

Lecture: Squaring the circle: Supporting bilingual children with SEN - what do we know, and what do we need to know?

## Introduction

Good morning Bore da!

It's a great privilege for me to be here at the launch of your report into provision for children with SEN in Irish Medium Education. And it's particularly a delight for me to be back here in Dublin where I spent nearly 10 years up the road in St Patrick's College- five of them as Director of Special Education. The issues around bilingualism and SEN have been under-researched for years not just here in Ireland, but across the world, and lack of knowledge has led to the advice being given to parents and the provision being made for children being based on hearsay and speculation and, sometimes, prejudice. So it's wonderful to see that at last there is beginning to be research, which will enable us to make provision founded on evidence; and just as importantly enable parents to make informed choices about the education of their children with SEN, even if in some instances those choices remain extremely painful.

I've called this presentation 'squaring the circle' as a way of acknowledging the difficulties which are at least perceived to be present in making provision for bilingual children with SEN.

At least part of the problem is finding a clear way of talking about the issues - for example supporting bilingual children with SEN is not the whole story, - we also, need to be concerned with supporting children with SEN to become bilingual and of course supporting teachers to work with children with SEN in bilingual environments.

## Context

And we have to acknowledge that all this is taking place in a context which is greatly changed from of a couple of decades ago.

Two strong themes which have emerged within education in recent years are inclusivity- educating together children with a diversity of needs and backgrounds, and sustaining and celebrating of minority cultures and languages, particularly what are sometimes called heritage languages, that is languages such as Irish or Welsh, which are indigenous, old but are currently spoken fluently/ as the language of choice by only a minority of the population in the country. I suspect that many of you like me, believe strongly in both inclusivity and the maintenance of heritage languages and cultures, and see education as having a critical role to play in the promotion of both sets of values.

In this keynote address, I want to propose that the reality is much more complicated than that simple statement implies. Because the issues are complicated, I think it's helpful to look at the current contexts for SEN and bilingual education separately first.

### SEN Context

Inclusion is not the only strong theme in the field of SEN at present, there is also a strong drive towards specialist provision for children with different sorts of needs- witness, for example the growth in provision for pupils with Autistic Spectrum Disorders in this country during since the end of the 1990s with the number of special classes for pupils with ASD having risen dramatically over the past decade from 90 in 2000 to 419 in November last year- and in terms of teachers' professional development the development of a range of specialised courses for teachers working with these pupils.. there are at least two courses in this country through which teachers can acquire in depth specialist knowledge on ASD at certificate, diploma or masters level; not to mention a range of on-line modules and short-courses. It's similar for specific learning difficulties/ dyslexia. In the UK, there are rumblings about the suitability of the national curriculum for pupils with moderate, severe and profound general learning disabilities, with a number of schools developing and publishing their own more specialised curricula, and there is also work on assessment methods, with an ongoing dispute over whether assessments which try and relate the progress of the children with the most severe difficulties to the National Curriculum are actually measuring what matters most for these children, or indeed are capable of showing meaningful progress at all. Of course these developments may partly driven by advances in research. Cognitive neuroscience may be able to help us tailor teaching more exactly to the needs of individual pupils and groups; but it's worth reflecting that, to date, there is at least as much evidence to suggest that there are core principles of good teaching which can be applied across the board, as there is evidence for specialist pedagogies linked to specific types of SEN- but that doesn't alter the fact that there's a potential tension between inclusion and making appropriate specialised provision tailored to individual children's needs. As Norwich has pointed out, we often hold values which are in tension with each other, (he cites equality and making special provision for individual needs) and experience conflict when we cannot satisfy one value without to some extent compromising another. Examples of conflicts or tensions of this type in relation to learners with SEN and minority languages and cultures abound, and some parents talk of heart-rending decisions about the educational choices they have felt they have had to make.

