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The Transition from Primary Languages Programmes to Post-Primary Languages Provision

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THE TRANSITION FROM PRIMARY LANGUAGES PROGRAMMES TO POST-PRIMARY LANGUAGE PROVISION

IAN COLLEN, EUGENE McKENDRY,
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We are exceptional

The Transition from Primary Languages Programmes to Post-Primary Language Provision

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A study funded by the Northern Ireland Languages Council

Ian Collen • Eugene McKendry • Leanne Henderson



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1.0 Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of two months of exploratory research into transition in modern languages from primary languages to post-primary language provision. The aim of this research was to look at current transition arrangements in England and Scotland, where language learning at primary level is statutory, and compare these to the situation in Northern Ireland where primary languages are not currently statutory. In order to avoid history repeating itself, the report looks at the successes and failures of primary languages initiatives in Northern Ireland from the 1960s to the present day. In seeking to find out what is currently happening, Year 8 children who have transferred from primary school to post-primary school are consulted as part of our data collection.

Key Findings

- There is no evidence of successful transition arrangements from primary to post-primary education for modern languages in Northern Ireland;
- Year 8 pupils in the study start their language learning from scratch, even when they have been taught a language at primary level;
- There is great variety in who is delivering primary languages, and the teacher's competence, leading to wide spread variation in pupils' experiences;
- Children perceive languages to have low status at primary school compared to their first year of post-primary education;
- There is appetite amongst head teachers to co-operate within cross-phase Area Learning Communities (ALCs) to develop primary teacher capacity. However, all principals state that conditions need to be right for this to happen; there needs to be adequate time allocation, quality of delivery and it is important that head teachers are afforded the autonomy to drive primary languages in their ALC in a way that they see fit.

Key Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- primary schools are best placed to deliver primary languages with support from neighbouring post-primary schools;
- modern language learning is made statutory at Key Stage 2; a time-limited regional co-ordinating body for implementation is identified;
- the roll-out of primary languages should be phased, starting in Primary 5;
- schools work within their ALC to decide which languages are taught at primary level;
- there is a need for strategic vision and appropriate investment to enable effective collaboration between primary and post-primary schools. An example would be to fund the release of a specialist post-primary teacher to implement the programme;
- language assistants support the specialist teacher of languages to develop capacity in the primary school.

2.0 Context

The non-statutory status of primary modern languages in Northern Ireland means that language learning opportunities offered to primary age children can vary greatly between schools. For many primary schools, lack of resources, both material and human, mean that the inclusion of modern languages on the Key Stage 2 curriculum is not possible without additional support. Language learning is a statutory element of the curriculum at post-primary level and all children are entitled to learn a language for the three years following transition to post-primary school (Key Stage 3). Since there is no minimum recommended teaching time or recommended number of languages to be offered, Key Stage 3 provision can also vary for children attending different schools. Each school has autonomy in which languages are offered and whether the timetable accommodates the learning of more than one language. Post-primary schools have well established modern languages departments and employ specialist teachers to deliver this area of the curriculum.

2.1 Introduction

This exploratory research considers the transition from primary languages programmes to post-primary languages provision in Northern Ireland. The report begins with an overview of the development of the current language learning provision at transition in Northern Ireland and a review of existing research from Britain exploring the challenges of achieving an effective transition for children as they progress to post-primary school.

The primary focus of the research is to engage with transition age children and school principals, to seek their views as key stakeholders in the transition from primary languages programmes to post-primary provision. It is hoped that by accessing and presenting the views of children the research can provide some insight into the experiences of, and challenges faced by, learners who have experienced the transition in language learning. The perspectives of school principals will give an overview of how transition is currently managed and the potential for schools to cooperate in a more meaningful way to maximise the potential for effective transition.

2.2 The Language Learning Landscape in Northern Ireland

In a climate of economic austerity language learning in Northern Ireland has faced a number of challenges across all educational phases in recent years. In 2009 Queen's University Belfast closed its German department (after closing Slavonic Studies, Italian and the Classics). In 2015, funding was withdrawn for two key initiatives which offered support to language learning in schools: the Armagh-based European Studies programme, which linked schools across Europe; and the Primary Modern Languages Programme (PMLP). These were followed by the announcement in September 2015 that Ulster University would close its School of Modern Languages and its Modern Irish courses in UU Belfast. This signalled the end of German degrees in Northern Ireland, and the end of Chinese, French and Spanish at Ulster University. This left Queen's University Belfast as the sole provider of languages degrees, in French, Portuguese and Spanish. Irish continues to be offered at QUB and UU Magee. Furthermore, the proposed increased QUB entry tariffs of ABB at A-level will



inevitably lead to pressure on places and contribute further to the perception that languages are only for the academically able. UK government changes to higher education funding also mean that studying in Britain is financially unviable for some students from Northern Ireland.

