

# Home language maintenance and development among first generation migrant children in an Irish primary school: An investigation of attitudes

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## Abstract

This qualitative study was undertaken against the backdrop of rapidly increasing levels of immigration to Ireland and a subsequent growing increase in the percentage of children attending Irish primary schools with a first language other than English or Irish, the two official languages of the country. The research investigates the attitudes of a group of first generation minority language children, of various ethnic backgrounds, to home language maintenance and development as well as their experiences of home language use both in school and in the family home. Data were collected from 17 minority language children, aged between 10 and 13 years and living in Ireland for a period of between three and seven years. Data collection methods included focus group interviews and semi-structured individual interviews, during which participants expressed beliefs, opinions and attitudes surrounding language practices. Interviews conducted with four parents of the child participants provided additional data. In addition, an interview with the teacher of a complementary language school for Polish children highlighted the efforts made by the Polish community; the largest non-Irish group in Ireland, to promote home language maintenance in the family. The data show that while the majority of children and parents display positive attitudes to home language maintenance and development, children face challenges in continuing to develop the literacy skills in the home language. The importance of maintaining and continuing to develop the home language for continued communication with extended family members is clear. The need for familial support in relation to the opportunities children have to engage in home language learning is evident. The perceptions of English as a global language and as a valuable asset were evident among both children and parents. There is no provision made for the formal learning of home languages to children in Ireland, and the only opportunity for children to do so is limited to privately run complementary schools, which are not always accessible to all nationalities. Concerns of children and parents regarding continued development in the home language are voiced, and in most cases, these concerns are borne out of a possible return to their native countries.

**Keywords:** home language maintenance, first generation, minority language, majority language, language attitudes, family domain.

## **Introduction**

This paper explores the attitudes of a group of first generation migrant children from different ethnolinguistic backgrounds, living in Ireland, towards home language maintenance (HLM). Language maintenance (LM) has been defined as “the continuing use of a language in the face of competition from a regionally and socially powerful or numerically stronger language” (Mesthrie, 1999, p. 42). Home languages can be described as languages spoken or used in the home or community but which are not the majority language in the society. There is an abundance of worldwide research available in the field of HLM which alludes to the benefits of HLM for second language acquisition (Collier & Thomas, 1989; Cummins, 1994), cognitive and academic achievement (Collier, 1995; Cummins, 2001) and ethnic identity (Cho, 2000). Some of the forces and factors which influence HLM include the school, the family (Spolsky, 2004), attitudes of the host society, ethnic identity and the “market value of language” (Pauwels, 2004, p. 728). While there is a growing body of research relating to parental attitudes towards maintaining the home language, relatively little research to date has focused on the attitudes of children to HLM. Language socialisation studies have evolved from analysing the role of parents or caretakers in socialising children to recognising the “dynamic network of mutual family influences” (Luykx, 2003, p. 40). Although previous research adequately alludes to the important role of parents and other family members in HLM and development (Kang, 2013; Melo-Pfeifer, 2015; Park & Sarkar, 2007), child agency in language choice and language use is quite an under-explored area to date and one that merits continued investigation (Fogle & King, 2013). The linguistic experiences of minority language children in Ireland warrant exploration due to the newness of the immigrant situation and the growing linguistic diversity evident in Irish schools and society today. We felt it important to capture the attitudes of young first generation migrant children as this might help to inform how we might better cater for the needs of young first and second generation migrant children in Irish schools. This study seeks to analyse the attitudes of a group of young first generation migrant children in Ireland towards HLM in a context where English is the majority language. We addressed the following research questions:

What are the attitudes of minority language children in an Irish primary school in relation to maintaining and developing the home language?

What are the children’s perceptions of English, the dominant language in the host society?

What are the children’s experiences of using their home languages in school and in the family home?

## **Ireland’s migration history**

Ireland’s migratory history is unique considering that it quickly transformed from a country of very high outward migration to one of substantial inward migration due to the onset of a sudden economic boom known as the *Celtic Tiger*, which lasted between 1995 and 2008. Singleton, Smyth and Debaene (2009) declare that “Ireland is probably the most dramatic example of how rapidly a society can become multicultural and plurilingual” (p. 197). The 2011 census showed

that the number of non-Irish nationals living in Ireland grew from 224,261 persons in 2002 to 544,357 in 2011 (CSO, 2012). The enlargement of the European Union in 2004 generated further migration to Ireland from the new Eastern European EU member states, with the free movement of workers being permitted from these states to Ireland (Fanning, 2016). The most recent census in 2016 recorded that the number of non-Irish nationals now stands at 535,475, representing 11.6% per cent of the total population (CSO, 2017). More importantly, it also revealed that 612,018 residents in Ireland spoke a language other than the country's official national languages English or Irish at home (CSO, 2017).

