooperation in the wake of the current refugee crisis will be supported through Erasmus+ and other financial instruments of the EU. Programme guides will be adapted to help Member States review their current strategies to prepare their schools to accommodate recently arrived migrants and to facilitate their integration and well-being.