Within this climate it is more important than ever that children have the opportunity to access meaningful language learning opportunities during compulsory schooling. If Northern Ireland is to allow children to develop competitive competence in languages and address the decline in languages that has gained momentum over the past decade then it is essential that we work to address the provision of languages, starting in the primary school. Two key aspects of doing this effectively are: to enhance cooperation between primary and post-primary schools; and to manage the language learning transition effectively.

2.3 Primary languages and the Common Curriculum (1989)

The educational system in Northern Ireland was based, and depends, upon the system in force in Britain, which, outside Wales, has had little success in primary languages.

With the international change in attitude towards languages in the primary school

in the 1960s, educators in the UK began to take interest in matters abroad, and a firm effort was made to gather information and experience. UNESCO carried out an international survey and, in 1966, published 'Languages and the Young School Child'. The tone was optimistic:

Although many questions have been raised on methods and materials of teaching languages at the primary level one conclusion has been reached beyond doubt as the result of the last few years: effective teaching of languages to young children is a feasible experiment. (Stern 1969, p27)

In this UNESCO publication, the situation in several countries is discussed. Particular emphasis was placed in Stern upon a British scheme, 'a unique project of considerable scope and of wider than purely national interest' (Stern 1969, p18). This was the Primary French Pilot Scheme, set up in 1963 to investigate the feasibility of teaching French to children in the primary sector. The 1966 Schools Council Working Paper French in the Primary School dealt with the work in progress on the scheme. The project as a whole was closely monitored, but after ten years of monitoring the optimism was dissipated with the publication of the Burstall Report in 1974, which concluded:

Now that the results of the evaluation are finally available, however, it is hard to resist the conclusion that the weight of the evidence has combined with the balance of opinion to tip the scales against the possible expansion of the teaching of French in primary schools. (Burstall 1974, p.246)

It is not our task here to analyse the Burstall report. However, we should recall that "the report was not an evaluation of 'Primary School French' but was rather a survey of some specific aspects of French being taught in the rather special context of the Pilot Scheme" (Buckby 1976, p15). Unfortunately the harm was done and the primary school teaching of languages in the UK remained under the



shadow of the Burstall report. The lack of arrangements for effective transition from Primary to Secondary was one of the issues highlighted in the Burstall Report.

Whilst language learning at primary school remains non-statutory in Northern Ireland a number of attempts have been made since the mid-1980s to address the issue of primary languages. Prior to the publication of the Northern Ireland Curriculum (1989) DENI published a series of Primary Guidelines which, whilst superseded by the NIC, also informed the new curriculum. A working group, the last to be formed, for 'A Second Language in the Primary School', was established, primarily in response to

teacher and parental demand for the provision of Irish, but included provision for second languages more generally. Although the guidelines were never published their consideration at policy level represented an appetite for primary languages in the Northern Ireland context.

Momentum for statutory provision of primary languages was quickly lost when, in the wake of the Education Reform Bill in England and Wales, DENI published 'Education Reform in Northern Ireland: The Way Forward' (1988) where Language Studies at Primary Level were unceremoniously dismissed in capital letters as 'NOT



APPLICABLE' (§2.10). However, the Minister of Education, Dr. Mawhinney, issued a statement in response stating that "the phrase means no more than that for the majority of schools, language studies are not compulsory at primary level....schools may offer subjects other than the compulsory subjects if they wish - and in the case of the languages studies area that includes Irish or any other language" (Mawhinney, 1989). The legislation which eventually resulted as the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 states: "...nothing shall be taken to preclude the inclusion of language studies as an area of study in the curriculum of a grant-aided school in relation to the first and second Key Stages". (GB & NI 1989, Articles 5, § 8).

2.4 Curriculum Review and the Northern Ireland (Revised) Curriculum 2007

The Northern Ireland Curriculum Review (2001) outlined concerns about languages at Key Stage 4 but was markedly more optimistic about the potential of a proposed primary languages pilot programme:

A positive approach to language learning in the earlier key stages is likely to create greater enthusiasm for modern language study beyond fourteen. (CCEA February 2001, p6)



In 2004, it was somewhat surprising that the Labour government, with a pro-European stance, made language learning optional at Key Stage 4. This filtered through to Northern Ireland, signalling a rapid decline in the number of pupils sitting GCSE and A-level modern languages. This decline has continued year on year for modern languages overall, and for French, German and Irish individually. Only Spanish has shown an increase in numbers (JCQ). This could be due to the notable endeavours of the Consejería de Educación which, for example, placed Spanish language officers in each region of the UK, including Northern Ireland, and also in the Republic, whose role was to promote Spanish.

