Ireland's Early Childhood Curriculum Framework Through the Lens of Plurilingualism

Francesca La Morgia

Research Fellow, Department of Education Studies Giovanni Maria Bertin, University of Bologna,
Francesca.lamorgia@unibo.it

Abstract

This paper argues for a more systematic introduction of plurilingual pedagogies in Ireland's early childhood curriculum framework. Plurilingualism as a pedagogical approach encourages the educator to engage in the use of multiple languages with the aim of fostering children's confidence in developing their own plurilingual repertoires.

The article challenges the dominance of the prevalent monolingual mindset, which pervades much of Ireland's early childhood education policy discourse, and proposes a pluralistic approach that can serve both as an enhancement of the current lack of language policies in the early childhood sector and as a foundation for the continuum between preschool and primary school.

The paper examines Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework used in Ireland's preschools and early childhood settings, identifying its strengths in placing language and communication at the heart of educators' practices, as well as its pitfalls and potential improvements in the conceptualization and application of plurilingual practices in early childhood settings.

Keywords: plurilingualism, early childhood education, curriculum, languages in education

1 Introduction

In today's increasingly multilingual societies, early childhood education settings are the prime environments where pluralistic approaches to education can be fostered. European institutions, such as the Council of Europe, have long been advocating for the implementation of plurilingual approaches in education to shift from a monolingual to a pluralistic model across all levels of education (CEFR, 2001). While many examples of good practice have emerged from primary and secondary education contexts, there are fewer practice guides and toolkits to inspire early childhood educators to enact plurilingual approaches, especially in contexts where monolingualism is part of the dominant policies and ideologies.

Ireland is an interesting example in the European context because it is a country with two official languages (English and Irish) and a country in which at least one in five children grows up in families where more than one language is spoken or where Irish Sign Language is used. In Ireland the Primary Language Curriculum (DES, 2019) has a strong emphasis on the development of plurilingual competencies as well as the development of English and Irish; however, Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework for children from birth to 6 years of age (NCCA, 2009) makes limited reference to plurilingual approaches adopted by educators and fails to interpret plurilingualism both as a pedagogical strategy and as a competency that can be fostered in all children.

This paper analyses the curriculum recommendations focused on language and communication and offers a reflection on the pitfalls in the current representation of plurilingual environments, suggesting improvements in the implementation of a plurilingual approach.

2 Literature review

Early childhood education and care (henceforth ECEC) settings often lack explicit language policies. This is especially common in countries where there is one dominant language of high prestige and monolingualism is the dominant ideology (Cross, D'warte & Slaughter, 2022). In recent years, plurilingual pedagogical approaches have been emerging as an alternative to the anachronistic monolingual ideology that creates a hierarchy of languages and ignores the linguistic plurality that forms part of societies and educational settings.

The term plurilingualism is defined as a "process of dynamic, creative "languaging" across the boundaries of language varieties" (Piccardo, 2019, p. 185) and as a "communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contribute and in which languages interrelate and interact" (CEFR, 2001, p. 5). Therefore, plurilingualism develops as a result of linguistic experiences matured in the home, at school and in social contexts to which the children are exposed. The languages that form part of a child's repertoire may be used for different purposes. Knowledge or competency in these languages may change over time, so a plurilingual repertoire is not fixed and should be seen as a fluid, adaptable and evolving competency.

ECEC settings are the ideal environments for the implementation of plurilingual approaches, because it is in these early stages that children develop not only language and communication skills, but also their cultural and linguistic identity. The majority of the research on language interventions in ECEC settings is based on the assumption that all children need to achieve a certain level of competency in the language spoken in the setting (Law et al., 2017; Greenwood et al., 2020), but little attention is given to the development of a plurilingual competency as part of the enhancement of the linguistic and communicative skills of young children.

