International Conference on Integration 2019

Shared language: integration through the prism of multilingualism

November 14-15th 2019 in Tallinn, Estonia.

Title: The *multilingual-identity turn*: developing a *multilingual mindset* within a *language rights* perspective

The narrow view of belonging, the one-nation-one-culture-one-language paradigm, has had a profound impact on how we perceive speakers of multiple languages and language learning in schools. There is a dissonance between the continued longing for an idealized monolingual state and the reality of the superdiverse societies of the 21st century, where children are exposed to multiple language contact situations from a very young age: they switch between several languages to communicate with binational parents and monolingual relatives; they integrate new language communities as a result of parents’ chosen or forced mobility; they learn foreign languages in primary school; they have English as a basic skill in the school curriculum; and attend after-school heritage language programmes. Inevitably, this multilingual scenario has a significant impact on children’s early experiences of language, literacy and identity. Yet, society still defines multilingual individuals through the narrow, restrictive monolingual lens and education systems continue to treat languages as separate entities. This approach often results in ignoring, banishing and sometimes punishing children’s plurilingualism, with the predictable social, educational and personal consequences of rejection.

Despite the multilingual turn, where we readily acknowledge the existence of multiple languages in society today, we still need to develop a multilingual mindset in order to debunk the myth of an essentialist and unique identity. Within a language rights perspective, I argue for a multilingual-identity turn in order to celebrate these language rich childhoods, where children’s languages are acknowledged and validated, not only for future economic benefits or political gains, but for developing a positive self-image and constructing an emotional and cultural identity across borders. We need to consider children as plurilingual speakers, with a right to their multilingual repertoires and to expressing this identity in the social contexts of the home, school and community. As multiple voices emerge, children’s multilingual identity is validated, their educational wellbeing is supported and the social fabric of a community is strengthened.