Finding Our True North: On Languages, Understanding and Curriculum in Northern Ireland

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Finding Our True North: On Languages, Understanding and Curriculum in Northern Ireland

Abstract

Language learning can open up new worlds and deepen understanding of our own. It can foster awareness of other people, other places and cultures, and bring social and educational benefits. Northern Ireland (NI) is an increasingly multilingual region that is emerging from conflict into a welcome, but fragile, peace. It faces unique uncertainties caused by Brexit, as well as the need to develop empathy in face of the Covid-19 pandemic. Concerns have been expressed also about academic underachievement and mental health among its young people. Against such a background, this paper explores the current context in NI relating to languages, and curriculum policy and practice in language education. It argues that young people in NI are poorly served, and that curriculum reform with respect to languages is timely. The paper makes five key recommendations: 1) Reform of curriculum, policy, and practice relating to language education in NI; 2) Introduction of statutory language learning in primary schools; 3) Investment in teacher development; 4) Valuing of linguistic diversity and plurality in curriculum policy and practice; and 5) Further practice-based research to explore pedagogy and outcomes in language education in NI.

Keywords: languages, language education, policy, schools, curriculum, Northern Ireland

Introduction

The onset of Covid-19 has provoked questions about schooling and the school curriculum. What are schools for? What and how should children and young people learn at school? How should learning be assessed? Together with concerns relating to racism brought into focus by the killing of George Floyd, the pandemic has contributed to "the conditions for rethinking old certainties and challenging taken-for-granted thinking about education, within and beyond schooling" (Priestly and Philippou, 2020, p. 335). This is certainly the case in Northern Ireland (NI), where, due to the pandemic, schooling was 'dismantled' (Walsh *et al.*, p. 6). Covid-19 has also drawn our attention to the importance of clarity in communication, to language itself, and to plurality in languages and cultures. As we find ourselves living in increasingly multilingual face to face and virtual communities, the ability to translate, interpret, and ultimately understand one another, is vital in order for us to live and work together well. Moreover, the possibility of coming to a more nuanced understanding of ourselves as human beings, our cultures and societies, through the prism of more than one language, holds out marvellously enriching potential.

According to the British Academy (2020, p. 6) *Towards a national languages strategy: education and skills* publication, languages affect many facets of our lives, personally and as communities, including:

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   productivity, trade and business; literacy and skills; community and social cohesion; soft power; culture; diplomacy; defence and national security; public services; health and wellbeing; cognitive capacity; social mobility; and equality of opportunity.

Yet at the same time, the condition of language learning in the United Kingdom (UK) is a cause for concern. In England, "A growing number of pupils are being disapplied from languages at KS3 in both state and independent sectors to receive extra support in literacy", and there is a decline of pupil uptake of languages at A level (Collen, 2020, p. 3). In Wales, despite apparent investment in pedagogy and practice in recent decades, there has also been a decline in uptake of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) in schools (Gorrara *et al.*, 2020). The British Academy (2020, p.6) describes the situation as 'critical', pointing to a significant languages skills deficit; with the exception of Scotland a reduction in provision for language learning in schools across the UK; and inequity in terms of accessing such provision among children and young people from less affluent backgrounds (British Academy, 2020, p.7).

It is in such a context that this paper will reflect on the current situation relating to languages, learning and the curriculum in Northern Ireland (NI). It will firstly consider NI's unique linguistic and political context before turning its focus towards languages and language learning in the region in terms of schooling and the curriculum. Drawing on school-based research, the paper will then discuss arguments for current investment in the future of language learning in NI, before presenting recommendations for development. For purposes of clarity throughout the discussion, the term 'regional' languages will be used to describe Irish and English, the term 'classical' languages will be used to denote Latin and Greek, and the term 'international languages' will be used to refer to all other languages including those traditionally referred to as Modern Foreign Languages (MFL). The term additional languages may be used to refer specifically to a language other than the language or languages spoken by learners at home.