The publication of the Northern Ireland (Revised) Curriculum (2007) represented an opportunity to improve the situation of languages in our post-primary schools and the perceptions of teachers of languages demonstrated strong support for the potential positive impact on learner engagement and motivation. However, once again the opportunity to make statutory provision for primary languages was missed and modern languages were the only learning area of the Key Stage 3 Curriculum upon which there was nothing to build from Key Stage 2.

The Northern Ireland (Revised) Curriculum (2007) does promote connected learning and cross-curricularity at all Key Stages, but it is recognised that second language learning does not routinely feature as part of this at Key Stage 2.

2.5 Primary Languages Provision

In 2005, in advance of the curriculum reforms outlined above, a Primary Languages Pilot, coordinated by CCEA, was set up in three of the five Education and Library Boards (ELBs). The project investigated two models which delivered French and Spanish: a Teacher Capacity Building model; and a Peripatetic model. The Pilot Programme was evaluated positively by parents and teachers and neither the Teacher Capacity Building model nor the Peripatetic model was deemed superior (CCEA, 2007).

Following on from the Pilot, the *Primary Modern Languages Programme* (PMLP) was set up in 2007 in response to the then Minister for Education, Caitríona Ruane's desire to promote primary languages. The programme adopted the format of the NEELB pilot project to develop a network of peripatetic language tutors at Foundation Stage and/or Key Stage 1. The programme was initially offered for Spanish, and then Irish, with a small number of

schools offering Polish. Many teachers and academics questioned the distinct absence of French, and to a lesser extent German, given that French did, and still does, attract the highest number of GCSE and A-level entries out of the four main languages taught in our schools. Whilst the programme demonstrated a commitment to primary languages it was limited to the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 and did not provide for transition to Key Stage 2 and beyond. Some would also argue that the peripatetic approach adopted did not address the issue of human resourcing discussed at the beginning of this report and that this may have been more appropriately addressed using the teacher capacity building model.

2.6 The unique opportunity of minority languages

Learning from Irish

As an indigenous language, the role of Irish is of a different order to that of other languages. At the time of the Burstall report the only second language being taught to a significant extent in Northern Ireland's primary schools was Irish, offered in maintained schools. So, the Ministry of Education 'Programme for Primary Schools' in 1956 included a chapter and appendix on Irish. In 1974 also, just before NFER published the Burstall Report, DENI published its Primary Education Teachers' Guide. In the chapter on 'A Second Language' the specific references to Irish emphasize its advantages in the cultural and linguistic environment of Northern Ireland.

While the position of Irish was a matter of considerable controversy during curriculum reform (McKendry IJBEB), one of the innovations of the Northern Ireland Curriculum was the statutory force given to Cross Curricular Themes:

A number of important strands of learning have been identified which, although possessing their own individual cohesion, are normally taught as part of several other subjects. (DENI 1988: §2.12)

The themes include 'Education for Mutual Education' (EMU) which had the particular personal sponsorship of the Minister for Education, Dr Mawhinney, and 'Cultural Heritage' which were linked.

Several respondents suggested that there should be opportunities for pupils to gain awareness of aspects of history, culture and traditions which contribute to the cultural heritage of Northern Ireland. The government welcomes and accepts this suggestion as a positive measure aimed at lessening the ignorance which many feel contributes to the divisions in our society. The government also believes it to be appropriate and necessary that the curriculum of every child should contain elements in Education for Mutual Understanding which has already helped to foster valuable cross-community contacts among our schools. (DENI 1988: §2.13)

It was intended that lessons or units covering the Irish language element in place names, personal names, dialect, music, history, the Scottish, Scandinavian, Norman connections for history, etc. could be introduced without controversy and contribute to the Themes.

Government will continue to support efforts to enhance awareness and appreciation of the Irish language in its cultural context. Indeed this has been given recent emphasis by our writing into the new schools curriculum a compulsory course on the Cultural Heritage of both sides of the community (Irish News, 31 January 1991).

The argument for integrating language diversity culturally and linguistically into the primary curriculum is accepted. Comparison can be made with reform in Wales and Scotland where the role of indigenous languages and their concomitant cultural heritage were recognized as central to learning from the beginning of Curriculum Reform. So, the Curriculum Cymreig in Wales and the Studying Scotland area in the Curriculum for Excellence in Scotland currently include linguistic heritage in their recommendations

The themes of EMU and Cultural Heritage were 'conjoined' after a couple of years, and then subsumed into Citizenship. But the importance of an integrated approach to the primary curriculum carries through Citizenship and into the current focus on Shared Education



In addition, all subject strands but in particular, religious education, history, geography, English, **languages**, drama and art and design provide opportunities for teachers to design learning programmes that explore identity, diversity and promote reconciliation, developing the attitudes and dispositions

(DENI Sharing Works: A Policy for Shared Education 2015, p14)

Northern Ireland's primary schools have changed radically in the last ten years with the arrival of many newcomer pupils bringing with them new cultural and linguistic diversity. The Northern Ireland Census for 2011 shows a 199% increase in total immigrant population from 2001. Data from the 2015/2016 DENI School Census shows that over 80 languages are spoken in schools in Northern Ireland and that there were 11,900 Newcomer pupils, 3.4% of the total, compared with 3,911, 1.2% of the total in 2007. Primary languages should no longer be seen solely in terms of traditional curricular languages, but in a wider linguistic awareness theme.