In order to contextualise our research further, we provide an overview of the educational language policy for minority language children in primary schools in Ireland.

### **Language policy for teaching minority language children**

The changing linguistic landscape in Ireland has resulted in schools experiencing a considerable increase in the attendance of children whose home language is not English from 2004 onwards (NCCA, 2006). This presented challenges for schools that had little experience of managing cultural and linguistic diversity. On entering English-medium primary schools in Ireland, children speaking a home language other than English must access the curriculum through English as well as learn the other national language of the country, Irish, a compulsory subject for all pupils in Ireland. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) describes the context as follows:

The phrase 'English as an additional language' recognises that English is the language used in teaching the child and that, where possible, the child will also learn Irish. The teaching of English will build on the language and literacy skills which the child has attained in his/her home language to the greatest extent possible. (NCCA, 2006, p. 5)

Responses to the increasing diversity in primary schools by the Department of Education and Skills have predominantly centred on the provision of English language support through the allocation of language support teachers. The importance of affirming and acknowledging pupils' home languages in the school context for both ethical and educational reasons is highlighted and the benefits of learning in a bilingual environment are affirmed (NCCA, 2005). Although teachers are advised to encourage children to continue to sustain the development of literacy skills in their home language, it can be asserted that the main responsibility for HLM and development is ultimately placed on the individual families of EAL pupils:

It is important for the child to continue to develop his/her language and literacy skills in the home language. An increasing number of libraries provide books in a variety of languages and these may be used by parents to support the child's language and literacy skills in the home language. Families may have satellite access to radio and television programmes in their home language. (NCCA, 2006, p. 9)

The approach taken by the Irish education system towards providing language support for migrant children has been described as a monolingual English-only system of language support where there is no provision for the teaching of minority language children's first language (Mc

Daid, 2007). A body of research on the subject of first language recognition in educational settings in Ireland elucidates the general lack of a positive focus on minority language children's first languages (Devine, 2005; Mc Daid, 2011; Nowlan, 2008; Wallen & Kelly-Holmes, 2006). In his study of Polish and Romanian speaking children attending Irish primary schools, Mc Daid (2011) found that the children "have been constructed as linguistic outsiders within their schools" (p. 25) and have had their multilingual abilities unrecognised. Nowlan (2008) described the language policy for EAL pupils in the Irish education system as assimilationist and not reflective of international best practice in that the main focus is placed on the acquisition of English, and not on the maintenance or development of children's home languages, thus failing to acknowledge linguistic diversity in Ireland. An exception to this however is the study of a particular primary school in Ireland where the school principal, as researcher, and teachers have fostered plurilingual awareness among all pupils by embracing the diverse set of languages present in the school (Kirwan, 2013).

There is no provision of national government funded minority language education for migrant children as part of the mainstream school curriculum in Ireland. This can be compared to a similar system in the neighbouring United Kingdom where minority language education is based on community initiatives in the absence of institutional support. Other European countries such as Sweden provide pupils with a legal right to non-mandatory mother tongue instruction (Ganuza & Hedman, 2015). In this particular context, however, research has highlighted specific implementation problems evident with regard to mother tongue instruction in Sweden, including struggles for legitimacy, its non-mandatory status and other deficiencies in mother tongue instruction delivery (Ganuza & Hedman, 2015). In fact, these deficiencies have led to the establishment of independent bilingual schools in Sweden, highlighting the gap that can exist between policy and implementation (Cabau, 2014). The presence of a *linguistic hierarchy* in Sweden (Hult, 2012), where the elevated and equal positioning of English and Swedish is in contrast to the inferior status of immigrant languages, is demonstrative of other educational language policies in other nations, where the global value of English is esteemed.