In Europe many of the national guidelines and curricula that drive the enhancement of early language and literacy development in young children (such as Aistear in Ireland, Koolieelse lasteasutuse riiklik õppekava in Estonia or the Programme d'enseignement de l'école maternelle in France) are increasingly recognising the role of bilingualism and plurilingualism, but they rarely describe plurilingual competency

as an educational outcome, even in some countries such as Ireland that are officially bilingual. Therefore, the educational policies, the curricula and the planned interventions aimed at creating a language-rich environment are normally interpreted through a monolingual lens. This is also demonstrated by the fact that early childhood education curricula, including Aistear in Ireland (see section 2.2), often represent plurilingualism as the byproduct of the presence of second language learners who need to improve in their L2, rather than as a strategy to enhance the linguistic repertoires of all children.

An increasing number of studies show that plurilingual educational practices have the potential to enhance all children's linguistic and metalinguistic skills (Andorno, 2020, Cohrssen et al. 2021). Moreover, a substantial body of research conducted in educational settings suggests that experiences, skills, and knowledge gained in one language can transfer to another if children are supported by educators in developing plurilingual competencies and work across languages (Little & Kirwan, 2019).

The employment of plurilingual approaches has the potential to enhance language and communication skills in children's heritage languages, raise awareness of the richness of linguistic and cultural diversity in the setting, promote respect for others, cultivate positive perceptions and attitudes towards speakers of different languages and their cultures, combat monolingual and ethnocentric attitudes and instil confidence. Initiating this approach during early childhood has the potential to impact children's communicative skills, self-confidence and identity formation from a young age (Little & Kirwan, 2019).

In environments dominated by a monolingual ideology, it is often believed that plurilingualism can be implemented when there is a need for a solution to the issues presented by the presence of children who don't yet master the majority language and could therefore benefit from hearing the language(s) spoken in their homes. This reductive interpretation of the pedagogical impacts of plurilingualism fails to recognize the role of the educator as a model for the plurilingualism that Piccardo define as "a unique, overarching notion, implying a subtle but profound shift in perspective, both horizontally toward the use of multiple languages, and vertically, toward valuing even the most partial knowledge of a language (and other para- and extralinguistic resources) as tools for facilitating communication" (Piccardo, 2016: 319).

The implementation of plurilingual approaches in ECEC settings requires educators to move away from the view that using different languages is only relevant when they are a subject to be taught or learned formally, and to enjoy the playful and creative aspects of communication, dispelling the fear that plurilingualism corresponds to high-level competency in multiple languages.

2.1 The role of educators in fostering a language-rich environment

The role of adults in creating a language-rich environment for children cannot be underestimated. Research has widely demonstrated that children's learning and development are enhanced by engagement with the people in their surrounding environment (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Vygotsky, 2005). Exposure to rich linguistic input provides children with the opportunity to learn new words in context, understand concepts and be active listeners and participants in conversations. While children develop language in recognisable stages, some linguistic domains can be significantly affected by the quality of their interactions. For example, vocabulary size has been consistently associated with quality and quantity of input, and it has been identified as a predictor for literacy attainment. Research has shown that vocabulary at the age of three is a predictor of a child's ability to read in third grade, and this has a direct correlation with educational attainment (Dickinson & Porche, 2011; Golinkoff et al. 2019). Language outcomes have also been associated with exposure to input directed at children in conversation and with the number of conversational turns. For example, Weisleder and Fernald (2013) found a correlation between the amount of speech addressed to children at 19 months and their ability to process words in real-time. Zimmerman et al. (2009) also found that the number of adult-child turns is a significant predictor of child language development even more than the number of words used. Similar findings emerged in a study by Gilkerson et al. (2018), who recorded the language environment of infants between 2 and 25

months. Their study shows that more conversational turns at 18–24 months proportionally contributed to higher IQ, verbal comprehension, and vocabulary 10 years later. Turn-taking is a social process that shows children how language interaction works, so it can be a useful tool for children to learn to infer meaning and understand the communicative intent of speakers, which in turn contributes to the enhancement of communicative competence. Developing a strong linguistic and communicative competence is not only essential for self-expression, but it has long-term repercussions on academic attainment and socio-emotional well-being: outcomes in academic achievement, executive functioning and socio-emotional skills have been shown to be affected by early language development (Bleses et al. 2016; Bruce & Bell, 2022; Hentges et al. 2021; Conti-Ramsden et al. 2018).