### Bilingualism context

The picture with regard to bilingual education is also extremely complex. This complexity and the issues it gives rise to in Wales is well- described in the work of one of my colleagues at Bangor, Gwyn Lewis. This is not the time to go into that work in depth, suffice to say that Lewis details the way in which the make-up of Welsh medium schools has changed over the past 40 years. Forty years ago, Welsh medium schools provided for children whose first

language was Welsh and could be classified as providing heritage language maintenance education. By now, however, many Welsh medium schools in Wales are providing within the same classroom for children from Welsh speaking homes, children from English speaking homes for whom it is immersion education and children from outside both England and Wales whose first language is neither Welsh, nor English. The work of Tina Hickey in Ireland suggests that a similar situation exists in many Irish Medium schools.

Another important part of the context is teachers' attitudes, and feelings of confidence and competence. Many teachers regard both inclusion alone, and bilingual education alone as significant challenges for which their training has not prepared them.

With regard to inclusion, our own recent research looking at curriculum access for young children with SEN in mainstream classrooms here in Ireland, found teachers in primary schools lacked confidence about providing for pupils with SEN and many of them said that they had had little or no preparation for teaching children with SEN during pre-service education,

This is strikingly similar to the findings in your own report about teachers in Irish Medium Education.

With regard to the education of bilingual children Lewis (2008) offers evidence that there is, to date, little research on how best to support teachers and children in the complex bilingual classrooms of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It's not surprising then, that for some teachers, bilingual education for children with SEN seems to present a challenge which is almost insurmountable.

What do we know?

There is as your own report makes clear little substantive published research or writing about the interface between special educational needs and the role of education in giving children access to their cultural and linguistic heritage. There is particularly little research about children with SEN who are sequential bilinguals - which would of course include children in immersion education.

But actually, if we are prepared to look worldwide there is more research than we think- in at least some areas. It's not, in general, research which gives guidance on teaching methodologies- that is still urgently needed, but there is a growing body of research which demonstrates that children with various types of SEN are NOT disadvantaged in their learning of language by being bilingual.

Kay-Raining Bird both summarises the work of others in regard to simultaneous bilingual children with speech and language impairment, and reports on her own work with colleagues with simultaneous bilingual children with Down's syndrome. In both cases, there is good

evidence that simultaneous bilingualism is not detrimental to these children's learning of language.

In the light of this evidence, it's particularly sad that professionals so often seem to advise parents that their child with SEN would be 'better off' if they spoke only the language of the majority community to them. Much of this information comes from blogs and internet discussion forums, but there is also some research into the experience of bilingual families with children with SEN. One such example is reported by Kay-Raining Bird, as part of her research (Kay-Raining Bird, 2010) into the experience of French-English bilingual families with children with ASD living in Eastern Canada. One mother reported that, she had followed the advice to use only the language used in school with her son- she now attributed his lack of integration into the local community, lack of friendships and feeling that he was being excluded from his cultural heritage to this policy. Other similar reports come for example from Kremer-Sadlik (2005). Kay-Raining Bird also makes the important and thought-provoking point that when professionals, such as psychologists or speech therapists suggest to parents that they should speak to a child only in a language which is not the language they would naturally use they may well be disrupting the interactions and social relationship between the child and the parent- And there is lots and lots of research demonstrating the critical importance of such interactions in developing communication and socialisation.

But we simply don't know the position with regard to children who are sequential bilinguals- and this is one of the things we most urgently need to know! Many children in Ireland, and Wales and other heritage language countries, are sequential bilinguals, as are many children of immigrant parents. It may turn out that there are some children with SEN for whom immersion education is so much of a struggle that parents need to weigh the decision whether to chose it very carefully, and may reluctantly decide against it- but at present we simply don't have the evidence to help them make that choice.

The good news is quite a lot of work going on at the moment which should help address some of the things we most need to know; there is also work research which is 'just' on bilingual education and research which is 'just' on SEN which is relevant, and there is also research from the EAL field, which traditionally we have seen as separate from bilingual education in language like Ireland and Wales, but which may none the less be helpful.

But we need more, especially on how best to support children with SEN in a variety of types of bilingual education

So what research is there on bilingualism/ bilingual education which we might usefully apply to the education of bilingual children with SEN, or at the very least to help us decide our research priorities?

