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Engaging with linguistic diversity. A study of educational inclusion in an Irish Primary School

by David Little and Déirdre Kirwan, London, Bloomsbury, 2019, 190 pp., £20.87 (hardback), ISBN: 978-1-3500-7203-9

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BOOK REVIEW

Engaging with linguistic diversity. A study of educational inclusion in an Irish Primary School, by David Little and Déirdre Kirwan, London, Bloomsbury, 2019, 190 pp., £20.87 (hardback), ISBN: 978-1-3500-7203-9

When I first came across *Engaging with Linguistic Diversity. A Study of Educational Inclusion in an Irish Primary School*, by David Little and Déirdre Kirwan (Bloomsbury, 2019), I already knew that it was about a very successful experience of plurilingual education since I had read Cummings's (2019) highly praising reference to the approach, which is also voiced in his foreword to this edition. Yet, what I have found in the book has far exceeded my best expectations. Below, I explain why as I tour the introductory section and the six chapters structuring the book, finishing it with a personal commentary.

The introduction is a firm statement of Dr. Little and Dr. Kirkwan's convictions, motives, research procedures and aims regarding plurilingual education. They begin by expressing their concern about the pedagogical approaches in which children's home languages and cultural identities are not allowed any space in education. They evoke cognitive, cultural and ethic reasons as well as the Council of Europe's inclusive political statements, besides general research results, in order to present the main point that they develop and argue throughout the book, namely that *every home language can become an asset for curriculum learning at primary school*. Then they introduce the case that is scrutinised in the book: the inclusive linguistic approach developed under Dr. Kirkwan's leadership at Scoil Bhríde (Caifíni), Blanchardstown, Dublin, as an answer to the extraordinary cultural and linguistic diversity characterising its students. The qualitative nature of the study presented is well signalled right from the beginning, the book being characterised as 'a thick description' (2) of the data collected by Dr. Kirkwan between 2011 and 2015 through video recording, interviews, samples of students work and teachers' reports. With the description, the authors seek 'to capture something of the rich complexity of classroom life and pedagogical practice' (2), the book being the product of their speculations about 'the reasons for its success' (5).

Chapter one situates the reader in the context of the pedagogical approach. The authors let us know how the challenge put by immigration demanded a different stance to language education from the disconnecting approach characterising the bilingual education policy in Ireland, which has for long kept English and Irish 'in isolation from one another' (12). Among the official initiatives, there is a reference to the 'Integrate Ireland Language and Training' (IILT), an in-service teacher program led by Dr. David Little, involving the production of supporting material for pedagogical practice, some of which developed with the participation of the attending teachers themselves. Due attention is given to the development of *English Language Proficiency Benchmarks* (2003) and versions of *The European Language Portfolio* (2004), both deeply informed by the Council of Europe's *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (2001) and already underpinned by empirical research. These and other documents may be immensely useful to develop language education in similar multilingual contexts, as they offer relevant descriptors for primary language education. Of special interest is the authors' cautionary word about the danger of using such documents with insufficient awareness of fundamental assumptions, as it seems to have been the case of the subsequent 'distorted' (23) political use of (only a part of) such documents, a clear signal of the tensions that were generated by the ILTT and the dominant official approaches.

Chapter two is essential to understand the singularity of the contents and processes of the pedagogical approach developed at Scoil Bhríde (Caifíni). The authors inform that, in 2015, there were more than 50 home languages represented among the school pupils, who showed 'little or no

English when they were enrolled in Junior Infants' (29). An overview of the development of the school's approach is then presented, the prominence of the role played by the principal being particularly obvious. The reader learns how its design and enactment were sustained upon ILTT's key tenets, tools and materials due to Dr. Kirwan and the school's language support teachers' attendance to the official initiative; how the development of Dr. Kirkwan's PhD research, developed under Dr. Little's supervision, gradually informed the professional development of her colleagues; and how Dr. Little's research on autonomy in language learning infused the approach as well. The reader further learns that the language support teachers' worked in close articulation with the mainstream teachers and, importantly, that the school's previous experience in the effective bilingual use and teaching of Irish, which was L2 for the students, contributed to the development of the approach. Also, one learns about the effective role of regular staff meetings in the collaborative development of the language policy (presented in an Appendix) as well as about parents' active involvement as partners in the construction of the approach.

