

Dr. Jim Cummins

Workshop On Preschool Education

I thought I would take five minutes or so to raise a couple of other issues or elaborate on a couple of the things that I said and then just open it up.

One of the issues that I know is being discussed here and hasn't really been discussed all that much, or at least in the same ways in some of the other contexts, is the issue of pre-school provision and whether it's a necessity or whether it's something that's desirable but not totally necessary in terms of children coming into a *gaelscoil*.

The major area where this is being taken very, very seriously, and where there's a lot of experience on it, is in New Zealand with the Maori language which is the indigenous language of the people there – again, very much a threatened language. In the late 70s they realised that it was going to disappear within one generation if they didn't do something radical. So, they set up what they called *kowango rayo* in Maori – literal translation is *language nests* – where mainly grandmothers who spoke the language fluently started small pre-school programmes that would take children literally from birth, or within the first few weeks of life, and have them in these pre-school settings as a way of developing Maori as their first language, or as a co-first language.

I remember, a number of years ago, I was in New Zealand and was visiting some of these pre-school programmes and a couple of people were telling me of an Irish couple who had emigrated to New Zealand. They spoke Irish at home and, obviously, were fluent in English also. But, they had decided that they wanted their child to learn Maori and had put her, in her first six months of life, into the pre-school. The father was also in the process of learning Maori. So he participated in there, again picking up the language. And, so, early pre-school provision can be very effective and is certainly something to promote as strongly as possible.

However, when you look at the experience in Canada and a number of other places, where the second language immersion programme, in the Canadian context, starts at kindergarten or senior kindergarten - which would be 5 year old. Children would go into junior kindergarten at age 4 which would be the equivalent of P1 here. That would be a two hour programme. Senior kindergarten is half a day usually. And senior kindergarten is totally through French. But for most children – for maybe 98% of children – that's the first experience they have of French. So, they haven't had pre-school provision. So, the research data that comes from the Canadian context is based on a situation where children start their exposure to French at age 5 or so. So, these are the results that they get on that basis. Now, if children were starting earlier, would they get better results? Probably. The more exposure, the more you can build in a rich foundation, the better. But, is it absolutely necessary in order that children be successful within a programme? The research doesn't support that.

In fact, what a lot of people don't know about the Canadian situation is that there is not just early immersion going on there. There is also what they call middle

immersion and late immersion. Middle immersion would start off with children aged 10 or 11 where they might have had maybe one year of what they call 'core French' or half an hour a day of French taught as a subject and they go into what would either be an 80% French programme or 50% French programme and have that over 3 or 4 years until they go into high school and then the percentage may go down a little bit. And those programmes have also been very successful. And late immersion programmes starting at secondary school have been successful also. Again, at the late immersion level you've got a self-selection factor happening – children who are going in at that level can make their own choices. They may be influenced by parents. But students have to agree that they want to go into this very intensive programme. So, you've got motivation built in there at that level. But, we find exactly the same pattern of results in late immersion. Children pick up French much better than they had done when it's being taught just as a second language. And, again, there are no costs in terms of English. There's a short-term cost over, maybe, a year or so in content areas because, if you got 80% of your time through French in Grade 7 (that's P9) and children have minimal knowledge of that language when they start, they're probably not going to learn as much history or geography as they would if it's in English. But, by the next year, they've caught up. So, the costs in terms of content are fairly short-term.

So, what I'm trying to say here is that, when we look at the age factor, obviously the earlier we can start the better for the simple reason that if we start early we've got more time in the language. But, there isn't any age that's sacrosanct in terms of any kind of radical cut-off in terms of 'after this you can't learn a language'.

In fact, it's interesting to look at some of the influences that were happening when the French immersion programmes in Canada started off because one of the people who was very influential was a person called Wilbur Penfield. He was a neuro-surgeon or neuro-psychologist who did work on things like epilepsy. He hit the headlines because he had shown that, if you poke peoples' brains in the right way with electrodes, that people who'd lost knowledge of languages that they might have known as infants – let's say somebody from Poland had emigrated to Montreal at age 2 or 3 and they'd been immersed in a French or English background and Polish hadn't been continued and they'd lost all of their fluency in Polish – conciously they had no knowledge of Polish. When he went in and stimulated the language area with electrodes, you would find these people would speak in a baby Polish. So, the language was still there. So, languages acquired young still have neurological traces and can be reactivated. And the same has been found through deep hypnosis which can generate the same kinds of regeneration of languages that have been lost.