We do know that the amount and quality of input in both languages is important, and that one issue for immersion education and heritage language education in general is lack of community exposure- although of course this has improved recently- more is still needed.

Since at least the 1990s researchers have been consistently reporting advantages for what are variously called metalinguistic skills or executive functioning. We might describe metalinguistic skills as awareness about language metalinguistic skills which develop earlier in bilingual than monolingual children include, awareness of both words, and grammar. This suggests that there might be an enhanced advantage to being bilingual for children who have difficulties in these areas, such as those with speech and language impairments or those with Down's syndrome. Similarly we might expect the executive functioning advantages which are reported for bilingual children, increases in accuracy and speed on certain types of task to be particularly important for those children most likely to have difficulties in these areas, such as those with Mild GLD. Research being carried out in Bangor at present by Beth Lye should begin to address this issue. Beth is comparing bilingual (Welsh English) and monolingual (English) children with MLD to see in the first instance if the executive functioning advantage for bilinguals holds good for this group. She's also going to compare the executive functioning of bilingual children with MLD with their bilingual peers without difficulties. But whatever Beth finds we need much, much more research in this area- we need to know how to teachers can make use of this information in their teaching. Again, theoretically we might expect that translanguaging too would particularly help children with mild general learning difficulties, but there's no research at all here.-

But some of the research being done by my colleagues Gwyn Lewis and Bryn Jones will be producing teaching materials and sharing best practice, for mainstream classes, which of course include some children with SEN.

Another area where there is a great need for further research is in the area of how to support children with SEN to learn two languages, because many children with SEN need to know two languages- Another piece of research currently under way at Bangor is looking at how best to support young children with Down's syndrome who have English as an additional language as they move into pre-school and school. This research is only in its early stages, but the findings are likely to be applicable - at least to some extent -to children from English speaking homes in immersion education in Wales or Ireland.

Yet another area where there is much need for research is in assessment.

Research is needed both in order to develop appropriate assessment instruments for bilingual children, and into the possible under-reporting of suspected SEN in children in immersion education.

Both these issues emerge as concerns from your own report.

In Wales we do have standardised reading tests in both English and Wales, and we now have the Prawf Geirfa -a vocabulary test which has been normed for children of different language backgrounds- I know my colleague Enlli Thomas will be talking about this work in more detail at your Belfast launch. Also we have 'Routes for Learning' which is a bilingual

assessment for children with profound learning difficulties- I know the Education Research Centre has been working on tests in Irish- which is a very positive development- but as far as I am aware these don't, as yet, contain norms for children from different language backgrounds.

A second assessment issue which is raised in your own report is whether there is under-referral of children from Irish Medium Education for assessment for SEN. By coincidence we have just begun to take our first tentative steps to thinking about this issue, This has come about as a result of the Mild GLD study for which we have had huge difficulty in recruiting participants- It appears that children in Welsh medium primary schools in the Welsh speaking areas of North West Wales are unlikely to be reported as having suspected Mild GLD primary school- and we've been wondering if this is due to the difficulty of assessing a child who is being educated through what for some of them is their second language, and whether it is also a difficulty in other areas of SEN.

### Conclusions

There is evidence that for children with some types of SEN being a simultaneous bilingual is at least not detrimental to their language/ communication development- More research is needed

Especially research on the communication development of children with different types of SEN who are sequential bilinguals- so that parents can make informed choices about their education.

And research which will support teachers in the classroom research which develops and tests teaching methods and materials for use with children with SEN who are bilingual.

Both these areas need to be underpinned by appropriate assessments- which take account of the child's language background, and training for those who carry out the assessments.

The intersection between SEN and bilingualism, especially in regard to 'heritage' language education has been ignored for too long, and too many decisions about children's education have been made on the basis of hearsay and prejudice. We cannot rule out some of what we find out being uncomfortable, and leading to tensions and difficult decisions but that is not a reason for continuing in ignorance.

Dr. Jean Ware.