2.7 Recent developments in England, Scotland and Wales

Since September 2014, a modern foreign language has been compulsory in England. There is also a long history in Wales of all children being taught Welsh. The Scottish Government's policy, 'Language Learning in Scotland: A 1+2 Approach', is aimed at ensuring that every child has the opportunity to learn a modern language from P1 onwards. Additionally, each child should have the right to learn a second modern language from P5 onwards. The policy should be fully implemented across Scotland by 2020.

2.8 The Scottish model in focus

Scottish Ministers have set an ambitious and challenging agenda for future language learning and teaching in Scotland's schools. They base their 1 + 2 model on the European Union ideal that all children should learn two languages in addition to their mother tongue. In most European Union countries, children start learning a language, in addition to their mother tongue, between the ages of six and nine.

Scottish primary schools are not told which languages they must teach; schools are afforded the opportunity to work in collaboration with their neighbouring post-primary schools to choose which languages work best in the local context.

Gaelic education is a key element of Scotland's National Plan for Gaelic which aims to secure a sustainable future for the language. Therefore, for some local authorities Gaelic will be a substantive element of their languages provision. It welcomes the development of Gaelic learning and teaching within such local authorities as Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (CNES - Western Isles), Highland, Glasgow, Edinburgh or elsewhere through GME or Gaelic Learner Education (GLE). As part of 1+2 development, Gaelic will therefore be the L2 language for some pupils.

2.9 Transition from KS2 to KS3: Insights from Research

The introduction of primary languages is considered an effective way to generate long-term favourable attitudes to language learning and greater uptake and success at Key Stage 4. It is well documented that poor transition contributed to the failure of the primary languages initiative in England in the 1960s (Burstall, 1974).

Recent curriculum developments in England and Scotland have drawn attention to transition from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3 in language learning. The transition of pupils at age eleven is widely recognised as the most upsetting time in a child's education (Galton et al., 1999, 2000, 2003; Rainer and Cropley, 2013). Research findings into the lack of long-term benefits of an early start in language learning can, at least in part, be attributed to a lack of cross-phase collaboration (Blondin et al., 1998).

The challenge of providing a smooth transition involves a wide range of decisions across a wide range of dimensions, all of which will have an



impact upon pupil progress, attainment and motivation. According to the Association of Language Learning (ALL), transition will be the most important thing that teachers of modern languages focus on in the next ten years of their careers (ALL, 2016).

Research by Galton et al. (2000) has shown that a lack of curriculum continuity between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 can lead to a 'hiatus' in learner progress, with 40% of learners regressing in their study. Driscoll et al. (2004) state that transition in languages is hampered by the non-uniform and inconsistent nature of primary language teaching with different teaching models, different languages being taught and variation in time and teacher proficiency. Chambers (2014) and Board and Tinsley (2015) cite a lack of cross-phase collaboration and a reported lack of assessment data from primary schools as two of the main reasons for poor transition.

Chambers (2014) conducted research into transition in languages in England with twelve post-primary teachers of modern languages. He found that only one school in his sample was well placed to deal with transition. In the other eleven schools, the guidelines surrounding transition in languages were unclear. Linked to clear aims and sound, understood policy should be the necessary planning for implementation, which would include funded, timetabled provision for

- (1) the development of professional learning communities, to enhance clarity and to create an environment in which schools feel comfortable sharing their practices, and
- (2) timetabled provision for review of the initiative so that changes can be made in the light of experience (Lemke and Sabelli 2008).

There was little evidence of either of these dimensions in the data collected by Chambers (2014).

Courtney (2014) and Graham et al. (2014) have conducted studies of transition in England. Courtney completed a detailed case study of 26 learners from two primary schools into one post-primary school. She measured progression via assessments and motivation via questionnaires and qualitative interviews. Graham et al. (2014) tracked the progress and motivation of 254 learners from nine schools, using assessment and questionnaires respectively. Contrary to previous studies, their studies showed that learners made small, but significant progress from Primary 6 to Year 7 in England (Primary 7 to Year 8 in Northern Ireland). In terms of motivation, Courtney's (2014) study showed that general attitudes to language learning were very positive and stable from Primary 7 to Year 8, whereas Graham et al. (2014) showed that motivation decreased slightly during Year 8, but it was still higher than at the end of Primary 7. When asked specifically at the beginning of Year 8, 89% of pupils in the Graham et al. (2014) study preferred lessons at post-primary because 'we learn more'.

