

Tina Hickey & Anne-Marie de Mejía. (2015) *Immersion Education in the Early Years*. London: Routledge. ISBN 978-1138182899, 126 pp., USD 124, GBP £75.

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This edited collection, which reprints in book form a series of articles first published in a 2014 special edition of the *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* (17, 2), presents diverse perspectives and practices concerning language immersion programmes for the youngest children. It is of interest to scholars of immersion and bilingual education and to those concerned with minority language revitalisation through education.

Depending on the education system in question, children as young as two and as old as seven can be considered to be in the preschool phase of education. But age is only one of a number of points of divergence to be considered when reviewing early immersion provision and its outcomes, in contexts as geographically distant and as linguistically and educationally varied as the USA, Canada, Belgium, Finland, and the UK. In this collection, two chapters are concerned with immersion programmes which enable (mainly) monolingual children to acquire second languages of national or global significance (Swedish for Finnish-speaking children in Finland and English for French-speaking children in Belgium); two chapters (both Californian studies) address different aspects of provision designed to ensure that Spanish-speaking children develop competence in both English and Spanish, with a focus on combating the educational disadvantages often associated with Hispanic populations in the USA; and two discuss programmes to develop competence in endangered minority languages: Welsh in Wales (UK) and Acadian French in New Brunswick (Canada).

Hickey and de Mejía's initial chapter introduces the collection and identifies current issues for the sector. Although early years immersion has been well established for several decades in some parts of the world, it has attracted less attention than primary/elementary and secondary/high school-based studies. This is partly because the nature, purposes, and practices of early years provision take very different forms, on a continuum from a child-led, play-based curriculum to one which is quite formally focused on the development of language and early literacy skills. These orientations have a significant bearing on how immersion is constructed and on what can be achieved. When the political context is also taken into account – and, here, this ranges from a long-standing commitment in Finland

to bilingualism in Finnish and Swedish, to a historical ban in Belgium on the use, as media of instruction, of languages other than that of the linguistic community in which the educational setting is located – the difficulties of either defining or establishing general principles for immersion in the early years become clear.

And yet, the role of early years immersion in providing an effective start to a child's experience of learning, maintaining, and developing an additional language is increasingly seen as critical to the longer-term success of immersion education. As Hickey and de Mejía point out, parents may choose to send their children to immersion pre-school because they are committed to their child's bilingualism, or else because they see this as a way of testing the water before formal education. In either case, the onus is on providers to ensure that provision meets parental expectations, and ensures a positive start, linguistically and educationally. Furthermore, the drive for immersion may be political, recognising that such provision supports bilingual children from disadvantaged populations, or reflecting a commitment to revitalise minority or endangered languages which were previously discouraged or banned in educational settings. In these cases, too, the stakes for preschool providers are high and the language goals for these very early stages of a child's educational career can represent very considerable challenges.

The six substantive chapters evaluate, in different ways, the impact of provision in very specific local or national contexts. Four of the six measure children's linguistic progress, both in L1 and in L2, at different stages over the course of the early years trajectory. In each case, the outcomes demonstrate the value of immersion.

In Kathryn Lindholm-Leary's longitudinal study of the impact of an early dual language (Spanish and English) programme for Hispanic children in California, USA, the gains of those who had attended the programme persisted and were consolidated over four years, while those of the comparison English-only group faltered towards the end of this period. This study thus contributes to a growing literature which shows that supporting the development of early learning and literacy through a child's first language also has beneficial effects on their subsequent development in a second language.

Gabriela Simón-Cerejido and Vera Gutiérrez-Clellen, concerned more specifically with Hispanic children with language impairments, evaluated the implementation by early years practitioners of a dual language (Spanish and English) programme (Vocabulary, Oral Language, and Academic Readiness, or VOLAR) designed to support such children. Their study similarly demonstrated the positive effects of the programme on the children's development in both languages, compared with peers in English-only programs, and thus challenges any notion that such children risk exacerbated developmental delays if educated bilingually.