In the context of ECEC, high-quality interactions between the educator and the child foster language-rich exchanges and promote the enhancement of language skills (Eadie et al., 2019; Niklas & Tayler, 2018). Factors such as the linguistic responsiveness of early childhood educators, the amount of their talk and meaningful feedback and recasting as well as dialogic reading accompanied by extension activities have been shown to impact the growth of children's vocabulary (Dickinson & Porche, 2011; Hirsh-Pasek & Burchinal, 2006; Silverman et al., 2013).

These studies indicate that the linguistic experiences of children at the early stages of language development are essential and that a high-quality linguistic input consists of interactions that are rich in lexical diversity and that actively engage the child and the adult. Through daily routines, social interactions, play and conversations with adults, children develop the ability to listen, take turns, express themselves and understand others. It is therefore essential that early childhood educators develop an awareness of their role in creating the type of linguistic environment that supports children in setting the foundation of these skills. This awareness is even more important in devising plurilingual strategies for the first time. In contexts where monolingualism is the norm, the shift in mindset described by Piccardo (2016) will result in changes to interactions between educators and children, and at the start this will require careful planning as it may not happen incidentally. The above research also shows that a language-rich environment benefits all children. This finding is corroborated by research on plurilingual practices, which have also been shown to enhance children's linguistic and metalinguistic skills (Andorno, 2020, Cohrssen et al. 2021).

2.2 Languages in early childhood education and care settings

Ireland is officially a bilingual country, with Irish as the first official language, followed by English. Irish is a minority language, spoken as a first language by a small percentage of the population. English is the language used in the majority of schools and preschools, and Irish is taught as a subject, starting in primary school, as well as being the main language used and taught in Irish-medium schools and preschools, which provide different forms of immersion education. Ireland has also been a country of immigration for an increasing number of people since the 1990s, and this has resulted in a population that is culturally and linguistically diverse. According to the latest population Census (CSO, 2022), in 2022 about 750,000 of the 5.1 million people living in Ireland were speakers of a language other than Irish or English. Polish was the most widely spoken language, with 124,000 speakers, followed by Romanian with over 57,000 speakers. The previous Census data (CSO, 2017) also showed that over 76,000 primary school children (13% of the primary pupils) spoke a language other than English or Irish at home (Oireachtas Library & Research Service, 2020). It is also estimated that in Ireland about one in five children is born to a family where at least one of its members speaks a language other than English, including Irish and 65% of ECEC and school-aged childcare services reported having at least one child for whom neither English nor Irish was a first language (Pobal, 2022).

In recent years, Ireland's language policies in education have focused on the teaching of the Irish language as a language revitalisation instrument. Irish language immersion education is present in all the

Gaeltacht areas, [the Irish-speaking areas], and in 8% of primary schools and 10% of secondary schools outside the Gaeltacht (Gaelscoileanna). Irish is also spoken in Irish-medium preschools (naíonraí) outside of the Gaeltacht.

In recent years, the Irish Government has published the first foreign languages in education policy, Languages Connect, Ireland's strategy for foreign languages in education 2017–2026 (Department of Education, 2017). The policy aims to improve the language skills of children and young people and to diversify the range of languages learned. While the initial focus was on second-level education, the implementation of Languages Connect has since included a voluntary enrolment for primary schools to a six-week "language sampler module" in a language chosen by the school (Department of Education 2021). The module has been introduced to raise awareness of the languages used by children in schools, including Irish Sign Language, and to encourage an interest in languages from an early age, which could then impact uptake at the post-primary level. Primary schools in Ireland also base the teaching of English and Irish on the Primary Language Curriculum, which encourages teachers to make links between languages and foster children's skills in all the languages that form their repertoires.

These language policies supporting the revitalization of Irish and the enhancement of skills in other languages show that plurilingual competency is considered by the Irish government as one of the priorities from primary school and throughout the education continuum.