Northern Ireland: linguistic and political context

As Carruthers and O'Mainnín highlight, "Northern Ireland's geographical and political status in the UK is unique and this has a number of important consequences for questions of language learning, languages in the community, and language policy" (Carruthers and O'Mainnín, 2018, p. 159). The two recognised regional languages are Irish and English, with English being the first language of a significant majority. Although Irish is growing in popularity, with a new Irish Language Centre opening in traditionally Protestant East Belfast in 2014 (BBC, 2014), the 2011 census indicated that less than 3.74 % of the population could "speak, read, write and understand" the Irish language (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), 2012). In its Programme for Government 2011-2015, the Northern Ireland Executive (2016) included a Strategy for Ulster Scots to "provide sustainable and quality educational provision relating to all aspects of the Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture" (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, 2015, p. 4). However, as Gardner (2018, p.402) notes, "The legitimacy of Ulster-Scots is contested. Its categorization as a full language, a dialect (of English or Scots) or merely trumped-up colloquialism is a source of contention in Northern Ireland". Nevertheless, Gardner highlights that according to NISRA (2011) about 8.1% of the population, claimed to have some ability. There is no debate over the legitimacy of Irish as a language, but it has been politicised, and its place in NI is controversial (Mitchell and Miller, 2019). The prospect of an Irish Language Act that would bestow official status, promote bilingual signage in shared spaces, and give the right to use it in court, for example, has fractured public opinion. As Collen (2018) put it,

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"the recent collapse of the power-sharing government has, amongst other issues, language and cultural identity at its core". The aforementioned government was *in absentia* for three years, since January 2017 until its restoration in January 2020; the lamentable vacuum this generated caused inertia across many areas of public life, including education, and health (Griffin, 2019).

Following the 1998 Good Friday Agreement there have been striking changes in the demographic of NI, reflected in a new multilingual and multicultural reality in its communities. After English, Irish, and Ulster Scots, the 2011 Census cited Polish as the most widely spoken language, followed in turn by Lithuanian. This new reality is especially apparent in schools (Kernaghan, 2015). According to the most recent Department of Education of Northern Ireland (DENI) school enrolment statistics (DENI, 2020), newcomer pupils, defined as those who do not share the language of instruction or who have insufficient English or Irish language skills to access the curriculum, represent 5% of the total pupil numbers.

This paper argues that recent political developments in NI have opened a window of opportunity to foster needed curriculum development in regional, classical and international languages. For although linguistic diversity is increasingly apparent, and highlighted in political discourse, there does not appear to be evidence of a matching enthusiasm for language learning in the region's schools. The complex nature of NI as a jurisdiction does pose challenges for curriculum policy and practice in language education. Yet, just as the challenges are unique, so too are the opportunities that restored government might seize upon in efforts to address a legacy of paralysis. The January 2020 document published by the British and Irish governments, *New Decade, New Approach*, (UK Government, 9th January 2020) managed to form a basis of agreement for the political parties, and thus break deadlock. The document expresses the commitments of both the Irish and British governments to NI, and addresses key issues in health and education. It includes specific recommendations around language and identity "to promote cultural pluralism and respect for diversity, build social cohesion and reconciliation and to celebrate and support all aspects of Northern Ireland's rich cultural and linguistic heritage" (UK Government, 2020, p. 15). The governments propose that a restored NI Executive "will establish an external, independent review of education provision, with a focus on securing greater efficiency in delivery costs, raising standards, access to the curriculum for all pupils, and the prospects of moving towards a single education system" (UK Government, 2020, p. 7).

