



## Language, Place and Identity:

### Exploring children's linguistic and cognitive development in heritage and community languages Research summary

#### Background

This Carnegie Trust funded project brought together an interdisciplinary research team across the cognitive and social sciences to conduct an exploratory study of children's experiences in Scotland of heritage and community languages<sup>1</sup>.

Scotland is becoming increasingly bilingual<sup>2</sup> resulting in a growing number of children growing up with a language other than English spoken at home. In 2017, 60,714 pupils were identified as having a language other than English as their main home language. Of the 158 different languages identified, the most spoken were Polish, Urdu, Scots, Punjabi and Arabic (Scottish Government, 2017).

With regards to Gaelic language use in Scotland, 510 of all pupils in publicly funded schools across Scotland were identified as speaking Gaelic as their main home language and 3,965 pupils were enrolled in a Gaelic Medium Education (GME) school. However, the use of Gaelic is more extensive in some areas, for example, in the local authority area of Eilean Siar. Here, 52% of the total population reported speaking Gaelic, with 42% using a language other than English at home (National Records of Scotland, 2011).

The cognitive benefits of language learning and bilingualism are increasingly researched (Bialystok et al., 2009; Costa & Sebastian-Galles, 2014) but less is known about how languages and bilingualism interconnect with children's day-to-day lives or their sense of self and identity. How children feel about languages and bilingualism may be influenced by how languages are valued and experienced within and by families, amongst peers, and by communities and services. Taking a closer look at the social contexts of children's bilingualism will contribute to the increasingly urgent task of understanding how best to support bilingual children and young people. This will enable them to draw the maximum benefit from their bilingualism.

#### How?

- Fieldwork was undertaken in two Scottish primary schools, one was located in a Scottish city and another in the Western Isles.
- The project used multiple research methods across both locations, including: observations; group work with children; individual interviews with children and parents; parental questionnaires; and cognitive tests completed by children.
- The primary focus was on children's perspectives in order to understand how they view their language and how this is associated with culture and their identity. In particular, the research aimed to explore children's experiences of and perspectives on bilingualism, across the domains of family, community and school.

#### Emerging findings

The children who took part in the research were at different points on the bilingualism continuum and described many different paths to bilingualism. As well as illustrating the diversity in experience, the research suggests common themes and areas which may be of interest for future research and inquiry.

#### Language learning and cultural identity: children's perspectives

The children in GME were clearly attached to their Gaelic and could be said to have a Gaelic sense of self. When asked the hypothetical question of 'which language (English or Gaelic) would you pick if you had to choose one to speak forevermore?', all of the children commented that they would speak Gaelic – even in cases where their family did not currently speak Gaelic. For most GME children, school was the focal point for their Gaelic identity and learning. Few spoke Gaelic outside of school or had any other form of out-of-school engagement with the Gaelic

<sup>1</sup> The terms heritage language and community language refer to indigenous, immigrant, refugee and ancestral languages in which an individual has some proficiency (Valdes, 2001) or a personal connection (Fishman, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Defined as those individuals who speak more than one language.

community. This raises questions about how they will maintain Gaelic in the future once they are beyond Gaelic schooling.

In the school located in a Scottish city, children found it difficult to separate their heritage language and Scottish (English language) identities. The children at this school were very aware, and proud, of their bilingual identities. Families tended to retain a sense of heritage language identity through the celebration of festive holidays and traditions, as well as reading books and watching films in the heritage language. The children's bilingual and cultural identities were often emphasised in the research, with formal language learning, such as grammar, viewed as a necessary evil. When language learning opportunities became more prescriptive (for example, through attendance at organised community activities, private tutoring, language school) children tended to do these at parental request, rather than of their own desire – often commenting that, if given a choice, they would not participate in such opportunities.

#### Family as being the first line of support in unlocking the potential of bilingualism

Across all households where the heritage language was spoken from birth, this was the language promoted at home. There were a number of approaches that parents took in order to enforce the use of the heritage language and these were met by children with various responses. Those children whose parents tended to adopt strict approaches (such as no English at home) accepted this as so. This was found across the Gaelic and non-Gaelic contexts. Those parents who adopted more relaxed approaches to language use, and who code-switched (the practice of alternating between two languages in a single conversation) regularly themselves, faced challenges enforcing the heritage language at home resulting in tensions between parental-child expectations and relations.

#### Wider support systems

As important as parents are for providing support and encouragement for language learning, children may need a more diverse support system which encompasses a wider range of individuals and groups to gain deep bilingualism, and the associated cognitive benefits. Although we cannot make statistical generalisations from this small study, it is unlikely to be a coincidence that those children who achieved highest on cognitive tests tended to be from Gaelic speaking families in the GME school. Alongside being taught in Gaelic, the children who achieved the highest results tended to be speakers of Gaelic at home (as the main home language) and/or were well-supported in their learning with at least one parent speaking Gaelic. As a result of GME they also had peers they could speak Gaelic with, while there were often also extended family members (such as grandparents) with whom children spoke Gaelic. This suggests that it is important for children and young people to be fully supported in their language learning across multiple areas of their life, not just at school and/or home. The research suggested children who may require further support were those: whose parents were unable to help with homework because of their level of ability in the schooling language; and who lacked a support network, formal or informal, beyond the family household to foster and encourage language learning.

#### Bilingualism beneficial to other activities

Most of the children spoke about how their bilingualism provided them with another way to express themselves and deepen relationships. This included through drama and theatre classes, roleplaying games with friends/siblings, competitive team sports as a tactical, secret form of communication, or simply to hold private conversations with family when in public spaces. All of these examples were commented upon in a very positive manner and children made a point of ensuring these experiences were disclosed. The positive consequences of language learning and bilingualism for children's sense of self and identity are not as concrete and measurable as cognitive benefits. However, children show they value greater opportunities for expression and connection with others.

#### Further information

If you would like more information about our research project, you can:



Visit the Bilingualism Matters website: <http://www.bilingualism-matters.ppls.ed.ac.uk>



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*This research was funded by the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland through a Collaborative Research Grant.*