In terms of motivation, both studies with children in England showed that many enjoyed their primary French lessons, but pupils highlighted the repetitive nature of content and activities and a dislike of writing. However, by first year of post-primary, there were no complaints from children about repetition of content or simply starting from scratch. In general terms, self-confidence increased from Primary 7 to Year 8, but the evidence about motivation suggests that lessons were enjoyed less at the end of Year 8.

In terms of progress, both studies showed that all learners made progress across transition, but the achievement gap widened by the end of Year 8. The studies reveal that there is a need for systematic L2 literacy instruction and greater differentiation of teaching in both Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3.

Courtney's (2014) study concluded that:

- there is a need for a thorough and systematic information exchange



between and among feeder schools and post-primary schools, including assessment data;

- there is a need to reflect upon appropriate assessment methods in relation to learner competence and requirements;
- in order to ensure the long-term benefits of early language teaching, continuity in all aspects is essential. This includes the stated and perceived aims of L2 teaching and learning, an agreement on instructional content (vocabulary and linguistic structures) and pedagogy to avoid major shifts while aiming to ensure progress for all;
- if learners cannot continue with the same language into secondary school, consideration needs to be given to what transferable skills need to be taught.

In Northern Ireland, there is no statutory requirement for data to be shared between primary and post-primary schools. Many schools rely on the goodwill of local relationships to ensure at least some data, usually for literacy, numeracy and ICT, is transferred between schools.

2.10 Area Learning Communities

Since September 2015, the Entitlement Framework has been statutory in Northern Ireland. This gives all pupils the right to access twenty-four subjects at GCSE level and 27 subjects at A-level. At least one third of these courses must be applied/vocational and one third general/academic. Whilst this increased pupil choice is to be welcomed, the Entitlement Framework has been detrimental to uptake of languages at post 16. As each slice of the cake gets smaller, there is more choice and pupils who would have traditionally chosen a language now do one of the other 27 A-level subjects. Languages have declined in a climate of increased choice. More needs to be done to find out why pupils do not choose to study this area of the curriculum

In order to help post-primary schools meet the Entitlement Framework, each school became a member of an Area Learning Community (ALC). A growing number of schools are now engaged with their local Further Education

College in innovative and creative approaches to collaborative working. There are currently ALCs established across Northern Ireland within which schools and Colleges are working to increase the range of courses for pupils in the local area. It is important to note that ALCs work horizontally, usually across Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 5 in order to deliver the Entitlement Framework. They, generally, do not operate vertically or cross-phase from primary to post-primary.

School collaboration and networking offer, amongst other benefits, wider curricular choice (Muijs, West, And Ainscow 2010; Pring 2009), motivating disengaged pupils (Hadfield et al. 2006) and combatting the negative effects of competition (Hodgson and Spours, 2006) as well as improving outcomes for children despite ambient financial austerity.

In Northern Ireland, over 90% of pupils are educated in predominantly protestant or catholic schools (Hughes, 2011). Only 7% of children are educated in an integrated school. Area Learning

Communities also seek to embrace shared education. Shared education means the organisation and delivery of education so that it meets the needs of, and provides for the education together of learners from all Section 75 categories (e.g. children from different racial backgrounds, children with and without additional needs, children who are carers or school age mothers) and socio-economic status. It also involves schools and other education providers of differing ownership, sectoral identity and ethos, management type or governance arrangements. Furthermore, shared education delivers educational benefits to learners, promotes the efficient and effective use of resources, and promotes equality of opportunity, good relations, equality of identity, respect for diversity and community cohesion.

As post-primary schools become more adept at closer collaboration with one another, there is reason to believe that, in the future, Area Learning Communities will work cross-phase, taking the ideals of transition one step further.



3.0 Methods

This section outlines the methods used in this qualitative investigation of the perspectives of children and adults who have knowledge of the transition from primary languages programmes to post-primary languages provision. It is arranged in a number of sections: research aims and research questions; selection of methods; procedures for engaging with children; procedures for engaging with adults; a timeline of the research; and ethical considerations.

3.1 Research aims and research questions

This research aims to access and document the views and experiences of key stakeholders in the language learning transition: children who have recently transitioned from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3 language learning; and school principals or their nominated deputies who have knowledge of the transition.

Arising from our review of existing research in the field, the following research questions have been identified:

Children's perspectives

Which languages are children learning in primary schools?

Who is teaching primary languages?

What are children's views of additional language learning?

Schools' perspectives

How do primary and post-primary schools in Northern Ireland currently deal with transition in modern languages?