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Against this backdrop, in the majority of schools in NI the curriculum is delivered in English. There is also a small but growing Irish Medium Education (IME) sector in which the statutory curriculum is delivered through Irish, adopting a language immersion approach. The benefits of this, including the ability to learn other languages more easily, enhancement of self-esteem, and broader appreciation of difference, were outlined in a ministerial statement to the Northern Ireland Assembly (Department of Education of Northern Ireland (DENI), 2014). According to Department of Education of Northern Ireland (DENI, 2020) there are 6, 816 pupils in IME schools or units in NI out of a total of 349, 536. Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta report that there are 92 schools providing IME across all educational phases (Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, 21 Jan, 2020).

The Northern Ireland Curriculum (NIC), revised in 2007, takes the form of a framework rather than a content-based curriculum, offering relative teacher freedom. The NIC is structured according to Areas of Learning rather than subject disciplines (Greenwood *et al.*,

2017) and favours cross curricular approaches. Language learning is culturally infused, as Williams (2017; 2019) argues, and can open up rich opportunities to learn about relationships, cultural mind-sets and philosophical representations of the world. There is great value in language learning across learning areas, as well as being embedded within 'Language and Literacy' and 'World Around Us'. At Key Stage 3 (11-14 years), 'Language and Literacy' is a compulsory area of learning that aims to help pupils develop effective communication skills. This includes English with Media Education, and, in Irish-medium settings, Irish with Media Education. Modern Languages is a further compulsory area that seeks to develop effective communication skills, through listening, speaking, reading and writing in a target language, with the stipulation that pupils must study at least one official language of the European Union. Languages may include but are not limited to Irish, Spanish, French and German. In both primary and post-primary, the NIC is skills-infused, with an emphasis on the development of Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities, such as 'Working with Others' and 'Being Creative', as well as three cross-curricular skills: 'Communication'; 'Using Mathematics'; and 'Using ICT'.

Currently, NI has one of the shortest periods of exposure in formal education to additional language learning in Europe, given that it is compulsory only at KS3 (British Council Wales, 2015, p. 13). In nursery and primary schools there is no statutory requirement to learn a new language, making the region an outlier in the UK (Jones *et al.*, 2017; Bennet and Carruthers, 2019). As Purdy, Siberry and Beale (2010, p. 154) pointed out, in the NIC (2007) "There is brief 'encouragement' of modern language teaching within the detail of the new learning area of language and literacy, but this falls far short of statutory entitlement". By contrast, according to Eurostat (2019), a clear majority of children in the vast majority of European Union states were learning English as an international language in primary school in 2019. In England since 2014, all pupils aged 7-11 have been required to reach a high standard of written and spoken communication in any modern or ancient language. Scotland has embraced the European 1 + 2 model to give children in primary schools the opportunity to learn their own language and two more, while most recently the Draft Curriculum published in Wales in 2019 has included 'international languages' at Key Stage 2 in primary schools, defined as home and community languages, modern languages, classical languages and British Sign Language (Gorrara *et al.*, 2020). In Ireland, policy makers have responded to the concerns of business and educators regarding the economic impact of the language skills deficit in the recent policy *Languages Connect*, which supports language learning at all educational stages starting with Irish in primary schools (Scally, 2016; Collen, 2018; Jones, 2018).

In NI, a funded Primary Modern Languages Programme (PMLP) at Key Stage 2 offering Spanish, Irish, and latterly Polish, on a peripatetic model, was established in NI in 2007, following a successful Foundation Stage pilot (CCEA, 2007), and this remained in place in 54% of primary schools until funding ended in 2015. The main achievement of the PMLP was its success in fostering awareness of the benefits of languages and generating enthusiasm in participating schools. However, in non-statutory provision in the years following the PMLP learner progress was not assessed; partnerships to support language learning were uneven; and time allocated to languages and frequency of lessons varied. Lack of inclusion of language learning as part of the statutory curriculum for primary schools in NI was perceived as evidence of the low priority placed on languages by government, and a significant deterrent to the development of provision in schools. Following the closure of the PMLP, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) in NI developed a Primary Irish and Aspects of Shared Culture programme to build capacity in

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primary schools, beyond the Irish Medium sector, to teach elements of Irish and shared cultural heritage (McKendry and McKendry, 2019).

