



Participants' Experiences of the Irish Research Network in Childhood Bilingualism and Multilingualism

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Created in 2018, the Irish Research Network for Childhood Bilingualism and Multilingualism aims to bring together researchers from a wide range of disciplines, policy makers, teachers, early childhood educators, educational psychologists and speech and language therapists who have an interest in advancing knowledge and improving practices in the area of childhood bilingualism. It was inspired by initiatives all around the world that attempt to facilitate access to research findings and promote cross-disciplinary collaboration in the area of childhood bilingualism.

This research evaluated three events organised as parts of meetings of this network:

- A **World Café** on Childhood Bilingualism held on May 3rd 2018, organised by Dr Duana Quingley and Mrs Lorraine Crean. A world café is a way to reflect and interact on specific questions within small groups.
- A **Public Panel** on Bilingual Education for Children with Speech, Language and Communication Needs, held on May 3rd 2018. Four panellists were present: Prof Ianthi Tsimpli (University of Cambridge), Prof Padraig O'Duibhir (Dublin City University), Dr Ciara O'Toole (University College Cork) and Dr Maria Garraffa (Heriot Watt University).
- A **Workshop** entitled "Becoming Language Explorers: a short course for primary school teachers" held on September 13th 2018, delivered by Dr Francesca La Morgia and Mr Simon Rouse.

These events intended to reach both parents/carers of bilingual/multilingual children and professionals working with bilingual children / in the area of childhood bilingualism/multilingualism in Ireland.

The aim of this research was to investigate the impact of the Irish Research Network on its participants. Indeed, although the development of similar networks worldwide reflects a need to adjust to the current growing of bilingualism and multilingualism, very little has been done so far to evaluate their impact on the population they intend to reach and thereby inform the direction they ought to take in the future.

The following is a summary of the research questions and of the answers that were revealed upon evaluation of the data collected:

1. *Is the Irish Research Network in Childhood Bilingualism and Multilingualism reaching the stakeholders towards which it is aiming to promote collaboration?*

Eighty-two attendees across all events agreed to participate to the study. They were primary school teachers, Irish medium education teachers, speech and language therapists, policy makers, academics and parents of both bilingual and monolingual children. The fact that such a wide variety of stakeholders were present at each event reflects a high interest for the subject and reveals that the Irish Research Network for Childhood Bilingualism and Multilingualism does reach its targeted population.

- 2. What challenges may these stakeholders face when raising/ working with bilingual/ multilingual children that may motivate their participation to this network?*

Following a thorough literature research, it was expected that challenges may vary according to stakeholders' professions and/or status, which was confirmed upon analysis of the data collected. Most professions reported that they felt they were lacking training and/or resources when working with bilingual/multilingual children, especially with children whose first language was not English. Parents reported that they did not always feel confident in the strategies they were using to implement bilingualism/multilingualism at home.

- 3. What expectations may these stakeholders have when attending an event led by the Irish Research Network in Childhood Bilingualism and Multilingualism?*

Stakeholders' expectations for each event reflected the events description, which testifies that the Irish Research Network for Childhood Bilingualism and Multilingualism provides clear information regarding the features and aims of the events ahead of their instalments. Participants' expectations were also closely linked to the challenges they had reported facing in their work with bilingual/multilingual children and in bilingual upbringing.

- 4. Does the Irish Research Network in Childhood Bilingualism and Multilingualism meetings address those challenges?*

Results showed that the majority of the participants' expectations had been met at each event. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive and provided rich and valuable information to encourage ongoing cross-disciplinary collaboration. Events met participants' expectations by giving participants the opportunity to meet people, to share experiences, to get resources, to hear about research and to get reassurance.

This research showed that the Irish Research Network for childhood bilingualism and multilingualism is currently reaching its purpose, however one should remember that *"this day has only scratched the surface"* (SLT, World café). As research progresses at an increasing rate, there is undoubtedly a lot that remains to be discovered about childhood bilingualism/multilingualism. It is essential that collaboration remains ongoing and that findings are disseminated often for it to make a difference in people's lives.