So, Penfield was somebody fairly prominent and he'd spent some time in India and had observed his children being taken care of by an Indian nanny who spoke the local language. And the children had picked up the local language from the nanny, seemingly painlessly and fairly rapidly.

He wrote a little book on bilingualism and he formulated two principles, one of which was *the mother's method* – that the best way to learn a language is, essentially, by mimicking what happens when we're on our mother's knee - when it's direct communication, when we're not teaching the language formally but we're just using the language to talk about things that matter. And I think that has held up very well in terms of subsequent research.

What has not held up nearly as well is his formulation of the *optimal age* idea. Basically, he said that after age 12 ‘forget it as far as language learning is concerned’. Our brains become rigid, the flexibility or the plasticity we’ve got before that age is gone and we can’t really acquire native-like skills in the second language. The only area where that is probably true is in terms of accent or picking up the native second language accent.

The main advantage of starting early is extra time and the reason for that is that older children are more cognitively mature - they’ve got more grey matter between their ears – and, obviously, learning a language is an intellectual process as much as it’s an auditory or other process. So, there are certainly advantages from a phonological point of view in starting roughly before puberty. But, children, individuals, adults of children who are in an intensive language-learning situation can pick up a fairly high degree of fluency in the language if they’re motivated enough and if the situation is appropriate.

So, going back to the whole pre-school provision, it’s important if we can do it; the earlier we can do it the better; the more intensively we can do it the better. But not having access to pre-school provision in Irish isn’t something that the research would say should bar children from participating in a gaelscoil or an Irish-medium programme.

Other issues that I mentioned just briefly are special education or special needs issues. There’s been quite a bit of research on this - not necessarily conclusive research – but it’s been a concern in many contexts in Canada – Are French immersion programmes appropriate for all children? Should we try and set up some kind of screening mechanism so that children who are not going to succeed can be screened out? What happens if a child does develop a learning problem within the programme? Should we ship him off to the English programme or try and work with him within the immersion programme? We’ve got answers to some of those questions, but certainly not all of them. But, what we do know is that usually there hasn’t been a lot of focus in the training of psychologists, speech and language pathologists or home healthcare workers about these issues. So, you often have conventional wisdoms or prejudices or assumptions that operate and that are communicated to parents as though they were based on research. The same applies to the medical profession. There is absolutely no background in relation to language development issues in most faculties of medicine and yet doctors will often advise parents not to put a child into a second-language programme or, if a child is speaking a language other than English at home, to stop using that. So, we’ve got a lot of ignorance out there about these issues and we will certainly talk about them.

If you look at the second handout sheet, the first point that I make is the need to communicate the research basis that’s out there to families so that they know what there is a sound research basis on. There is obviously a lot of issues – more specific issues – that need to be discussed, that we don’t have necessarily clear answers. But, there is a pretty strong core basis in research that we can communicate.

The second point is that learning difficulties are not caused by or exacerbated by bilingual upbringing in the home or by attending an Irish-medium school. That can be stated as a blanket statement.

The third issue that has come up in most situations that I am familiar with - where children are learning a language not only from their teachers but they are learning a language also from learners. They're hearing the language from other children in the classroom and children are learning the second language in a way that is very much influenced by their mother tongues and by the dominant language viz English. And so you often get a classroom dialect of the language where you get some kinds of errors that become fossilised, that become ingrained and, by the time the child is 10 or 11 years old, it is very difficult to eradicate these errors. There is no clear way of eradicating this. Researchers have looked at some programmes or tried some interventions to try to deal with this, usually gaining some short-term success, not necessarily long-term success. Again, this is an issue that merits quite a bit of discussion and brainstorming in terms of what options do we have for dealing with the issue. Obviously, if we had a pool of native speakers where the language was intact and could act as models, that would be great. But, as the gaelscoileanna expand there are more and more children who are learning the language as a second language. So the issue of the quality of the language the children are gaining becomes one, I think, that is out there as you know better than I do.