There is, however, no language policy for the early childhood sector in Ireland, other than the Irish language policies governing Irish-medium preschools. Síolta: the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, 2006) and Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) were developed to provide a framework of reference for the early childhood curriculum and for quality assurance. Within the Aistear Framework, great emphasis is placed on language and communication, with very limited consideration of plurilingualism. Some guidance is provided to practitioners working in the ECEC sectors through the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2016). The Charter includes some recommendations concerning second language learners, but also provides some suggestions for practitioners, as shown in the quotes below:

> *Acknowledge and show appreciation for the variety of languages the children in the preschool may speak. All children are sensitive to learning language in early childhood. Early childhood practitioners can celebrate the richness that this variety in languages brings.*
>
> *(2016, p. 55)*

> *The child should feel comfortable speaking in their own language to other children or staff in the setting who speak the same language. Other children can be supported to recognise and acknowledge this and develop an interest in other languages, learn a few words or sing a song. There are benefits for all children in developing an interest in languages, especially those being spoken around them.*
>
> *(2016, p.55)*

The above quote is the only open declaration in an official document aimed at enhancing the quality of early childhood education and care in Ireland which states that plurilingualism is beneficial for all children.

Given the impetus inspired by the Languages Connect strategy, the increase in the number of languages present in early childhood settings and the increasing research evidence showing the positive

impact of plurilingualism for all children, introducing policies and practices in early childhood education and care is of paramount importance. To this end, this paper aims to critically examine how the existing curriculum may interact with plurilingual educational practices to inform educators' approaches.

3 Procedures for analysis

This study reports, interprets and discusses the representation of language-enriching practices described in Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. Principles and Themes, published in 2009 by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, a statutory body of the Department of Education in Ireland. Aistear is the framework that informs the practice of educators working with children from birth to 6 years of age. In Ireland, this includes primary school teachers, because children may start primary school at the age of 5. However, only examples of practice that concern children in ECEC settings were selected for analysis. The selection procedure involved the extraction of all examples of practice and all references made to the creation of a language-rich environment that focuses on communication involving the educator and the child or children, including those that focus on languages other than English and Irish. The criteria for the selection of the text extracted for analysis were:

-   The text can be an example, a statement or a recommendation
-   The text must refer to language and/or communication relevant to ECEC settings
-   The text must refer to language and/or communication relevant to interactions within the settings and only between children and educators
-   The text cannot refer to communication between educators and parents

Since the focus of this study is plurilingualism and how it is currently represented in the Aistear framework, the results report all the extracted excerpts that mention the presence of other languages, the educator's use of other languages in their practice or the awareness of plurilingualism.

As well as the criteria mentioned above, additional selection criteria were used for the identification of relevant examples related to plurilingualism. These are listed below:

-   The text explicitly mentions a language other than English, including the phrase "home language" and/or
-   The text refers to "other languages" or "all languages", and it is clear that these are languages other than English.

4 Analysis of the Aistear Framework

The Aistear Framework supports educators in identifying what and how children should learn, describing examples of practice. Aistear categorises children's learning under the 12 principles of early learning and development. Each principle is presented through a short description and through various examples illustrating the principle from the perspective of the child, as shown in example 1.

Example 1. How Principles are Presented in the Aistear Framework

Principle: Communication and language

Description: The ability to communicate is at the very heart of early learning and development. Communication helps children learn to think about and make sense of their world. They communicate from birth using many different ways of giving and receiving information. Each of these ways is important

in its own right. Learning to communicate in early childhood is shaped by two main factors: children's own ability and their environment.

Child's perspective: Support me to communicate to the best of my ability from the earliest age possible. Watch out in case I have any communication and/or language delays or difficulties, since the earlier I get help the better it is for me.

Table 1 lists all the Principles that show the adult's role in supporting children's language and communication development, following the inclusion criteria outlined in the Methods section.

Table 1 *List of Aistear principles connected to language and communication*

1. Take time to observe me and to talk to me regularly. Use this time to identify moments when you can help me connect my new learning and development with past experiences and plan for my future learning.

2. Support me in learning with and from adults and other children. Ask me about my discoveries and adventures; talk to me and help me to learn more. I learn a lot on my own but I also learn a lot when I can share my experiences with others.

3. Look at what I am doing, talk to me and listen to what I am saying. When I master something for the first time, take a picture of me or make a note of it and add it to my learning portfolio.

4. Support me to communicate to the best of my ability from the earliest age possible. Watch out in case I have any communication and/or language delays or difficulties, since the earlier I get help the better it is for me.