At a time when school budgets are pressurised, children in areas of NI with high levels of socio-economic disadvantage seem particularly at risk of missing out when it comes to language learning; in more affluent areas schools have resorted to asking parents to pay for language classes (Ridealgh, 2019). In 2019, the inaugural *Languages Trends Northern Ireland* report (British Council, 2019) found that 55% of the primary schools it surveyed (25% of primary schools overall), offered some kind of language learning provision. However, the nature, regularity and centrality of provision to the schools' curriculum offer and development planning varied, and only 14% of the surveyed schools offered systematic language teaching embedded in a scheme of work relating to the NIC. In summary, government funded language learning initiatives in primary schools in NI, although positive, have been limited in scope or duration, and the absence of a clear statutory requirement to teach languages in primary schools means that teacher development, and curriculum guidance and support are minimal.

In post-primary schools in NI, language learning is statutory for three years in NI at Key Stage 3. However, as languages are not compulsory at General Certificate Secondary of Education (GCSE) level or beyond, and taking into account fluctuations in birth rates, entries for languages for public examinations at GCSE and also General Certificate of Education (GCE) examinations have fallen (British Council NI, 2019). At GCSE, between 2010 and 2018, while entries for Spanish increased by 16%, examination entries fell overall by 19%, with significant falls in Irish (- 8%), German (-18%) and French (- 40%) (British Council, 2019, p.6). At GCE A level, since 2010, there has been a decline in entries in all the main languages (French - 40%; German - 29%; Spanish and Irish - 6%) (British Council, 2019, p. 31). Perceptions of harsh grading of GCSE and A-level qualifications in languages do little to help (British Council, 2019). Where class sizes are considered too small, schools must collaborate to meet the demands of the Entitlement Framework. This sets out the minimum number and range of courses a school should offer at Key Stage 4 and Post-16. Collaboration between NI's complex mix of schools of varying governance types has also been encouraged through funded Shared Education initiatives (Duffy and Gallagher, 2015; Gallagher, 2016), although there is no requirement to focus on any given area of the curriculum. Overall, schools in NI report they "would welcome action to improve the status of languages generally and to embed more positive attitudes towards other languages and cultures" (British Council, 2019, p.5).

Although NI has two popular universities, possibilities for language learning in Higher Education were diminished with the 2015 closure of the School of Modern Languages at Ulster University. Its linguistics department survives, but there is currently no entry pathway to a languages degree. Queen's University offers full degree programmes in French, Spanish, Irish and Portuguese, and International Business with Mandarin or German and has a thriving Language Centre offering subsidised courses in a wide range of languages to students across all disciplines. But even here choice is limited; it is no longer possible to take a Joint Honours degree in German (Carruthers and O'Mainnin, 2017). With the exception of a Post Graduate Certificate in Education for Irish Medium in primary, there has been no Initial Teacher Education (ITE) degree course in primary languages in NI since 1991, when funding was removed due to the absence of languages from the Primary Curriculum (Purdy *et al.,* 2010). However, in the BEd primary ITE pathways in both

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Stranmillis and St Mary's University Colleges, vibrant Erasmus programmes offer some scope for the development of linguistic and intercultural skills.

The *Languages for the Future Strategy* (DENI, 2012) identified a languages skills deficit in NI and made ambitious proposals to address it. This deficit was noted in the region by the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce (2014), and more generally across the UK by the British Academy (2016) and the International Institute for Management Development (IMD) World Talent Rankings (2017). Although published by DENI, the 2012 strategy failed to attract the investment needed to implement reform. *Languages for the Future* argued for the provision of language learning opportunities for all in NI, starting with early intervention in nursery school and extending beyond school into Higher Education and ITE. Progress in policy development in response to the 2012 strategy has been scant. In terms of practice, there are some signs of hope, but the overarching picture is one of patchy, inequitable provision in which some children and young people enjoy opportunity, and others miss out.