The fourth point that I've mentioned here is when it comes to academic English skills children can often pick up English reading spontaneously. But, I think we need to be concerned about children who may not be picking it up spontaneously. If they're not picking it up, we need to ask why. We need to discuss the issue of what kind of support should the school give for children to make that transfer to English because what Canadian research suggests is that, once that transfer takes place to English and children start reading in English, there's a backwash or back-transfer to Irish. And so the fluency in English reading that children have has pay-off in terms of children bringing some of those same strategies to reading in Irish. So, it's a two-way reinforcement that takes place and, again, as I have mentioned, in most of the Canadian contexts, this has been left to itself - with the idea that we certainly don't want to bring English in too early, we don't want to mix the languages in any way. So, the English has been separated away from French and some of the potential benefits that might accrue from spending some time looking at linkages or encouraging children to take an analytic orientation towards the languages where we encourage them to compare and contrast their languages and become more aware of language - that's not being picked up on at all and yet I'm throwing it out as an issue where there is obviously pros and cons for this and there's no clear answer from research.

So, I'll stop there, having thrown out a few issues and see where you want to take it in terms of those issues or any other issues that you want to bring up.

Participant 1 (P1) From personal experience I accept point 2 (on the handout) that learning difficulties are not caused or exacerbated by a bilingual upbringing. My query would be: Can they be appropriately addressed in a bilingual immersion context given one of the points you made about the ignorance and lack of suitable training of key personnel.

Jim Cummins (JC) I think that's obviously a key issue from a parents' point of view - if it's my child what decision am I going to make? And it's an issue for which you could have formulated exactly the same question in relation to the Canadian context where, even though there hasn't been the same shortage of teachers that has been experienced by some in some gaelscoil contexts because there's a pool of teachers available in Quebec that can be exported across the country, there certainly has been a shortage in terms of special needs' teachers, or bilingual psychologists who are working with special needs' children. There has been a shortage of assessment instruments that would be appropriate for children in immersion programmes. So, all of those issues have been there. If one were to take a bird's eye view, you'd find different provisions. In some cases the school district has made a commitment that they are going to try and address some of those difficulties within the programme. In other cases, the difficulties would be addressed in English rather than in French. In other cases, they are not addressed at all - the child just goes into the English programme as the 'safest' method. What the research in the Canadian context seems to show is that, when children go into the English programme, their learning difficulty doesn't disappear. It just manifests itself in one language rather than two.

There may be damage to children's self-esteem if they're branded as a failure - that they couldn't make it in the immersion programme. They may also be damaged if parents insist that the child is going to stay in the immersion programme even though the child is not having a good time there, the child is not getting along with other children, the child hates the teacher. If you've got that sort of situation there is probably not a strong rationale for keeping the child in the programme. The major group of children that do transfer out of the programme are children with behavioural difficulties. And you can see why that's the case - teachers are anxious to get them out and they're probably not going to survive.

P1 I was troubled with this from the point of view of advising parents in the past. This was not about what I preferred as somebody who is investing into the Irish-medium scene. So, they will say: 'you are the converted; you're going to say this; you're going to say that.' So, personally I come down on the line that, if I have some confidence in the psychologist - that has not always been the case, given the reasons that you intimated earlier - but if I have some confidence in the particular psychologist - then, if they're telling me, as a principal, that these particular difficulties evolve around an innate linguistic problem - if there's such a thing - then I would feel, in terms of addressing that currently, to be fair to the child ultimately in terms of their development of life skills, that perhaps the best advice is that, on the basis of an innate linguistic difficulty, that this child should operate through one language.

JC It really depends because you've got to raise questions about how does that psychologist make that diagnosis because the psychologist will typically, and speaking from experience because that's my own background training, but psychologists will generally give an IQ test - usually the Western Intelligence Scale for children which has a verbal component and a non-verbal component. Now, if you've got a child whose education has been through Irish, and it hasn't been reading in English up to this point and if the child is having a learning difficulty, that's probably the case. Where the child's vocabulary in English hasn't expanded in the

same way that it would if the child had been in an English-medium school and had been reading, that doesn't mean that there is an intrinsic difficulty. So, you've got a situation where the verbal scales of these tests have got to be looked at very sceptically because the assumptions underlying the test have not been met. Now, the non-verbal measures may be much more accurate. But, 75% of children could get diagnosed as having a learning disability of some kind have problems in the verbal sphere rather than in the non-verbal sphere.

So, basically, I think, as you're saying, it comes down to the sensitivity of the psychologist – are they taking account of the child's experience? Is the child's coming from an Irish-medium home? Again, that's another variable that may be going on here. What the child's language in the home is - is the child manifesting any problems linguistically in the home also whether it's in English or Irish? All of those things are going to go into making a decision. And I think I certainly agree with you that, if the child is having some serious difficulty that is affecting the child's self-esteem, then serious consideration should be given to what is the best medium for the child is.