Could Area Learning Communities be involved in transition in modern languages?

3.2 Method

The research team sought to build on work in transition carried out in England, whilst focussing on the context of Northern Ireland. It was decided to use qualitative inquiry.

In educational research, as in other social sciences, the qualitative paradigm concentrates on investigating the perceptions of people involved in order

to illuminate these perceptions and gain greater insight and knowledge. Broadly attributed to the work of Alfred Schutz (1899-1959), phenomenology is 'a philosophy that is concerned with the question of how individuals make sense of the world around them and how in particular the philosopher should bracket out preconceptions (Bryman 2012, p30). Schutz argues that the world as explored by the natural scientist does not 'mean' anything, whereas social reality has specific meaning for the living beings that take part in it. A social scientist has to gain access to human-beings' thought processes and phenomenology ascertains that researchers need to view human behaviour and analyse how people interpret the world around them. It follows that it is necessary to see the world from the views of others.

The research team decided to use focus groups to engage with children and

semi-structured interviews with school principals.

3.3 Procedures for Engaging With Children

Two members of the research team, who are both qualified teachers and have recent and relevant experience of working with Year 8 pupils, arranged to conduct focus groups with twelve Year 8 children in two post-primary schools. One school was in an urban setting and the other in a rural setting. Teachers in the schools were asked to select children to take part in the research.

The focus groups each lasted for thirty minutes and were recorded. Children were asked to respond to the following unseen questions which are closely linked to the research questions:

1. Which language(s) did you learn at primary school?
2. Do you learn the same language(s) now in year 8?
3. Who taught you languages in primary school?
4. Do you think learning a language at primary school was worthwhile?
5. What are the similarities and differences between your



language classes in primary school and this school?

- What do you learn?
- How do you learn?
- Tell me about assessments.

6. What do you want to gain from learning a language?

The researchers sought to create a relaxed environment for the children. They ensured different children answered each question first in order to avoid 'group think'. The focus groups were video recorded and transcribed in detail. The data were then read and reread and analysed by the researchers using thematic analysis.

Thematic analysis 'is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.79). Thematic analysis has a number of advantages in exploratory research as it can be applied across theoretical and epistemological approaches.

The data were coded. The researchers coded each distinct idea with a word or phrases. The codes were analysed and combined together to form themes.

3.4 Procedures for engaging with adults (principals)

As adults are key stakeholders in transition from KS2 to KS3, it was important to have their voice in the research. The researchers contacted six school principals (four post-primary and two primary) by telephone or visit and asked them the following questions:

- **Exchange of information between primary and secondary schools**
 - Is there a teacher in charge of transition?
 - What data do you exchange?
- **Area Learning Communities**
 - How good are relationships between schools in the ALC?

- Is your ALC effective at present?
- What might be the potential benefits and challenges of operating ALCs cross-phase?
- What conditions need to be right to ensure cross-phase collaboration?

- **Modern Languages Education**

- How, as headteacher, do you envision the future of modern languages education in Northern Ireland?

The interviews were semi-structured which allowed the conversation to develop within a flexible framework. The interviewers noted key ideas which will feed into the discussion chapter.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

As this research involves the study of human participants, ethical approval was sought from and granted by the Ethics Committee at the School of Education, Queen's University Belfast.

The study was explained in detail in one of three information leaflets. There was an information leaflet for principals,



an information leaflet for parents and a child-friendly information leaflet for pupils.

Children were only allowed to participate in focus groups once we had their written permission, along with their parent/carer's written permission and the school principal's written permission.

School principals, or their nominated deputy, were only allowed to participate once we had their permission.

All participants were free to leave the study at any time.



4.0 Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of empirical research with children and adults, as detailed in the previous section on research methods.

4.1 Children's views of transition in languages from KS2 to KS3

The views from the children's focus groups were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. Following data driven coding to put the children's voices at the centre of the research, one main, overarching theme was identified to be 'the status of languages'. Three sub-themes were also identified, namely 'teacher', 'what children learn in languages' and 'how children learn languages'. This theme and sub-themes are closely related to the research questions.