Aafke Buyl and Alex Housen evaluated an English immersion programme in Francophone Belgium as part of a wider northern-European initiative (Early

Language and Intercultural Acquisition Studies, or ELIAS), involving immersion programmes in Germany, Belgium, and Sweden. The results showed that, despite a relatively late start, the Belgian children made rapid progress and soon reached a level of competence in English close to the mean for the nine schools involved. These findings represented a positive outcome, given the challenges faced by the Belgian programme. Early years practitioners were relatively inexperienced in immersion pedagogy, compared with their German and Swedish counterparts. German and Swedish-speaking children may find it easier to learn English, in contrast to French-speaking children, given greater similarities among Germanic languages. Furthermore, the socioeconomic status of the Belgian pupils was lower than that of the German and Swedish children and this might be assumed to mean that the Belgian pupils would be at an educational disadvantage. The authors believed these results would help to dispel historically negative attitudes towards immersion in Belgium.

Marianne Cormier, Jimmy Bourque, and Manon Jolicoeur investigated the impact of different models of *francization* programmes on the French language skills of English-speaking children of Francophone descent attending French-medium early years provision in New Brunswick, Canada. These models ranged from separate classes for the learners, through combinations of mainstreaming with pull-out classes, to fully integrated classes where both L1 French speakers and L2 French learners were educated together, but learners received targeted support from a *francization* practitioner. The study found that the integrated approach was the most effective in terms of children's progress in French, as measured by a tool already in use in the sector. The authors argue that this was partly because the learners had greater opportunities to hear and interact with fluent French-speaking peers, and because such interaction was very explicitly promoted by the *francization* practitioner. In addition, the collaborative ethos established meant that both mainstream and *francization* practitioners were more overtly focused on supporting children's linguistic development. This study therefore contributes to the literature on the value of integrated rather than separate provision for children with different language backgrounds, recognising that success is dependent on skilfully delivered language support for those in the early stages of learning the language used as the medium of instruction.

The other two chapters in the book take a different approach, looking in detail at immersion practices in the playroom as a way of informing understandings of outcomes. In the study by Tina Hickey, Gwyn Lewis, and Colin Baker, in some ways a mirror image of that by Cormier et al., the focus is on children who are L1 Welsh speakers in *cylchoedd* (Welsh-medium playgroups in Wales, UK) which also cater for English-speaking L2 Welsh learners. While the provision effectively constitutes immersion for this latter group, the authors express concern that the

needs of L1 Welsh speakers may be overlooked. The chapter, based principally on findings from a survey of *cylchoedd* leaders, discusses implications of a key finding: that *cylchoedd* leaders, though theoretically committed to total immersion, find this difficult to achieve in practice, and therefore habitually translate Welsh into English to ensure comprehension for the L2 Welsh learners. The authors conclude that there is a need for more specialist professional development for *cylchoedd* leaders, both to develop understanding of immersion pedagogies generally, and to address the need for differentiated approaches to the needs of L1 and L2 Welsh-speakers in the playroom, if the full potential of the provision is to be realised for both groups.

Siv Björklund, Karita Mård-Miettinen, and Marjo Savijärvi summarise a series of Finnish studies on early total immersion in Swedish for Finnish-speaking pupils, aged three to six. Because early immersion in Finland dates back to the 1980s, the authors are able to trace research trends over the decades and observe that the focus has shifted, in response to changing theoretical perspectives on bilingualism and language learning. In contrast to an emphasis on the linguistic development of individuals in the earlier phase, there is now greater focus on the nature and quality of interaction in the playroom. Learning from this research, practitioners now seek to maximise opportunities for Swedish development in the context of the wider curriculum, and recent evaluations have shown improvements in children's Swedish competence on entry into primary school as a result. The significance of this chapter lies in the evidence it presents of the impact of research on practice over time and in the detailed account of how children's linguistic competence grows both through direct interaction with the educator and as a result of the educator's indirect management of the linguistic environment. Given that several of the other studies included in this book indicate a need for specialist professional development for preschool practitioners, the close collaboration between researchers and practitioners and the productive consequences indicated here are something to which others will aspire.

Indeed, Hickey and de Mejía in their introductory chapter conclude that initial education and professional development for early years immersion practitioners is a pressing need, regardless of the diverse contexts and specific constructions of early years provision and immersion programmes around the world. The chapters here highlight the need for practitioners' thorough understanding of immersion pedagogy and ability to differentiate provision to support the linguistic development of both L1 and L2 in these contexts, among children who are typically developing, those who come from less socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds, and those with additional support needs. This collection thus offers a valuable overview of the range of issues at stake.

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