Carpe diem: time to invest in language learning in Northern Ireland's schools?

NI is a society emerging from conflict, now also facing the uncertainties of Covid-19. Extended school closures in spring have 2020 generated important questions about the fundamental purpose and value of schooling, the nature and breadth of the curriculum, curriculum access and equality of opportunity. There is debate as to the character, skills and capabilities that current and future generations of young people will need in order to live healthy, positive and meaningful lives, as individuals and in communities. This paper proposes that these conditions call for a fresh approach to language learning, particularly with respect to the key issues that follow.

Firstly, there are concerns regarding inequality of opportunity, brought sharply into focus by Covid-19. Although Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results suggest recent levels of achievement in NI have risen, there is a continuing focus on underachievement, especially in contexts of disadvantage (Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), 2018; Henderson *et al*., 2020). The significant variation in opportunities available to children to learn a new language has implications for academic success. For example, according to a recent ETI Chief Inspector's Report, in IME post primary schools in NI where children learn in more than one language, the standards pupils attain in literacy are "consistently very good or better" (ETI, 2018, p. 36). Exposure to more than one language appears to foster enhanced levels of achievement in literacy. Such a benefit is denied to many children in NI. Referring to the *Review of Current Primary Languages* (Jones *et al*., 2017), the Chief Inspector argues that an implementation of the 2012 *Languages for the Future Strategy* would be timely, in view of "the evidence of cognitive, social and economic benefits arising from language learning" (ETI, 2018, pp. 26-7).

Secondly, given growing numbers of newcomer pupils in NI, we must address the needs of learners in multilingual settings. The *Key Inequalities in Education Draft Statement* (Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, 2015) highlighted newcomer pupils as a group at risk of underachievement. In an OECD review, Stanat and Christensen (2006) report that although immigrant students are motivated, they often perform at levels lower than their peers. Attitudes to schooling vary between ethnic groups (Flynn, 2013), and in NI there are

concerns about attendance patterns (Kernaghan, 2015). Oikonomodoi (2014) points to the need to raise aspirations, while Biggart *et al.* (2013) stress the importance of a holistic understanding of the educational experiences of minority ethnic children of all ages in NI. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (2017, p. ii) notes that "over two fifths of minority ethnic students [had] been the victims of racist bullying and harassment". Language learning might begin to address this by affording awareness of diversity and mutual understanding. It is also an area of the curriculum in which multilingual pupils can feel confident and excel; there is evidence of a positive correlation between immigrant bilingualism and language learning achievement (Maluch *et al.,* 2015). Research suggests important benefits of being multilingual, including cognitive improvements; facilitation of development in first language literacy; strengthened phonological awareness and improved physical and mental health (Cheater and Farren, 2001; Bialystok *et al.*, 2009; Murphy *et al.,* 2015; Bak *et al.*, 2016; Kim *et al.*, 2018). In schools in NI, multilingual newcomer children and their monolingual peers stand to benefit from enhanced language learning opportunities.

Thirdly, mental health is a key area of concern in NI, particularly among young people, with recent calls to instate a minister dedicated to its improvement (BBCNI, 2020). Mental health risks faced specifically by immigrant groups in NI have been highlighted too (Murphy *et al.* (2017; Rochford *et al.* 2018). Challenges to mental health and wellbeing among multilingual immigrant young people may include language "brokering" (Rainey *et al.,* 2014); translating in high-stakes situations (Anguiano, 2018); and "parentification" (Hooper, 2007, p. 323). The *Multilingual Minds* study (Jones *et al.*, 2018), commissioned by the Education Authority Youth Service in Northern Ireland to investigate the mental health and wellbeing of multilingual newcomer pupils, found that this group faced significant adversity and stressors in addition to the usual challenges of childhood and adolescence (McMullen *et al.*, 2020). However, the study also found that multilingual newcomer pupils in NI enjoyed and valued language learning in school. Arguably, valuing linguistic and cultural diversity through language learning is an important contributor to both academic success and wellbeing among pupils in multilingual contexts.