But, you've got to take account of a lot of factors there. The child may have good friends in the school. The child may be getting along very well in the school. And some children have developed mental delays that are just that – delays – they're just about developing a little more slowly and it's problematic to leap to judgement and say that there's some kind of intrinsic difficulty here. Our ability to make those decisions is very inadequate.

So, to sum up, each situation is unique and I think a lot of considerations need to be taken account of. If I were in the situation either as a parent or as a teacher or as a psychologist, a major consideration for me would be the affective dimensions of the child's situation – Is the child unhappy in the programme? Is the child having really serious difficulties that are affecting self-esteem? What attempts have been made within the programme to address the child's difficulty? If the child has difficulty learning decoding skills, can we find some resource person or some help for the child to work directly with him or her on those difficulties? That's going to give us a much better sense, if we can provide that intervention before the child gets formally assessed. If the child doesn't make any progress within that sort of direct teaching medium then that's a sign that there's probably something more problematic there. But moving the child from the Irish-medium school to the English-medium school isn't going to solve the problem but it may reduce the complexity of it.

P1 It may improve the quality of the services available to correct it if they're focusing on a one language front and, at the end of the day, if we want it. But this child has to go out there and live in the real world. So, if we're putting that at risk, then I think that's a big question. It's a subjective call at the moment - this is the problem

JC As I said, those are all the considerations that have to be taken into account. We can say some things fairly clearly, but each situation has got to be viewed in its unique aspects.

P2 The danger with that, though - moving into an English-speaking school - is that the teachers that are actually currently working there have no understanding of what the child has come through. So, it can actually be compounded. This has happened in our own school. We've had pupils and there's no library books; there's no one understands or is sympathetic to the children. They're not even interested in finding out more because they're too busy with the current curriculum that they're dealing with. And there is no Board support or no one in the Board that I've come across that can give teachers the advice needed to help the children who are coming from an immersion school into a mainstream English-speaking school.

JC Again, that's part of the consideration too. If we're making a decision to move the child or not will the provision in the English-medium school be more adequate or not? And it's not necessarily clear that it will be more adequate, as you say. As I said, it's hard to make generalisations because we're talking about individual children's lives. But, we should certainly be sceptical of the mindless assumptions that very often get made because the research shows that those are exactly that – mindless assumptions.

P3 In view of the multitude of assessment programmes we have today is there some positive way we could approach this by looking at some way of testing the underlying proficiency that you talked about earlier, of getting to grips with what are those underlying concepts that are required in order to progress. Is there some global assessment we could use that would cross languages to do that?

JC There's a test that I was involved in helping to develop called *The Bilingual Verbal Abilities Test* (BVAT). It's something that probably could be easily adapted for an Irish situation. The basic idea behind this test is to try and get a better sense of what the totality of the child's conceptual apparatus is in terms of language. You have a similar situation in many North American contexts that are very multi-ethnic, where you've got children who are learning English as a second language and, if they encounter learning difficulties, how do we know if that's a genuine intrinsic learning problem or just a normal process of catching up.

There is a lot of research suggesting that, even though children may acquire decoding skills fairly quickly, it takes usually at least five years for children to catch up in terms of broader aspects of language proficiency e.g. reading, comprehension, writing abilities etc. So, how do we diagnose if a child does have a difficulty? For those five years typical verbal tests will underestimate children's ability. So, the BVAT takes three of the sub-tests of one of the IQ batteries that are out there – the Woodcock-Johnson Battery. It includes:

- a picture vocabulary test
- an oral vocabulary measure that deals with synonyms and antonyms and
- a verbal analogies measure.

These are all fairly standard kinds of things that you'll find on verbal IQ measures. And, we've adapted those three measures for about twenty different languages. The procedure is that the child gets the test in English first. But any item that the child misses we go back to in the child's first language, or in the other language, to see if the child has that concept in that language. So, if a child has had his or her first two or three years of schooling in Irish, there's going to be some concepts that they've learned at school that they have in Irish but that they haven't necessarily got in

English yet but it just hasn't transferred up to this point. So, there's potentially some increment that could come from looking at both sides of the coin. And, the child's score is the totality of what they get right – in other words, what they did in English plus the increment that comes from items that the child knew in the second language but not in English. I think it's a useful tool. But, it's just that. It's not a solution. It's a tool that can help the diagnostic process.