In the Netherlands, minority languages were initially taught in primary schools to immigrant children; a practice which lasted from 1974 until 2004. This ceased as a result of the viewpoint that such a practice prevented the integration of migrant children into mainstream society (Extra & Yagmur, 2006). Similar to Ireland, minority language education in the Netherlands is now limited to community initiatives outside of the school curriculum. Privately run complementary language schools are located throughout Ireland, serving various migrant communities. The schools, also known as 'community' or 'supplementary' schools are described as serving "specific linguistic or religious and cultural communities, particularly through mother-tongue classes" (Creese & Martin, 2006, p. 1). Complementary schools throughout Ireland serve European immigrant communities. However, these schools are not as available or accessible for children with home languages other than Polish. It is not surprising that the number of Polish complementary schools has grown immensely (Nestor, 2012) with Polish nationals being the largest non-Irish group in Ireland and currently representing 2.7% of the Irish population (CSO, 2017).

## Theoretical considerations

Gardner and Lambert (1972) first introduced the notion of language attitudes in relation to instrumental and integrative motivations for second language learning. Instrumental motivations can include power, prestige and improved employment opportunities. Integrative motivations may be borne out of a desire to become part of a culture or to integrate into the speech community of a particular language. Research relating to LM attitudes highlight the contrast between the instrumental value linked to economic or academic progress and the intrinsic or sentimental value placed on languages (Cabau, 2014). Bourdieu's (1977) conceptualisation of *linguistic capital* depicts the potential value that language can have for individuals. This form of capital may place people in a more globally central position due to the opportunities particular languages and dialects can provide. Language attitudes and LM are inextricably linked. Scholars over the last three decades have alerted us to the problematic nature of analysing and defining attitudes, indicating that attitudes and beliefs are constructed through interaction, and are therefore not stable (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). In this way, it is important to be mindful of the fluid nature of existing attitudes and beliefs, which are constantly being renegotiated and adjusted according to interactions and experiences

The importance of analysing LM in the context of 'linguistic domains' has been previously recognised (Urzúa & Gómez, 2008). Fishman (1970) confirmed the concept of 'domains' as the major institutions of society where language use in specific situations can be contextualised. These domains include the family, education, religion, employment and friendship (Fishman, 1991). The family has been identified by Fishman (1970) among others as a hugely influential domain or site for language use and maintenance (Arriagada, 2005; Mu & Dooley, 2015; Park & Sarkar, 2007). Language ideology has been succinctly defined as "sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use" (Silverstein, 1979, p. 173). Language ideologies "are based on the perceived value, power and utility of various languages" (Curdt-Christiansen, 2009, p. 354). It is essential to consider that the formation of language ideologies in the family setting is consciously and sub-consciously determined by a multitude of influences and micro factors, involving the home, school and wider community as well as other macro factors including political and socioeconomic influences (Leung & Uchikoshi, 2012). While Fishman (1991) describes the family as "the most common and inescapable basis of mother tongue transmission", societal influences stemming from outside, or "macro-forces" need to be considered (p. 95). Political decisions at macro-level regarding language policy, and especially decisions regarding in-education policy can have a profound impact on the ideologies formed and decisions made by family members regarding their everyday language choices and practice (Spolsky, 2004).

## Home language maintenance, attitudes and previous research

To date, there has been little research on migrant children's language attitudes in the Irish context. Attitudes to bilingualism and language use greatly impact on HLM, with positive attitudes positively impacting on HLM as children learn languages additional to the mother

tongue (Li 1999; Park & Sarkar, 2007). Furthermore, positive attitudes towards the home language and home culture and a resistance to the hegemonic use of the dominant language lead to an eagerness to improve skills in the home language (Gibbons & Ramirez, 2004; Young & Gardner, 1990). Previous studies among immigrant families and their children highlight the view that the home language should be maintained for international use or for future employment opportunities (King & Fogle, 2006; Urzúa & Gómez, 2008). The current study investigates children's attitudes to both the home language and English and the motives behind these attitudes.

An investigation of HLM necessitates consideration of the topic of language shift (LS); the reverse of LM which involves a shift in use of language from the home language to the more dominant language, due to pressures of assimilation from the dominant group (Caldas, 2006; Fishman 1966; Rumbaut, 2009). Fishman (1970) sets out a three-generation theory in his model of immigrant LS, maintaining that the first generation of immigrants bring the new language to the home, the second generation grow up bilingual and the third generation commonly become monolingual in the dominant local language and have little or no knowledge of the heritage language. Others, however, strongly claim that heritage languages can be completely lost over two generations (Brown, 2011; Fillmore, 2000). The current study considers the formation of language attitudes among first generation migrant children in Ireland who face the struggles of both home language maintenance and development alongside the acquisition of the dominant language, English. According to Pauwels (2004), "school-age children are more prone to LS, especially if their schooling excludes or prohibits the use of the home language in the school or in public" (p. 731). Hua and Wei (2016) describe a recurrent pattern whereby first-generation migrants have the challenge of learning the language of the new resident country, while the second-generation face the challenge of maintaining the home language.