5. **Remember that I give and receive information in many different ways. I can communicate using words, sign language, Braille, rhythm, number, movement, gesture, drama, art, and Information and Communications Technology (ICT). When I am ready, support me in my writing and reading in a way that suits my needs best, and don't rush me.**

6. You have a key role in supporting my communication and language skills. Talk to me, listen to me, respond to me, interpret what I say, and provide a place for me where I get the opportunity to share my experiences, thoughts, ideas, and feelings with others in all the ways that I can. Model communication and language skills for me.

7. **My parents will be keen for me to learn English and/or Irish if I have a different home language. Remember to tell my parents that it is important for me to maintain my home language too. Reassure them that I can learn English and/or Irish as well as keep my home language.**

Aistear also describes the children's learning under four themes, namely *Well-being, Identity and belonging, Communicating and Exploring and Thinking*. The themes describe children's ways of learning, and in the Framework each theme is associated with aims and learning goals or outcomes. Under the *Communicating* theme, the framework acknowledges the importance of children's language development as a means to interact with others, listen, discuss, take turns in conversation, explore linguistic patterns, expand their vocabulary, grow their understanding of syntax and meaning, and develop an appreciation of their mother tongue and other languages. The goals and outcomes are very much in line with practices informed by language development evidence and demonstrate an active commitment to providing a rich linguistic environment where adults are actively encouraged to support children's language and communication.

Tables 2 and 3 show the Learning Goals and some of the Learning Opportunities associated with language and communication, which constitute examples of good practice. All the goals and learning opportunities that reflect an attention to plurilingualism are highlighted in bold.

Table 2 *List of Learning Goals*

In partnership with the adult, children will

1. **be aware of and respect others' needs, rights, feelings, culture, language, background, and religious beliefs**

2. **become proficient users of at least one language and have an awareness and appreciation of other languages**

3. **be positive about their home language, and know that they can use different languages to communicate with different people and in different situations**

4. use a range of body movements, facial expressions, and early vocalisations to show feelings and share information

5. understand and use non-verbal communication rules, such as turn-taking and making eye contact

6. interpret and respond to non-verbal communication by others

7. understand and respect that some people will rely on non-verbal communication as their main way of interacting with others

8. combine non-verbal and verbal communication to get their point across

9. express themselves creatively and imaginatively using non-verbal communication

10. interact with other children and adults by listening, discussing and taking turns in conversation

11. explore sound, pattern, rhythm, and repetition in language

12. use an expanding vocabulary of words and phrases, and show a growing understanding of syntax and meaning

13. use language with confidence and competence for giving and receiving information, asking questions, requesting, refusing, negotiating, problem-solving, imagining and recreating roles and situations, and clarifying thinking, ideas and feelings

14. use language to interpret experiences, to solve problems, and to clarify thinking, ideas and feelings

15. build awareness of the variety of symbols (pictures, print, numbers) used to communicate, and understand that these can be read by others

16. become familiar with and use a variety of print in an enjoyable and meaningful way

17. have opportunities to use a variety of mark-making materials and implements in an enjoyable and meaningful way

18. share their feelings, thoughts and ideas by story-telling, making art, moving to music, role-playing, problem-solving, and responding to these experiences

19. use language to imagine and recreate roles and experiences

20. respond to and create literacy experiences through story, poetry, song, and drama

Table 3 *List of some of the Sample Learning Opportunities*

The adult

1. **labels regularly used objects and resources using pictures and different languages, for example coat hangers, shoe boxes, pigeonholes for work, place mats for snacks, daily routines, different areas of the room**

2. **creates a language environment that reflects the languages of all the children and adults in the setting**

3. **invites children to teach their peers words in the language of their home country, writes and displays these key words and phrases**

4. **speaks key words and phrases using babies' home language where this is neither English nor Irish (asking parents for help in doing this)**

5. **encourages toddlers to use their home language (when this is neither English nor Irish) in the setting, for example to say a rhyme**

6. establishes and maintains eye contact with babies, speaks to them when interacting, and pauses giving them a turn