Finally, and importantly, there is the need to develop empathy, not least in the midst of Covid-19. Literature and the arts offer the potential to broaden horizons and deepen understanding; perhaps even to heal. Engaging with these in the context of the plurality of languages and cultures enhances such potential. For example, Williams (2014, p. 155) presents convincing arguments that a knowledge of Irish opens up windows into culture, literature and history, offering access to a "world of extraordinary literary riches, extending from pre-Christian Ireland to today". English literature is similarly rich, but limiting cultural engagement to the worlds of Irish and English and ignoring other cultures and languages is limiting. The popularity across the globe during the current pandemic of Camus' novel *La Peste* is a striking illustration. Written in isolation and illness in a relatively unknown corner of rural France (Jones, 2020), and now translated into more than thirty languages, this novel has an enduring, global relevance that is testament to the value of reading across languages and cultures. Another example is the dearth of a foundation in classical and biblical literatures that might be understood to limit cultural literacy in contemporary languages. Appreciation of the full resonance of significant work by Northern Irish poets (Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley, for example) is enhanced by knowledge of the classical languages and literature that shaped their work (Jones, 2017, p. 499). (The poem 'Ceasefire' by Longley is a striking illustration of this.)

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As well as enhancing communication skills and employability, then, language learning has the potential to cultivate cultural literacy and broaden horizons. As Williams (2019) argues, learning a new language opens up a new world, and new ways of mapping the world, since each language is part of a culture and tradition of thought. Enhanced understanding across cultural divides may in turn reduce prejudice, contribute to friendships, and strengthen psychological resilience (Bagci *et al.,* 2014). In England, the Department for Education (2013), as outlined in the statutory guidance for foreign languages at Key Stages 2 and modern foreign languages at Key Stage 3, argued that "Learning a foreign language is a liberation from insularity and provides an opening to other cultures. A high-quality languages education should foster pupils' curiosity and deepen their understanding of the world". As NI's demographic evolves, such intercultural education is vital (Richardson and Gallagher, 2011; Purdy and Ferguson, 2012; Jones, 2015). As Mitchell and Miller (2019, p. 250) put it:

> language learning has the potential to *develop empathy for the members of another linguistic community*. This is not simply because language acquisition creates "common ground"– the learner comes to share the same communicative ability as the speaker – like other contact-based peace work. More than this, learning a language opens a window into another linguistic community's inner world – revealing nuances of culture and ways of life.

Towards a languages future: five recommendations

Drawing this discussion of languages and curriculum in NI to a close, the final section of the paper presents recommendations to bear in mind as we seek to respond to our current situation and move forward, and that a review of education in NI might consider.

1. *Reform of curriculum, policy, and practice in language education in NI*

Thirteen years after its inception, it is time to review the NIC (CCEA, 2007). In order to implement successful reforms, strong leadership, investment and partnership will be vital. Policy makers and educationalists will need to engage seriously with the fundamental dichotomy framed by Priestley and Biesta (2013, p. 185):

> Perhaps the biggest question here is to what extent education should be driven by economic concerns, and to what extent it should be driven by wider human concerns, such as a concern for democracy, a concern for social and ecological justice and a concern for peaceful human coexistence. From an economic perspective, the latter are of course far more difficult to measure as 'returns' of an investment in education, not only because, in the economic lingo, they are 'soft outcomes' but also because they are long-term outcomes.

Given the complexities of our societies, Ball (2012, p. 3) posits that curriculum reform can be "unscientific and irrational". Bringing about intelligent reform in language education in NI will require collaboration across sectors and educational stages, the investment of time and effort, and attentive engagement with evidence. Structures that are already in place, such as Shared Education and Area Learning Communities (Gallagher, 2016) may prove helpful, but government needs to communicate a clear message that language education is important for all children and young people, in each and every school. Flowing from this, careful development of curriculum guidance, and frameworks to support high quality planning and teaching, will be crucial.