Parental language practices and opinions have a significant impact on the attitudes of their children towards both the home language and the language of the host society (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2009). The present study includes the voice of parents in an effort to draw links between the attitudes of both parents and children. Supportive interactions in the home language between parents and children as well as close and cohesive family relations are considered positively influential in maintaining the home language over generations (Li, 1999; Tannenbaum & Howie, 2002). At the same time, research has shown how the language repertoires of siblings in the same family can differ, resulting in instances of mother tongue retention and mother tongue loss within the one family (Stevens & Ishizawa, 2007). Parental influence and significant use of the home language in the familial context, while so important, doesn't always ensure continued progress or higher levels of literacy development in the home language (Alba, Logan, Lutz, & Stults, 2002), with individual effort and practice on the part of the language learner being considered essential in the process (Kim & Pyun, 2014). Previous studies have revealed the positive impact of exposing home language learners to literacy resources in the HL, with positive literacy practices in the home language being more likely to occur as a result (Gibbons & Ramirez, 2004; Kim & Pyun, 2014). Other studies, however, highlight the challenges of maintaining successful home language literacy when limited literacy resources and materials are available (Hashimoto & Lee, 2011). Eisenclas, Schalley,

and Guillemin (2013) discuss the possibility of promoting literacy in the home language outside of the macro-level education system, using a “bottom-up introduction of literacy through non-formal education practices” at home and at community level.

While minority language children may be introduced to or exposed to the home language in the home, their exposure to the majority language through education and the wider community leads to possible dominance of the majority language. The current study explores migrant children’s experiences of home language use in the school setting where the English language dominates. Numerous studies of immigrants have demonstrated a preference for English language use over the heritage language (Portes & Hao, 1998; Rumbaut, 2009). Generally, the minority language lacks national status and tends to be used solely in the home or in the minority language community, and a shift towards the dominant language can occur due to the “status, prestige and social success” associated with it (Holmes, 2001, p. 56) and the need to feel accepted in mainstream society (Baker, 2011). Research shows that many minority language children can eventually become monolingual in English as a result of the high status of English as well as a limited number of opportunities available to children to learn languages other than English (King & Fogle, 2006). There is immense pressure put on language minority students to acquire English at a very young age (Hakuta & D’Andrea, 1992) and the impact of childhood education in a monolingual environment may provide little opportunity for children’s development of the home language. Lee (2002) discovered that a shift to the English language can occur despite a willingness to maintain the home language due to inadequate instruction in school. Critical to this discussion, is HLM as a societal process which demands the contribution of home, school and community (Lee & Oxelson, 2006; Zhang, 2004) considering that the school and society can play a negative role in this regard when English continues to be regarded as the more important language.

More recent studies demonstrate child agency in language choices and practices and highlight a reversal of roles in the language socialisation process where children can be viewed as active agents in influencing and socialising their parents in engaging in particular language practices (Luykx, 2003). The current study considers the central role of the child in the formation of language attitudes, while also taking into account the impact of language practices in the home, school and wider society. Considering the child as an active agent can increase our understanding of their language attitudes and experiences both in the school and in the home, offering insights into how better educational opportunities can be provided for minority language children in Ireland.

## **Methodology**

A phenomenological approach to qualitative research underpinned this study, with the importance of participants’ own perspectives and lived realities being explored (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). A purposive sampling method was used whereby child participants were chosen based on the following criteria; they were born in another country, they had a mother tongue other than English, they had been living in Ireland for more than three years and they were attending a specific primary school in Ireland. The school, an all-girls’ school where one

of the researchers was employed during the research process, is located in a town with a population of approximately 4,500 people in the west of Ireland. In the school, children from 18 nationalities are represented and 152 minority language children are in attendance out of a total of 410 children. The decision to recruit all participants from the same school was based on the fact that the majority of migrant families in the area tend to attend this particular English-medium primary school.