7. reads favourite stories and introduces appropriate new stories

8. goes for walks and chats with toddlers along the way

9. invites toddlers to talk about their news, experiences and feelings

10. creates multiple opportunities for young children to talk, listen and be heard whenever possible with peers, with adults, or in small groups

11. sits with children during break-times, encouraging them to chat, to share experiences, and to listen to others

12. encourages speaking and listening to others in a group, for example passes round a pretend microphone giving each child an opportunity to say something, as well as hearing what others have to say

13. provides 'talking' toys for play

14. sings songs slowly leaving gaps which invite babies to join in

15. shows the meaning of words by linking to children's actions and experiences

16. invites toddlers to 'read' stories using pictures

17. provides opportunities for children to talk to different people in one-to-one, small group, and large group situations, for example children saying a nursery rhyme with a friend or telling their news about something they did together, children interview a member of their community

18. encourages children to play group games, for example, games that involve listening to, memorising, and adding to lists such as a shopping list, I went to the shop and I bought a loaf of bread, a litre of milk, a tin of beans

As these examples of good practice show, early childhood educators are encouraged to engage with children through meaningful linguistic interactions, dialogic reading and creative play. The suggestions presented in Aistear are reflective of the good practices that contribute to enhancing children's linguistic development, such as recasting, reading, listening, taking turns and establishing joint attention, which have all been identified by researchers as key in establishing a high-quality language-rich environment.

The text extracted indicates that a great deal of attention has been afforded to language and communication, and plurilingualism is partly represented. The statements in bold extracted into tables 1, 2 and 3 are the only references that raise awareness of plurilingualism.

5 Discussion

Aistear presents many suggestions for practitioners who want to create a language-rich environment. The discussion will focus on a critical analysis of the presence of plurilingualism in the current Framework.

The Framework recognises the presence of children who can speak other languages, and this is particularly evident in the Principles, expressed through the perspective of the child (Table 1). The Principles section introduces children as users of Irish Sign Language (or other Sign Languages, as the language is not named) and also presents the issue of parental concern about the learning of English or Irish, at the detriment of the "home language". The advice given is for parents to maintain this language, which is a positive indicator of an attitude that welcomes plurilingualism.

The *Learning Goals* section lists many goals in the area of language and communication, providing educators with a plethora of measurable or observable behaviours. Many of the goals listed under the theme Communicating include expressions such as use language, interact, understand, interpret, listen, respond and express. All these expressions refer to activities that children can engage with and that educators can observe. An example of a goal related to a linguistic behaviour that an educator can observe is "use language for asking questions" or "use an expanding vocabulary of words and phrases" (NCCA, 2009, p. 35). A critical examination of the three Learning Goals that indicate an awareness of plurilingualism, starts from the observation that all the goals are primarily focused on awareness and attitudes rather than on skills or abilities. The goals indicate that children will become:

- aware of other languages
- respectful of other languages
- proficient users of at least one language
- appreciative of other languages
- positive about their home languages

The lexical choices made to describe these goals encourage educators to support positivity towards all languages, but there is no mention of what children may achieve in terms of competencies. The only statement that relates to competency rather than to attitude or awareness is the statement that children will become proficient in at least one language. This phrase indicates that children could become proficient in more than one language, and this may be the case in Irish-medium settings, but in a monolingual setting the so-called "proficiency" is difficult to achieve if educators are only promoting one language. While many of the goals listed support educators in looking for development in areas such as syntax, vocabulary, self-expression and listening, none of the goals point towards children who actively hear or use more than one language.

The Sample Learning Opportunities are examples that can support educators in identifying examples of practice that they can implement to support children's learning. Again, the language used in these statements includes verbs such as repeat, model, talk, tell, name, which are all referring to