The approach that I would see taking or trying to work towards in terms of this kind of situation is, if a child is having difficulty/if the child is not making the kind of progress that we would anticipate e.g. picking up reading or whatever the problem might be, that should trigger an initial stage where the teacher tries to make adjustments within the classroom. And teachers will tend to do this automatically. But, I'm suggesting we do it a little more formally where the teacher makes a note of things that she/he has done. For example, one of the strategies that can work very well in helping children to pick up reading skills or develop their reading skills is bring books home to read with the parents. And, even if the books are in Irish and the parents don't know Irish, the children can read the books in Irish, explain what it means in English to the parents and talk about the book, talk about the story. There was research done about twenty years ago in England that showed that this is a very powerful strategy, much more powerful in fact than just providing excellent reading instructions to children in terms of helping children to acquire reading skills. We might try something like that.

Or if the child is having difficulty picking up the phonics rules for reading in Irish, then let's see if we can work a little more with the child or put a little more emphasis on this for the child. So, we try various adjustments within the classroom. We take a note of what the child is having difficulty with, what the child can do well, what his/her interests are, what doesn't seem to interest them. We talk to the parents about it; we see what parents might be able to do at home. We do the kinds of things we would do naturally.

Now, if the child still doesn't make progress with those kinds of classroom interventions, the next step, ideally, would be to refer the child – not refer the child directly for special needs' assessment – but refer the child in the sense of saying: 'We've got a child here who needs help' and ideally this should trigger a resource person of some kind – a reading specialist, or somebody else within the school system who we can call on, who would work either individually with the child or on a small group basis. We try to work towards as ideal a learning environment as possible where this person would build on the observations of the teacher so that we're not starting from scratch. And we try to intervene directly in helping the child to gain the concepts or gain the skills that he/she doesn't have. This is also an observation process because we're not just intervening – we're also observing how the child reacts to the intervention.

If the child still doesn't make progress with that kind of direct intervention, then I think we're in a much better situation to say that there's more than just a language-learning problem going on here. This child probably has something more serious, whether it's some kind of intrinsic difficulty, or something like dyslexia which is a very rare condition. But, if the child doesn't make progress with that kind of intervention over, maybe, a couple of months, then I think we can feel much more

confident having the child assessed in a more formal way and discussing the child's situation on the basis of that assessment. But, that intermediate intervention stage, I think, is a much more reliable way than any test that's out there in terms of getting a sense of what the nature of the child's difficulty is.

Now, where we find the funds to do that is going to vary from one situation to another. And often, certainly in North America, special education has become so legalistic and so formalised, and there have been so many cutbacks to school systems, that it's really hard to find the funds for those resource teachers who might work with children. This could be reading recovery, for example, that may have if the school system has access to that.

So, that's the kind of model that I would try to work towards. And so, within a gaelscoil, working with a child in Irish on the difficulties he/she has before any kind of formal assessment or before pathology type of thinking takes place, I think would be a very important step to try to work towards, if we can.

P3 You talked about a 50/50 style. How does that work? I'm thinking about KS2, trying to catch up on English teaching. Is that one day about?

JC There's a number of variations. The most common one is probably morning/afternoon split. Sometimes schools will do this because they have trouble finding qualified Spanish-speaking teachers. So, the same teacher can service two classrooms if you've got this kind of split. So, the teacher might teach Class A in the morning and Class B in the afternoon. Then an English-speaking teacher would take the other halves of those classes. It's a very viable model in that context.

There's one very successful school in Washington DC called the Oyster Bilingual School whose test scores are just off the roof in terms of how well children are doing in English as well as in Spanish. In this school they've enlarged the class size, they've put all their resources into classroom teachers. So, they don't have substitute teachers; they don't have resource teachers; they've cut down on administration and tried to be very creative. So they might have 35+ children in each class. But, they'll have two teachers – one a Spanish speaker, one an English teacher – in each class. So, they try to have linguistic equality here. And children come from a variety of different social classes and backgrounds. But, it's extremely successful both in developing Spanish language skills as well as English academic skills.