Four semi-structured focus groups were conducted with 17 minority language children from different nationalities and ranging in age from 10 to 13 years. It was considered important to use age-appropriate questions with the children and to avoid posing long or complicated questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Follow-up semi-structured interviews with four of the individual children who participated in the focus group discussions served to further probe four prominent themes identified during the focus group discussions. In addition, the participation of four parents of the child participants, from different nationalities, in semi-structured interviews gave an added perspective to HLM efforts in the family. A semi-structured interview with a teacher of a weekend Polish school highlighted the contribution of language schools in helping to maintain the home languages of minority language children living in Ireland. The use of pseudonyms ensure that the identity of participants are not revealed.

Four sets of data were therefore analysed; (1) semi-structured focus group discussions with four groups of children as can be seen in Table 1; (2) individual interviews with four children from focus groups as can be seen in Table 2; (3) individual interviews with parents of four children as can be seen in Table 3 and (4) an individual interview with the teacher of a weekend Polish language school.

*Table 1. Research sample of children from focus groups*

Participant (Pseudonym)	Country of Origin	First Language	Age (in years)
Alina	Poland	Polish	12
Zofia	Poland	Polish	12
Natia	Poland	Polish	13
Marta	Poland	Polish	13
Krystyna	Poland	Polish	13
Claudia	Brazil	Portuguese	11
Cassia	Brazil	Portuguese	10
Denisa	Brazil	Portuguese	11
Duena	Brazil	Portuguese	11
Arika	Brazil	Portuguese	11
Kamiisa	Chechnya	Chechen	11
Laila	Chechnya	Chechen	10



Eliiza	Chechnya	Chechen	11
Raisa	Ukraine	Ukranian	12
Lavani	India	Indian (Tamil)	13
Brigita	Latvia	Latvian	12
Audra	Lithuania	Lithuanian	13

*Table 2. Research sample of children participating in individual interviews*

Participant	Country of Origin	First language	Age
Zofia	Poland	Polish	12
Audra	Lithuania	Lithuanian	13
Claudia	Brazil	Portuguese	11
Eliiza	Chechnya	Chechen	11

*Table 3. Research sample of parents participating in interviews*

Parent	Nationality
Paulina	Polish
Gloria	Brazilian
Fabiana	Brazilian
Justyna	Polish

## Findings

Four major themes were identified during the analysis of transcripts and anecdotal notes from focus group discussions. These four themes were further explored with four children during individual interviews in order to provide a lucid description of the attitudes of minority language children to HLM.

### **Home language use for family cohesion and identity**

The important role of HLM for maintaining family connections, ethnic identity and culture was evident. All children revealed that their parents favour and facilitate use of the home language in familial contexts. They provided many examples of needing to speak the home language for practical reasons as some parents did not speak English very well. Duena explained that she speaks Portuguese at home “because my parents don’t speak too much English”. There were

other examples provided of instances where parents demand use of the home language. Raisa revealed that her siblings “are not allowed to speak English at home” and the commitment of parents to speaking the home language was further exemplified in the interviews with parents. Justyna explained that family members always speak Polish in the home, watch Polish TV and regularly speak Polish to grandparents and family members in Poland.

As first generation migrants, the children have close connections with family members and friends in their countries of origin and they continue to use the home language to maintain these connections. Zofia and Natia discussed communicating with friends in Poland through a Polish social networking website. Sisters Claudia and Cassia “use the computer with our mum to write to our cousins in Brazil”. Duena, Eliiza and Audra reported how they often talk to their grandparents and other family members on the telephone. It is clear that parents understand the importance of HLM for continuing to communicate with extended family members living in their countries of origin. Paulina spoke of her children speaking Polish to their grandmother and cousins living in Poland on a regular basis. Even though the family plan on staying in Ireland, Gloria wants her daughter to learn and speak Portuguese so she can “get to know my family in Brazil and talk to them, especially her cousins”. She feels that her daughter “is very happy when she uses the language and I think she is proud that she can speak Portuguese”. Karolina, a teacher of a Polish weekend school also discussed the importance of HLM among Polish children for communicating with their family living in Poland.

For many of the children and parents, it emerged that a main reason for wanting to maintain and develop the home language was borne out of a concern that the family may have to return to their home country in the future. Fabiana highlighted the fact that “parents do worry that one day they will go back home and their children will need Portuguese again”. These findings suggest that parents and children may view the home language only in terms of instrumental value for functioning in their home countries (Cabau, 2014).