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2. Introduction of statutory language learning in primary schools

This paper recommends that NI should follow England, Scotland and Wales in the statutory inclusion of languages in the curriculum for primary schools, echoing the British Academy (2020, p. 3) call for "further work to establish and then implement the best approach for the primary curriculum, and for the transition to secondary". Coffey's (2018) discussion of social capital points to the need to prevent language learning opportunities being seen as a privilege of the elite. This brings to mind questions of curriculum and social justice relating to classical languages (Hunt, 2018). Recently I observed some very successful Latin lessons in a primary school in an area of NI with high levels of social disadvantage. This experience has convinced me of the significant value of classical language learning in understanding of language generally. Learning Latin can support the development of pupils' vocabulary, grammatical understanding, and cultural literacy. The findings of the Classics in Communities project suggest "positive trends in the development of literacy skills, when a Classical language is used as the medium for (or supplement to) literacy learning" (Holmes-Henderson, 2016, p. 52). Yet opportunities to learn classical languages are severely limited in NI. Schools are more likely to develop provision for learning languages if there is a statutory requirement to do so. As Myatt (2018, p. 17) argues, making an area of the curriculum a requirement "is a way of ensuring that all children encounter, engage with and study to varying degrees of depth, the content and material which are considered important for a rounded education". However, while fully in favour of the learning of Irish in schools, Williams (2014, p155) argues that making immersion education in Irish compulsory was not conducive to successful language learning more generally. Williams argues, therefore, for parental choice, and for a balance between offering the entitlement to learn and imposing an "unproductive burden".

Progress with primary languages provision in other UK jurisdictions is encouraging, but not perfect. Gorrara *et al.* (2020, p. 251) note that in the Draft Curriculum for Wales, "how to approach multilingual literacy remains ill-defined"; that further guidance is needed for teachers to find out how to develop "good multilingual language competence"; that the needed "reconfiguring of teacher identity and practice will be a mammoth task"; and that language learning needs to be more connected, integrated and inclusive. In England, Collen (2020) found that primary languages are embedded in policy but not practice, and that further work is needed in transition from primary to post primary school especially.

3. Investment in teacher development

Progress in policy and provision for language learning in schools will require much work, not least the development of teachers. Ideally each school should have a language leader, a qualified classroom teacher with a very good level of competence in the language being taught, who can contribute significantly to, and coordinate, language provision. This should become an important factor in ITE, in teacher recruitment and in building leadership capacity. In particular, if language learning is included as a statutory curriculum requirement in primary schools, building teacher capacity and agency will be essential. This will require investment in the preparation of new teachers in ITE, in tandem with Continuing Professional Development for serving teachers. Arguably the most effective model involves the leading of

learning by effective qualified primary classroom teachers who understand the curriculum, age and stage of the learners, and who have sufficient language competence and pedagogical expertise (Sweeney, 2007). To facilitate this, generalist primary classroom teachers should receive language instruction as well as pedagogical formation during ITE and CPD. In terms of ITE, student teachers with a very good or excellent A level qualification in a language upon entry to BEd programmes in the University Colleges could develop their skills in language and pedagogy, participate in student mobility programmes in target language countries. In addition, current postgraduate ITE courses could be extended to include a pathway for primary languages.

4. *Valuing of linguistic diversity and plurality in curriculum policy and practice*

This paper argues that the curriculum in NI at all educational stages should place value on linguistic and cultural difference, not just with respect to Irish and Ulster Scots, but to languages more globally, offering language learning opportunities from an earlier age to all pupils in all NI schools. In order to value linguistic heritage, yet foster an outward-looking perspective, schools should develop their capacity for engagement with a plurality of languages including regional, international and classical. The potential for learning that linguistic and cultural diversity already present in NI schools should be exploited for good, harnessing the expertise of families and the wider community to encourage learning. An example of this in practice might be engaging the help of multilingual parents in schools to facilitate shared reading of multilingual story books. If time is spent in the classroom learning about the plurality of languages, literacies and cultures, children should come to understand the value placed upon them.