4.1.1 The status of languages

The research team believe that children have the perception that languages, where taught in primary schools, have a low status:

'In the primary school, it wasn't like a proper subject.' (R2)

'We only did it (Spanish) like a day a week so it wasn't really that much but I can't really remember any of the language any more.' (R7)

'Our teacher said we would do it for the whole year round and we did like one...like ten minutes a week.' (R9)

'I did French in primary school and it was only an after school club and it was only for a few weeks. The only word I can remember from it is pantaloon [sic].' (R10)

Worryingly, two pupils reported that their language learning ceased in order to concentrate on the unregulated transfer

test, compounding the notion that languages aren't important:

'I done [sic] it (Spanish) from when it started in P2 up to P7. I missed it for the transfer test, I missed that period of it.' (R1 supported by R2)

Conversely, the pupils identified that for their first year of Key Stage 3, the specialist teacher of languages is concerned with learning and making sure learning is happening. The pupils appreciate the higher status attached to languages in the post-primary school:

'In primary school, we only done [sic] it once a week, but here we do it three times a week; it's better. I learned the basics in primary school, just the basics' (R4)

'This (the post-primary school) is more learning the French and getting used to it as well...and doing exercises in your books so you learn better.' (R2)

'Because they actually teach the language, like they actually work here and they're not just voluntarily coming in to teach you. I think it's better in a way.' (R10)

'In the high school the teachers like they go over everything and like we speak it ourselves. Like in primary school we just had to write it down but in like high school you get to like speak it, like do questions and stuff. It's more interactive.' (R11)

All of the pupils in our focus groups had high aspirations for their language learning. Motivation is high, but it is

unclear if this is due or not due to having studied a language at primary school:

'I think it would be important because like if you go on to work somewhere else and you want to go abroad you need to learn languages and like if you meet someone, someone in your job you might want to talk to them and like sometimes in those companies you need to know languages.' (R8)

'If I was a doctor, which I want to be, and there was a patient from France or Spain, I would like to be able to speak their language.' (R9)

Discussions with pupils showed that there is no evidence of their being any form of transition in modern languages from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3:

'[in the post-primary school] we go over everything we did [in primary school] and learn some new stuff as well.' (R1)

'We start from the bottom in Year 8.' (R3)

'We start at the beginning, because not everybody in the school learned languages at primary school.' (R4)

The pupils' voices show that there is a perceived low status attached to languages in primary schools and a perceived comparatively higher status attached to languages in post-primary schools. It is unclear whether the presence of some form of language teaching at primary boosts or hinders pupils' enthusiasm in year 8. More investigation would need to be done in this area.

4.1.2 Teacher of primary languages

Three of the twelve children were taught primary languages by a teacher from their own school. The three children signalled that their teacher had knowledge of the language. The other nine children were taught by an 'outsider', varying from a

language assistant from the local post-primary school, to a sixth-former from the local post-primary school, to 'an outside company' (R1) to teachers from the local post-primary:

'I had it after school on a Thursday [...] but I don't know what the company was.' (R1)

'My Spanish teacher, I can't remember who she was, but she had this big dress.' (R3)

'In P1 and P2 there was a Spanish woman, like someone from Spain, that now taught Spanish. She just came in voluntarily' (R9)

The twelve pupils in our focus group were drawn from eleven different primary schools. The data collected would suggest that primary schools in our sample rely mostly on a peripatetic model rather than a teacher-capacity building model. This report has shown in the literature review that the peripatetic model of delivery has had little impact.

The current culture of self-evaluation in schools suggests that schools themselves are best placed to effect improvement in all aspects of their work. The research team would suggest that, moving forward, there is a need to focus on developing the capacity of practising primary teachers to deliver primary languages, much like the 1+2 model in Scotland. This will require support from post-primary colleagues in the early days through ALCs, time commitment and quality of delivery.

4.1.3 What children learn in primary languages

The focus groups showed that children were generally aware that they had been taught primary languages, but they were unable to narrate what they had learnt. As previously stated, all pupils said they started again in Year 8 from scratch, and the variety of experiences from the pupils showed that Northern Ireland could benefit from a defined programme of study for Key Stage 2 modern languages. The children revealed that what they learn in primary languages is not

challenging or appropriate to their needs and aspirations:

'In the Primary school it wasn't like a proper subject. It was supposed to be fun for us. Like, we didn't have any tests. We just played games with the languages so we didn't really learn anything.' (R9)

'In the (post-primary school), it's harder, but in a way you learn more.' (R11)

'I learned how to pronounce things in primary school, but I didn't know how to spell it.' (R1)

Resonating with research conducted in England (Chambers 2014; Courtney 2014), the children revealed a clear bias in primary languages to speaking and listening skills, with little evidence of reading and writing skills. This raises concerns about the philosophies of language education and the methodological approach taken at primary level. More research would need to be done in this area. The absence of any formal Key Stage 2 programme of study for languages means that post-primary teachers are left with little choice other than to start from scratch in Year 8. Again, this raised questions about pupils' motivation and perception of the status of languages, which would require further research.