Although the majority of the children speak their home language most of the time with parents and siblings, this was not a universal experience among the research participants. Audra made it clear that she would prefer to speak English at home with her parents but explained her dad “doesn’t really like it ... he prefers Lithuanian”. There is evidence that a number of the children speak English with younger siblings and siblings who were born in Ireland. Laila revealed that she uses both English and Chechen at home: “I speak English with my little brother all the time but I speak Chechen with my parents and big brothers”. This occurs despite the fact that Laila’s parents prefer her to speak Chechen at all times. Claudia speaks Portuguese with her parents but speaks “a lot of English” with her brother and sister who are both younger than her. Cassia speaks English with her brother who was born in Ireland and her parents speak with him in Portuguese. There was also evidence of both the home language and English being used in some homes. Previous studies reveal that sibling interactions between minority language children are likely to be in the dominant or majority language (Stevens & Ishizawa, 2007). This excerpt from Paulina describes her children’s use of both Polish and English in different situations in the family home:

Well it’s funny because I speak with them [her children] in Polish all the time but the three of them speak English with each other always but when I’m around we speak

Polish. They talk English and they don't speak Polish anymore together but they do when they talk to me.

Eliiza is 11 years old and moved to Ireland with her family five years ago as refugees. Eliiza's strong sense of ethnic identity and positive attitude to the Chechen language was very obvious. She spoke about her family's desire to eventually move home to Chechnya. She discussed the importance of speaking Chechen because "if you forget Chechen, you forget your granny and your aunt and your uncles and everybody in Chechnya". Her strong belief in the connection between the home language and ethnic identity is very evident (Zhang, 2004). Eliiza eloquently explains her ethnic identification with the Chechen language for family ties as follows: "it's my own good language from my home country and I use it when I want to talk to my family and it's a good language for us".

### **Challenges of literacy development in the home language**

Detailed evidence emerged of difficulties faced by the majority of children in relation to developing the skills of reading and writing in their home languages. Even though Marta has lots of interesting Polish books, she finds it "much too hard" to read them. Natia finds Polish grammar very difficult and described her Polish reading and writing skills as "very bad". Arika's lack of confidence in her literacy skills in the home language was obvious when she stated "I don't really know how to write. I prefer to write in English". Three children from Chechnya; Kamiisa, Laila and Eliiza described their lack of ability to read or write in Chechen. Laila expressed the feeling that she is "kind of forgetting the Chechen language now".

As many of these children moved to Ireland when they were very young, it is possible that they may not have been fully introduced to the skills of reading and writing in the home language. Karolina highlighted the fact that "children need to be taught the home language properly by a teacher", maintaining that "it's not enough to speak it at home". It is probable that many of these children will be unable to develop the skills of reading and writing in the home language, unless measures are taken to enable the children to engage in home language learning.

Claudia is 11 years old and Brazilian. Portuguese is her home language. She moved to Ireland 6 years ago with her mother after her father had come to Ireland a year earlier to secure employment. Claudia describes the process whereby she initially had difficulties speaking and learning English. However, she described how she now feels that she is much more confident speaking English and that she is unable to read or write properly in Portuguese. When asked how her parents feel about her inability to read or write in Portuguese, her response was as follows: "They don't really mind. They don't say I have to but I think they would like if I could read and write more in Portuguese".

### **English as 'linguistic capital'**

Many of the children and all parents were very aware of the global dominance, prestige and status of English, and their commitment to the learning of English is evidence of its world

status (Baker, 2011). Children's opinion of English as an extremely important asset in their lives was very clear as many children described potential employment opportunities that may arise from having English as a language. According to Zofia "it really helps to speak English in Poland". Brigita's definition of English as "the common language of the world" is a clear evocation of her perception of the high status of English in society. All of the parents interviewed discussed the benefits of having English for future employment and travel opportunities. Paulina explained that "everybody speaks English in many countries and if they go back to Poland it would be very good for them to have English and to get good work". Karolina, the teacher of a weekend Polish school in the local town understands the desires of parents for their children to acquire English. She referred to the perception among parents that "English can help you get a good job in the future".

Audra is 13 years old and moved to Ireland with her family from Lithuania 6 years ago. Her home language is Lithuanian. Audra's preference for the English language and disregard for her home language was clearly evoked. She described the value of English for her future prospects, as "you can get lots of jobs with English" and her hopes for travelling "because there are so many countries that speak English". She also discussed the difference between her as the only Lithuanian girl in the class and other pupils who can speak their home languages with each other: "It would be nice if I had someone my age to talk to in Lithuanian but I don't". Even though her parents have made attempts to help her develop literacy skills in Lithuanian through purchasing books and literacy resources, she explained her lack of interest in reading or writing in Lithuanian, concluding that "my parents get very sad when I don't like to use Lithuanian anymore".