It is also important that we pay due regard to pupil voice and choice. Increasing learner agency by giving students voice and choice "can create meaningful experiences that help to meet the developmental needs of youth" (Mitra, 2004, p.681). Interestingly, in Scotland, "Enjoyment and Choice" is included as a line of development in the Languages area of learning in the Curriculum for Excellence (Reeves, in Priestley and Biesta, 2013, p. 61). The importance of understanding learners' experiences of curriculum has also been emphasised by Manyukhina and Wise (2019, p. 18); since children in NI Primary schools have expressed views about language learning, it is imperative that policy makers and educators respond to these.

5. *Further practice-based research to pedagogy and outcomes in language education in NI*

Finally, there is a need in NI to explore fresh approaches to language learning and investigate the relationship between language learning and other areas of intellectual, social and emotional development in young people. The current NIC, with its emphasis on developing cross-curricular learning and skills, offers real scope for the embedding of language learning across the curriculum. In view of this, the *Languages for the Future Languages Strategy* (DENI, 2012) and the *Review of Current Primary Languages* (Jones *et al.,* 2017) advocated a focus on Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). According to Barwell (2015, p. 143), "Language and content integration concerns the teaching and learning of both language and subject areas (e.g. science, mathematics, etc.) in the same classroom, at the same time". The CLIL approach has been endorsed in Europe

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(Council of Europe, 2019) and is being encouraged currently in the Republic of Ireland in the teaching of PE through Irish, in keeping with the 2017 *Languages Connect* policy (DES, 2017; DES, 2019). However, further funded research is needed to investigate the potential of CLIL in NI.

Myatt (2018, p.98) argues that etymology, a fascinating area of study opened up by comparing different languages, extends learning in every subject area, as well as vocabulary, and that the exploration of the relationships between languages ancient and modern yields rich dividends. Advocating an interdisciplinary approach to learning, Campbell-Thompson also highlights the relationship between language learning and literacy development, and in so doing counters tired arguments about the crowded curriculum: "Positioning foreign languages in the centre of literacy enterprise addresses the dilemma of the shortage of curriculum time for language studies" (Campbell-Thomson, 2017, p. 461). Given the high levels of literacy reported in IME schools in NI noted earlier in the discussion, this paper recommends further funded research to investigate the relationship between multilingual learning and literacy development.

Conclusion

In light of contemporary NI's unique linguistic, political, social and educational context, the shaping of future directions in curriculum policy and practice in language education call for renewed energy, sensitivity, commitment and investment. Uncertainties around Brexit, concerns regarding educational underachievement, the needs of learners in increasingly multilingual schools, and the Covid-19 pandemic sharpen urgency. The arguments for research-informed review and reform of curriculum policy and practice in language education at this juncture in time are compelling. In view of the recognised personal and social benefits of language learning, in the interests of equity within and across jurisdictions, and in order to promote positive attitudes towards linguistic diversity, we should no longer delay engagement with language learning in NI until Key Stage 3 and limit it in many cases to three short years. Giving language learning at all educational stages a fresh impetus will require investment in teacher education and development, the creation of effective curriculum guidance and support materials, and further funded research. All pupils in NI deserve the opportunities that language learning offers, not just a privileged elite, and structures to afford this should be shaped in light of our children and young peoples' contextual needs and views. More than ever in NI we must harness opportunities to connect people, ideas, times and cultures, to strengthen literacy and develop empathy. By developing curriculum policy and educational practice in a way that is sensitive to our time and place, we might move a little closer to finding our True North.

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