actions initiated by the adult. All these actions are not associated with a specific language, as in the example "names familiar objects and describes experiences" (p. 37). In a setting where the language of education is English, it is reasonable to assume that educators will perceive this task as being solely delivered through the English language. The five Sample Learning Opportunities that indicate an openness to other languages are indicative of a move towards a plurilingual approach, even though they raise some questions. Two of the Sample Learning Opportunities provided encourage educators to take on an active role in using a language other than English or Irish. One of the Samples describes the educator speaking keywords and phrases, the other describes the educator labelling useful items in different languages. Labelling objects and naming important words are both part of a plurilingual approach, and they constitute very important initial steps in the shift from a monolingual to a plurilingual mindset. Another example of good practice encourages educators to support toddlers in using their home language in the setting. The example provided is that of a toddler being encouraged to use a rhyme in their home language. This is a questionable example because it indicates to the educator that the use of the home language can be relegated to a song or a rhyme, but not to a more natural day-to-day use of language. There are no examples in Aistear of how educators can support children in using languages other than English (or Irish) for communicative purposes. The Sample Learning Opportunity that shows the involvement of more than one child is the example of a child teaching words to their peers. However, the statement provided in the Framework is "invites children to teach their peers words in the language of their home country" (p. 31), suggesting that the country that represents the child's "home" is not Ireland. While this may be the case for some children, this expression is obsolete and ignores the need for a pluralistic view of identity and belonging. Another observation that emerges from the analysis of Aistear is that the learning opportunities provide some very clear examples of practice, such as: "through pretend play, retells and adapts stories read and experiences lived, for example, toddlers creating a den where the animals sleep at night" and "encourages speaking and listening to others in a group, for example passes round a pretend microphone giving each child an opportunity to say something, as well as hearing what others have to say" or "encourages children to play group games, for example, games that involve listening to, memorising, and adding to lists such as a shopping list, I went to the shop and I bought a loaf of bread, a litre of milk, a tin of beans" (p. 31). These suggestions clearly indicate examples of how an educator can encourage children to tell stories and listen to others, with the guide of an activity that may be initiated by an adult, such as creating a den to talk about animals, providing a microphone as a tool for talking and organising a memory game. These are extremely useful tools for educators who are interested in targeting language and communication through their planned actions. Considering the long-standing practice favouring monolingualism in early childhood settings, it would be extremely beneficial to provide tangible examples of practice so that educators can be inspired and encouraged to take action.

The phrase used in various statements within Aistear referring to "home language - when this is neither English nor Irish" also ignores that the child's plurilingualism might include several languages, and English and Irish might be part of this linguistic capital. A promising direction is shown in the Draft Update of Aistear (NCCA, 2023), currently under revision, which lists the three national languages together with home languages in a statement about building positive attitudes towards all languages: Become confident and positive about our national languages of Gaeilge, English, Irish Sign Language, their home language(s) and have an awareness and appreciation of other languages.

Within the curriculum there is no mention of the need for making links between languages, so the framework presents a rigid dichotomy between what is referred to as "home language" and "English or Irish". A dichotomy is also present in the National Quality Framework, Síolta, which has very few references to linguistic diversity, but in one instance refers to children as "English and non-English speaking children" (2017: 99), failing to recognise the plurality and fluidity of linguistic competencies. Referring to children as "non-English speaking" is also indicative of the so-called "deficit model", which ignores children's linguistic capital.

5.1 Towards a plurilingual approach in ECEC settings: some recommendations

The model offered by Aistear, which informs the practice of early childhood educators in Ireland, has a strong emphasis on the development of language and communication skills, honed by the adults' engagement. Plurilingualism is presented within Aistear as the competency of children who possess "home languages" that are different from English or Irish, without openly recognising that children may possess plurilingual competencies, which are diverse, fluid and in constant transformation. While the current process of updating Aistear is moving in the direction of a clearer recognition of plurilingualism, there is still much work to be done to truly include all languages as a pedagogical tool that serves all children. The dichotomy between the official languages and the home languages still exists in the Framework, and the terms bilingual, plurilingual or multilingual do not appear in the current draft update.

The learning opportunities listed in the framework are extremely useful to indicate to educators pathways for the engagement of children in meaningful dialogue and for the development of key skills such as speaking and listening. The analysis of these statements shows that all the examples of good practice are in line with the evidence suggesting that children need to be immersed in a language-rich environment to develop language and communication skills.