### **Recognition and non-recognition of home languages in school**

The children reported both positive and negative experiences with regard to using their home language in the school. A number of the children revealed that they were not permitted to use the home language in the classroom setting. Natia recalled getting in trouble with the teacher "for speaking Polish in the classroom". Positive experiences and instances where children were enabled and encouraged to use their home language in school were also described, including involvement in intercultural events as well as translating and interpreting for parents, teachers and children in the school. Krystyna explained that she helped a teacher "to write letters in Polish and to translate letters from parents", and that doing so was enjoyable and good for helping her to remember the Polish language. Some of the children described teachers' positive affirmations of their home language. Claudia talked about an intercultural evening held in the school which involved children and parents showcasing their cultures and languages.

Zofia is 12 years old and moved to Ireland with her family three years ago. Her family is very committed to HLM and development, and Zofia and her younger sister attend a Polish complementary school every weekend. Their mother assigns reading and writing tasks in Polish every week. As the family are planning on moving home to Poland in the next five years, maintaining and developing the Polish language is of great importance to them. Zofia conveyed a deep awareness of the contrasting attitudes of different teachers to home language use in class. She explained that her teacher permitted home language use in class, or perhaps only

tolerated it, as she “doesn’t mind if we are speaking Polish”. However, she was very aware of the fact that other teachers placed demands on the pupils to use English only.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

We can see from the findings of this study that it is difficult to make generalisations regarding the attitudes of first generation migrant children to HLM. Nevertheless, similar patterns regarding children’s experiences of home language use and development have been observed during this study. Children’s perceptions of linguistic hierarchies caused by sociocultural factors in the mainstream society (e.g. Hult, 2012) can shape their attitudes towards English and the home language. On one hand, many children conveyed their opinions of English as more superior to their home language, which is generally mirrored in wider society. On the other hand, HLM is important to the children and their families for family cohesion, cultural identity and for the possibility of returning to the home country. The views expressed among children and parents regarding the instrumental use of the home language to communicate with extended family members and in preparation for a possible return to their home countries in the future can be viewed as somewhat restricted. The benefits of bilingualism for both the child’s individual cognitive development and for the Irish economy or state were not recognised or alluded to by the participants. Here, we suggest that more attention should be placed on the value of bilingualism as well as the promotion and acknowledgement of minority languages in educational settings. This is particularly relevant considering evidence of the non-recognition of home languages or in some cases mere tolerance of minority language use in Irish school settings. The examples given by children when their home languages were recognised or acknowledged in the school setting should inspire further recognition and awareness of cultural and linguistic diversity (Cummins, 1991).

The difficulties and lack of formal and educational opportunities available to develop literacy skills in the home language were evident. While a number of Polish children reported attending a complementary Polish school, the children from other linguistic backgrounds did not discuss such formal educational opportunities for home language learning and development, highlighting the limits for minority language education in Ireland. These children discussed the sole efforts of parents in promoting literacy development in the home language. Addressing the possibility of educational opportunities above family level in the form of national government funded minority language education could rightly serve the bilingual development of minority language migrants in the future.

The children’s views of English as a global language (Crystal, 1997) and as a valuable asset in their lives were clearly revealed, highlighting the global dominance of the English language. In Ireland, it is essential for migrant children to become proficient in English in order to be educated and to participate in mainstream society. While minority language children may be introduced to or exposed to the home language in the home, this study clearly highlights the dominance of the majority language within the primary education system. A number of the children in this study expressed a preference for the English language over the minority

language outside of school. This in turn can cause children to embrace the majority language, resulting in future struggles with HLM and development. Numerous studies of immigrants have demonstrated a preference for English language use over the heritage language (Portes & Hao, 1998; Portes & Shauffler, 1994; Rumbaut, 2007, 2009).

The novelty of this research is its investigation of the attitudes of first generation migrant children to HLM in a society coming to grips with linguistic diversity and where the English language dominates. Further investigation of migrant children's attitudes to HLM and continued recognition of the child as an active agent in the formation of language attitudes and language practices can serve to acknowledge their role in HLM.

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