So, there isn't just one model that is **the** correct model. The situation will vary from one context to another. If we're talking about reviving a language that is in danger, that isn't reinforced very much in the home like, for example, most cases in Irish, then you probably, ideally, want to look at something more intensive than that. But, if the programme were to expand, and we have a real shortage of teachers, and we want to attract some additional families who may be concerned about going the whole immersion route, then this is an option certainly worth considering and it may appeal to some parents who might be concerned about a stronger programme. I think we should be open to options and talk about pros and cons. But that is one option. The findings essentially say that children don't develop quite as strong Spanish skills as they do in the more complete immersion programme but they do pretty well. They're certainly fluent in the language; they can read the language; they can write the

language. A lot will depend on what they do after the primary school. So, if you were to take a child who has gone through a 90/10 programme, as they call it in America – it's a more full immersion programme that will have most of the initial instruction through Spanish - and then, by Grade 3, work towards, maybe a 50/50 type programme from Grades 3-6, compare that with a 50/50 programme K- 6 (Kindergarten to 6), you will find a difference at Grade 6 in terms of Spanish. But, three years later, if these children are in the same programme at the secondary level, probably the differences will be minimal. So, it's a viable model, certainly, in some contexts. And, as I said, even weaker options are going to do better than just teaching the language as a subject. Just having one subject taught through the language will get you a lot more in terms of outcomes than just teaching the language as a subject.

P4 Did you say, in the Canadian model, that English wasn't actually introduced till the age of ten?

JC There's 3 different kinds of model in Canada. By far the most common one is what is called Early Immersion starting in kindergarten at age five.

P4 Sorry, I actually thought you said something about that, when they're in Early Immersion that was in French, that English teaching or English language teaching wasn't introduced till ten. Do you mean that you didn't start teaching them grammar and spelling in English till ten.

JC The original model starting in Grade 2 where children would have been just seven or eight – the equivalent of P4 here – but it really is introduced a year later over there than it is here. So, you've got English being introduced sometimes in Grade 2, sometimes in Grade 3, sometimes in Grade 4. In Grade 4 children are ten years old. That's in the school my children have gone to. That's the model. I have some concerns about it because, if you've got a child who may have some difficulties and who isn't spontaneously transferring reading skills from Irish to English (now, as I said, the vast majority of them do this within the Grade 1 year. So, by the time they've finished that Grade 1 year they're reading in both languages and often reading much more fluently in English.) But if that's not happening and we don't know about it – you know, parents think this is normal, the child's doing o.k. in school, the child's reading in French. The child may be decoding in French but not have transferred it. I would have real concerns about the child who hasn't started to get into book reading extensively in any language until he/she is ten years old because extensive reading is a core variable in terms of academic development.

Within the Canadian context I think there is an argument to be made for checking up on whether the child is making that transfer process to English. It might be that, say in May or June of the Grade 1 year, we spend a little bit of time in English and check with the parents whether the children are reading. Maybe we could work a little bit with children who are not making that transfer to help them make that transfer.

If we tend to take an either/or view of it - if they get into English in that school it will some way cut back on Irish. The research is saying the opposite - that there's positive transfer both ways. And so I think English is not the enemy. It's obviously essential for children to develop then. The programme would harm its credibility if children were not developing as well in English as children who are in all-English

programmes. And the research suggests that they do. But, I think we've got to monitor this, not take it for granted. If we're talking about English writing development, particularly in a context where there's high stakes assessment in English that children are going to be facing, I think we've got to be very serious and explicit in terms of working for transfer across languages, helping children get the rules of the game in terms of writing in English, providing authentic contexts where it makes it possible for them to write in English, using ICT in creative ways to support that process. And ideally – again this is my bias, this is not based on formal research – I would see a role for spending some time - it may be a particular period during the week, it may be Friday afternoons, or it could be a period at some time during the day – where we consciously work to promote that language transfer and help children develop that analytic orientation to languages. The research say it tends to happen spontaneously and tends to become a more positive thing, children become more aware of how language works. Well, if we were to give it a little bit of a push, I don't see any harm in that personally. But the biases that are out there – again very much in the Canadian context/in the American context – that we've got to keep the two languages totally separate and we can't let one interfere with the other, I think it's worth rethinking that – not necessarily rethinking it but revisiting it and looking at some of the possible options that we might have.