However important this information may be, the central pages in this chapter are dedicated to the presentation of the five pedagogic principles that the authors identify as underpinning the approach, namely:

- (i) *Starting from pupils existing knowledge*, using children's cultural identity and knowledge as an asset for the construction of school learning;
- (ii) *Use of home languages*, assuming that they are 'the soil in which learner's proficiency in English grows' (158). This is clearly assumed as the blueprint of the approach. The authors explain that the activation L1 languages enhanced children's primary tool for discursive thinking, supporting the necessary cognitive processes for learning the curriculum content in whatever ways seem appropriate to them (either in language support or in mainstream classes). Besides, they also mention that hopefully such activation would create the conditions for the development of home languages themselves through the transference of developments achieved in the other languages being learnt (English, Irish and, in the Fifth and Sixth Grades, French);
- (iii) *Emphasis on [age-appropriate] literacy skills*, stimulating the transfer of the skills being learned in English, Irish and French into the reading and writing in the children's home languages, again hopefully enhancing their development, which required parents' very active support and teachers' trust in the quality of the literacy practices that were developed at home;
- (iv) *Pedagogical explicitness*, demanding teachers' careful dealing of curriculum contents combined with special attention to the development of language awareness. In fact, 'making explicit the interconnectedness of languages (...) regardless of the subject being taught' (48) 'to encourage a generally reflective approach to learning' (41) was fundamental in the approach;
- (v) [Respect for] *Teacher autonomy*, which is essential in teachers' differentiated enactment of the approach, being obviously rooted in the principal's ethical stance and in her informed professionalism and democratic leadership.

As such, this chapter clearly shows the intricacy, sensibility and sensitivity of the multiple decisions underpinning the success of approach, its final pages offering compelling reference to students' achievement (consistently above average) in national assessments as well as enthusiastic students' and teachers' testimonies.

Chapters three to five offer an immense array of evidence of the development of children's (oral) plurilingual communication, plurilingual literacy, and autonomy in language learning, respectively. In these chapters, the illustrating vignettes are organised in a similar way, starting from the early grades (Junior Infants, ± 4 -year olds) up to the Sixth grade (± 12 -year olds). In all of them, the rich descriptions of practice, complemented by the examples of the children's perspectives about their own learning and the teachers' perceptions about their work, are immensely helpful in envisaging the enacted plurilingual pedagogy. Each chapter is also punctuated by pertinent commentaries that help bring the theoretical coherence out of the data.

For example, apropos the development of children's plurilingual repertoires (cf. chapter three), one learns that children's home languages were used to sustain interaction among teachers and children, though not systematically due to the obvious lack of their necessary mutual understanding to do so; for 'reciprocal display', often involving translation of curricular contents into the children's languages; and as a rising 'source of intuitive linguistic knowledge' (54), allowing children to think about languages by exploring similarities and differences among them. In chapter four, the authors describe the development of children's plurilingual literacy resulting from encouraging children to transfer literacy skills learned in English into the writing texts using home languages, as well as Irish and French. The authors explain that their data have 'led to a greater appreciation of the cognitive function of literacy' (124) in identity affirmation, in curricular learning, in the development of language awareness and, indeed, in oral communication. In fact, they point out that their data bring evidence to the idea that the reflection involved in the process of composing plurilingual texts, which were then read or told to the classmates or shared with others at the school, is a potent trigger of the development of oral language communication abilities, which goes against the assumption that children should learn how to speak and listen before being introduced to literacy. In chapter five the authors describe the children's communicative (oral and written) prolific agency as evidenced by the number and quality of their autonomous language learning projects and their rising self-assessment skills. They evidence the children's enthusiasm for language learning, clearly showing how the reflective plurilingual approach to education scaffolded the construction of a mature sociolinguistic awareness among the whole community at Scoil Bhríde, including a very positive impact upon the learning of Irish as L2. In addition, they underline the role of teachers' attitudes, such as respect, openness, flexibility, and their professional collaboration in making that possible. Fundamentally, chapters three to five are persuasive evidence of how 'the role of [ELL home] languages in classroom discourse reflected the limits of the possible' (164), sustaining the claim that '[b]y the time most of Scoil Bhríde's ELL move on to post-primary school, they have native or near-native literate proficiency in English and are also confident communicators in Irish and French with age-appropriate levels of literacy to match' (164).