4.1.4 How children learn primary languages

The focus groups brought to light that, in the pupils' opinion, there is an absence of assessment for primary languages:

'We did a couple of tests in primary school, but she (the teacher) wouldn't really mind if you did bad or she wouldn't care. She would just, we would just move on like even if everyone did really bad.' (R12)

'Now (in the post-primary school) there are less songs and there are more tests to do for Spanish, much more tests.' (R2)

The pupils' appreciate the formal nature of language learning at post-primary school;

'There is a proper classroom and you get a specialist teacher.' (R6)

'In (the post-primary school), the teachers go over everything and we speak it ourselves.' (R11)

'I think the teachers (in the post-primary school) work more on actually getting you to learn the things because in primary school people would be asking 'what does this mean?' and it would just take up the whole class with people asking silly questions.' (R9)



'In primary school, the teacher said the words once, gave us a worksheet and said a bit in English and then said 'get on with it' and we were like 'we don't have a clue.'" (R8)

Whilst it is a positive step that the children in our focus groups had experience of primary languages, discussion with them reveals that there are concerns for the research team about teacher competence (be it language assistants, sixth-formers, external teachers), assessment of primary languages, the focus on songs and 'fun' and the perceptions of pupils towards primary languages. Within the scope of this exploratory study, we are unable to draw firm conclusions, but there is much food for thought as we navigate the future of language learning and transition in Northern Ireland.

4.2 Principals' views of transition in languages from KS2 to KS3

Semi-structured interviews with six principals or their nominated deputies focussed on transition arrangements from KS2 to KS3. In Northern Ireland, there is no statutory requirement for data to be transferred from primary schools to post-primary schools. Schools work on a local level and professional relations exist to share data.

However, some post-primary schools have over fifty feeder primary schools from a large, rural hinterland and it is therefore inevitable that some data are 'lost' in the process of transition. The C2K data exchange, a web-based platform available to all schools in Northern Ireland, was supposed to assure the transfer of data, but, in the words of one principal 'this is piecemeal to say the least'. Furthermore, as academic selection at age 11 remains unregulated, primary schools have been directed not to liaise with selective post-primary schools in transferring assessment data.

Even where effective exchange of data takes place, post-primary schools often baseline their Year 8 intake on entry.



There is no evidence of any exchange of information on assessment of modern languages from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3 from the six principals with whom we spoke.

Principals are still adjusting to working in ALCs, which have been in place since 2011. ALCs currently operate horizontally across Key Stages 4 and 5 to deliver the Entitlement Framework. All four post-primary principals report that daily collaboration within the ALC is currently 'difficult', given location and timetabling constraints. Principals are, however, open to future collaboration within vertical ALCs provided that conditions are right.

Discussions with principals, together with our own professional practice and research to date, would suggest the following implementation of languages at Key Stage 2:

- staged implementation of Primary Languages, working towards statutory status, from the 2017/2018 school year for Primary 5, from 2018/2019 for Primary 5 and 6 and from 2019/2020 for Primary 5, 6 and 7;
- an exemplar scheme of work is written for Key Stage 2 modern languages;

- Area Learning Communities are awarded funding to release a post-primary languages teacher to deliver primary languages from 2017-2020 and capacity build with primary teachers. This may be 0.6 Full Time equivalent, for example;
- Area Learning Communities are responsible for how any funds for primary languages are to be spent;
- Language assistants could support the teaching of and capacity building for primary languages;
- There is no preferred single language for primary. Schools should be guided by their local ALC context.



5.0 Conclusion

Over the years, there have been marginal successes and significant shortcomings in our approach to Primary Languages in Northern Ireland. Given the recent seismic changes to tertiary modern languages education in the province, the now annual decline in overall entries for GCSE and A-level languages, and primary curriculum reform in England and Scotland, it is imperative that we move to improve the language learning landscape in our primary and post-primary schools.

We owe it to our pupils to ensure they are equipped with the language skills to take their place in a multi-lingual working environment, where competition for jobs will come from an international candidature.

Our research shows that primary schools are best placed to deliver primary languages with support from neighbouring post-primary schools to develop teacher capacity within the primary school. We would also welcome a widening of primary languages pathways in initial teacher education.

We suggest that primary languages be made statutory at Key Stage 2 from 2020 onwards, or as soon as feasible, aligning our provision with recent developments in England and Scotland. To realise this vision, there is a need for a time-limited regional co-ordinating body for implementation to be identified. Background implementation work could begin in the 2016/2017 school year, led by the co-ordinating body. The roll-out of primary languages should be phased, starting in Primary 5 in 2017/2018. Schools would work with the co-ordinating body, but increasingly within their own ALC, to decide which languages are taught at primary level, or how the area can be progressed in a cross-curricular, language awareness model. A post-primary school or schools within each ALC is/are allocated money to release a specialist teacher of languages (0.6 FTE, for example) for the first three years of the roll out, depending on local context. Language assistants support the specialist teacher

of languages to develop capacity in the primary school.

This an ambitious vision, but it is one which could change the face of language learning in Northern Ireland.

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