(Working from computer/overhead) Let me just show you something that illustrates what I'm talking about here. I've mentioned a couple of times the whole affective sphere in terms of language learning, the children taking ownership of it and feeling proud that they speak two languages. I feel that we may not exploit that or promote that nearly as much as we might because we're caught up with the academics. There was a school that some colleagues of mine and I worked in or worked with over the last few years – it's a very multi-ethnic school, a lot of children coming from all kinds of different language backgrounds – and the project was basically an action research type project where we sat around the table and we brainstormed about options for helping the school and the community get closer together and how we could build on what children were bringing in from their home communities.

One of the things that we looked at was a book that Viv Edwards, who is a researcher in Reading in England – he's done a lot of work on multiculturalism, on language learning, on reading which is his speciality, dialect issues. She was involved in projects that involved the development of dual language books – books, say, in Basque and Spanish, or Irish and English I think was one of the languages involved and developing a computer programme that would facilitate children doing that. She had written a book called '*The Power of Babel*' – you know the Tower of Babel – getting across the point that linguistic diversity can be an advantage if we build on it in the classroom.

And one of the things that we have quite a bit in England is books in two languages e.g. Urdu and English. So, the school ordered some of these books and they also went along to their local library to check out some of these books to use as models. And then people realised there's only a limited number of books here. Why don't we do this for ourselves? So, the pupils in Grade 1 – these are seven year-old children – all or most of whom were learning English as a second language and, at this stage, were probably conversationally quite fluent in English, they started to make their own dual language books. Basically, the procedure was that they would write the stories in

English initially – that was the language of instruction in the class. There was about forty different languages in this particular primary school. Then they would work with either older siblings or parents, or possibly somebody in the school who spoke their first language, to develop first language versions of these stories. They would illustrate them and then the teacher would scan these into the computer so that the illustrations and the text were in the computer. And once they are in the computer you can do a lot of things with them – you can print out multiple copies, you can have a copy for the child himself/herself, one for the parents, one for the classroom library.

Down the side here you have the different languages the children have written stories in, ranging from Arabic to Urdu, Vietnamese to Galog etc. So, you click on one of these, Russian for example, and you'll get maybe one or two stories that children from Russian-speaking backgrounds have written. There was one Russian boy wrote this story about some space alien and was so proud of it that he sent it home to his grandmother in Russia. So, this was done by very young children. The kind of stories that you get are something like this – this is one in Korean and English. It goes: One sunny day a girl bought an ice-cream cone from the market', and it goes on to talk about how, on her way back home, she met a dog, and the dog's name was Rover, and Rover wanted some of the ice-cream. So, she taught Rover how to do a trick, and Rover sat up and begged, and then she gave him some of the ice-cream – a very small charming little story, very coherent, beautifully illustrated. But, this is up there for the world to see. And, in terms of the impact this has on children's self-esteem, on their sense that they can be writers, on the pride that they have in being literate in two languages, I think there's wonderful opportunities to use ICT in creative ways to enhance both the affective and the academic aspects of literacy development.

Now, obviously, we can do this in Irish. There's some wonderful programmes out there I saw yesterday (thanks to Gabrielle) – the slideshow programmes and presentation programmes that have been developed that are available for schools where children can do this. We can scan this stuff into the computer and children can make presentations of the stories in class; we can put them up on websites. And we can do it in Irish, or we can do it in English, or we can do it in both. And I think there is potential advantages to doing both. Even though we may be spending only a minimum amount of time teaching English in the early years, we can have children do this.

So, what you've got here is anybody, anybody here in Belfast, anybody in the Philippines - grandparents in the Philippines can go into the website and download the children's story. Now, that's power and parents communicate this pride to children. So, I think if we start thinking about what literacy really means, and what it takes to get children to read more and to write more – ideally in both languages – then I think there are some very creative possibilities that will emerge. You could have, for example, a project like this that could link up Scottish-medium schools in Scotland with Irish-medium schools in Ireland on doing projects like this where students will probably be able to read or make out the stories in the other language. This is challenging them in terms of looking at similarities and differences between languages.

There is no correct, single model here but the issue is that we go beyond the amount of time that we spend in each language - what we want children to be able to do from a literacy point of view and how can we stimulate that. Should we build opportunities

into the programme, or work with parents for them to do some of this so that the two languages reinforce each other in interesting ways?

P5 Can I just ask your opinion on initial literacy in the second language. You talked earlier about motherese, oral motherese. Should the children be exposed to the complexities of the second language in the written form of motherese. One commentator said that the success of immersion education is that they are exposed to the second language in its entirety. So, should there be a written form of motherese? Should the children be exposed to the complete complexities of the second language at a very early stage or should it be a gradual process?