Besides offering a concluding overview of the approach, chapter six discusses the demands posed by its sustainability in the future of the school and when pupils move into post-primary education, and by its generalisability to other similar diverse contexts, presenting evidence of current developments of a plurilingual approach in the official Irish guidelines for primary education that are likely to have been by some means influenced by the reported experience. The chapter also examines the major implication (and related research possibilities) that the approach contributes to teacher education for language diversity, stated as follows: 'Scoil Bhríde's experience suggests that the answers to our questions lie not in additional training to teach EAL but rather *in a new exploration of the relation between language and learning and the very nature of learning itself* (169, emphasis added). I will use this claim to turn into my final personal commentary to the book.

I do consider that the former statement hints at a critical principle sustaining the plurilingual education approach developed at Scoil Bhríde, which, surprisingly, is not made explicit among the above-mentioned five key principles (cf. chapter three), although pervading the discussion throughout the book. I would formulate the principle as follows: *Use students' emerging L2 [English – Irish and French – in this case] to make curricular meanings and construct school learning.* As argued in the book, this idea is aligned with basic tenets about child-centred learning sustaining the primary education curriculum, such as active and holistic (or integrated) learning, as well as with key tenets of dialogic and inquiry-based views of language learning. It translates into the basic proposition that language (L1 or L2) is best learned when it is used to learn the curriculum, that is, to make meanings – with and for others and in the oral and written modes – in the authentic, challenging, collaborative and personally involving situations that are offered in mainstream primary or in language support classes. In my opinion, this explains the author's claim that theirs is not a fixed method for second language acquisition, being instead a socioconstructivist approach to language learning emerging from constructing 'the life of the [primary school] classroom' (169). As I see it, this is the

ultimate essence of what David Little and Déirdre Kirkwan tell us about (indeed, the book is presented as being about ‘the role played by language and communication in the educational process’ (3)), shaping the impressive pedagogical possibilities opened by the enactment of the remaining principles. As they put it:

Scoil Bhríde’s pupils mostly become proficient in Irish and in due course French, and its ELL become proficient in English. This happens not because they are taught these languages in any traditional sense, but as a result of their active involvement in classroom discourse that is conducted in English, has frequent recourse to Irish and (in Fifth and Sixth Class) French, draws continuously on ELL’s home languages (...), and thus helps to develop plurilingual competence as they receive and process curriculum content. (82)



My interest the book was stirred by my recent experience as teacher educator and consultant in educational projects developed in post-colonial contexts in Africa and Asia where Portuguese is taught as an official language, though being a second language for the vast majority of children in primary schools. The readings that I have undertaken have led me to the always-in-progress reconstruction of what I have come to see as a ‘theoretical polyhedron’ sustaining Portuguese education in such contexts. While such polyhedron has been underpinning the work that I have been doing, it often came to my mind that I was working with an abstract set of very good ideas. *Engaging with Linguistic Diversity. A Study of Educational Inclusion in an Irish Primary School* is the first book that has offered me the empirical evidence of the integrated realisation of such principles in the first years of education. I therefore vividly recommend the book for those like myself who are interested in plurilingual education in the first stages of schooling. I am not ignoring that it presents a situated case study of second language learning. But with Jim Cummings I assume that ‘actuality implies possibility’ (xix).

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