Pedagogical frameworks such as linguistically responsive pedagogies and translanguaging pedagogy are increasingly being embraced and extended across educational contexts, and the current curriculum, by holding a special place for language and communication, is the prime point of reference for promoting plurilingualism from birth. However, a curriculum framework and its associated suggested applications should be embedded in a greater understanding of the reasons why plurilingualism is a strength and of how educators can enact plurilingual practices. Aistear currently encourages educators to consider the existence of other languages but is still far from offering inspiring ideas for practice. The first step in building a practice where different languages can be used and enjoyed by children and educators lies in understanding the nature and the potential of plurilingualism, to infuse it into the existing practices, which are already driven by evidence on how to create a language-rich environment.

Being plurilingual is a question of attitude, openness, and awareness and early childhood educators should be themselves models that reflect this ideology. Aistear addresses the critical role of language and identity in early childhood learning and development, acknowledges the key role played by the adult in supporting children, but does not reflect the shift needed for educators to embrace plurilingualism as part of their practice. On the basis of the analysis of current curriculum, recommendations can be made in three areas:

Plurilingual practices should be part of professional development

In a country that is dominated by a monolingual ideology that permeates all areas of professional development and policies, and where there has always been a defined separation in the conceptualization of competencies in English, Irish and other languages, educators cannot be expected to become models for something they have never learned about, observed or experienced. ECEC educators need to be better supported throughout every stage of their professional development in planning for children's linguistic encounters and for those encounters to become more diverse than they currently are. Opportunities for learning about plurilingual practices should not be limited to educators who seek support for responding to the needs of emergent bilinguals (in the Irish context, these are the so-called "EAL" learners), but all educators should embrace this shift. Plurilingualism should also permeate Irish-medium settings and settings that don't have plurilingual cohorts, and training colleges and universities should act as advocates for plurilingual approaches.

Educators should be inspiring models of plurilingualism

Considering that plurilingualism is not a method, but a flexible approach based on sharing interest and curiosity towards languages, ECEC educators should become models of plurilingualism by first developing awareness of their own language skills, some of which might be dormant and may need awakening, some of which can be newly developed. With the awareness that plurilingualism does not demand that educators learn new languages, but that they explore avenues for communication and exchange to play with languages, educators can become more confident in going out of their comfort zone. With the help of children, parents and the ever-evolving innovations in digital technologies, language discoveries are within reach. Research on language development in early childhood settings shows us that children benefit from being exposed to language-rich environments.

Aistear should be reinterpreted through a plurilingual lens

Plurilingualism does not only serve as an inclusive tool, but also as a tool to ensure that all children can develop life-long skills. With this awareness, early childhood educators cannot reduce plurilingualism to putting up posters in multiple languages or asking children to say a rhyme in a different language, but they have to embrace a pedagogy that infuses all routines with this plurilingual mindset. Aistear offers a wealth of suggestions that ECEC educators can interpret through a plurilingual lens. Educators can ask themselves: how can this recommendation for practice, idea or activity be adapted to include more than one language? How can I prepare so that this plurilingual activity becomes a source of dialogue and shared learning for everyone in my setting? How can I learn from my observations of children's linguistic behaviours to enhance my practice? What can I learn from seeing children's reactions to my changed linguistic behaviours?

6 Conclusion

Creating a rich linguistic environment during early childhood is paramount for cognitive and communicative development. ECEC settings in Ireland have been identified as the prime environment for the development of language and communication skills, and this is reflected in the national framework Aistear. The current framework, while dated, offers useful guidelines for creating language-rich environments, but still reflects a monolingual ideology, which is in stark contrast with the fact that Ireland has two official languages and more than 100 languages spoken by children nationwide.

European institutions advocate for plurilingual approaches in education, yet there's a lack of guidance for early childhood educators in implementing such approaches. The analysis of Ireland's early childhood education Curriculum Framework reveals a need for improvement in representing plurilingualism as a skill that can be nurtured by the active involvement of educators.

Recommendations for incorporating plurilingualism into ECEC require development and integration into current guidelines and should be accompanied by activities with clear learning goals and examples to illustrate processes and possible outcomes.

In a context in which efforts are being made to promote plurilingualism as a competency in primary and post-primary school, ECEC settings represent a key starting point. Involving children at a time when they are laying the foundations of their learning is paramount in developing confidence in plurilingualism as a lifelong skill, alongside other children in Europe who are embarking on this journey from a young age.

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