JC Well, there's always going to be a gradual process because children can only process limited amounts of the second language. When we're introducing reading in English, for example, in an English-medium school, we don't start off with big long words. We start off with familiar words and very familiar stories that the children will have. There's quite a bit of research on this that, I think, is worth emphasising. A lot of people, before immersion programmes came along, before they were researched, felt that it was axiomatic – in fact UNESCO, back in 1953, came up with the statement that it's axiomatic that children should be taught to read in their mother tongue. So this was an argument in the case of children from minority language backgrounds – we should be providing some mother-tongue instruction for them. But, it's much more complicated than that because, according to the research, children can acquire reading abilities through a second language. So, a child in a school like this – in an ESL (English as a second language) context – they can acquire reading skills in English where they acquire awareness initially of the sound system of the language, where they acquire phonological awareness, where the phonics rules would be introduced and expose them to a rich environment of the language with books that they can relate to. But, we're using words that are high-familiar words, words that children will have acquired at this stage. We're not exposing them to the total complexity of the language. And children, under appropriate instruction, can acquire good decoding skills in the second language under these conditions.

Now, the fact that they can decode the language doesn't mean their language proficiency is necessarily well developed in a broader sense. And, if we look at the catch-up period for children in French immersion programmes in Canada, we're usually looking at the end of primary school before children have caught up to native speakers in terms of reading skills and comprehension skills. They never catch up in terms of productive skills – speaking and writing – there's problems of accuracy in their speaking and also in their writing. It's accepted they take that amount of time to catch up. But, they've caught up much sooner when it comes to just decoding. So, by Grade 1 and Grade 2 there are very few differences in basic decoding skills between native speakers and second language learners. So, what I am saying here is that you can learn to read effectively through a second language when it comes to decoding. But, in order for strong reading comprehension abilities to develop we have to flood children with a rich linguistic environment, a rich literary environment, really work on motivation to read both in school and outside of school. And obviously that's a lot easier to do in English where there's a much wider and richer array of children's literature than there may be in Irish or, in the Canadian context, in French. So, I think we need to brainstorm about how we can increase or sustain that reading comprehension process through the primary school.

When we're talking about initial reading comprehension what generally happened in any language, regardless of the language structure, is that you start off with what children know in their oral language. So, we'll start off in books with the language that children are likely to hear; we'll use high-frequency words. We'll obviously use some inflections that are used in common day language. And then, the way children will expand their knowledge of those is both through hearing them in speech as well as reading. But, we do it in a gradual way.

P5 But we have already admitted that there are problems with these children struggling with the second language. And the majority of teachers are also struggling with the second language as well as being users of the second language. So, therefore, in our efforts to bring native proficiency ...

JC Again, I think it's a kind of specific linguistic issue that the people in this context need to sit around and talk about – 'What has our experience been?' 'What range of options are out there that we're trying right now?' 'Which one seems to work best?' 'What schools are getting the best results?' And it's that kind of insight research - informal research where, as teachers, we're building on our experience – that I think is essential because we can say certain kinds of things from the broad international research, and we can put to rest some of the misconceptions that are out there on the part of, maybe, some parents, some teachers, some other people. But, there's always going to be very specific issues that have got to be answered within each situation. And I think this is probably one of them.

And obviously it relates to the other issue we talked about in terms of how do we work with children to get a stronger, more accurate variety of the language internalised at an early age. And again, on that point, what I would see as being a strategy that might make sense to pursue is for educators who are working in this context, or maybe collaborating with educators working in gael scoileanna down south, to get a sense of what are the most common errors that children make, what kinds of things come up over and over again, that we know, when children near the end of primary school, despite our attempts to eradicate these, that they are still making these errors. Can we intervene fairly early to really put a lot of stress on these structures so that, before they become internalised and ingrained, children get the correct forms of these and we work on them at that very early stage? I'm sure, probably, this has been done informally but that kind of focus on typical problems or typical interference issues at a very early stage, I think, certainly should be tried and worked on, not just orally but also in written form. In written form children can see it. So, the more media you can use – if you can use a multi-media approach – where they see it, they hear it, they become aware of it consciously at an early age. I think there may be some opportunities for avoiding some of the common problems that children encounter.