In this third newsletter in our series, we introduce the qualitative aspect of our ‘New Irish Families’ study. We focus here on families’ language usage and their sense of belonging in the communities in which they live. To achieve this, we refer to information collected from the families of the infant cohort of Growing Up in Ireland and interviews with 20 migrant families.

Introduction to our qualitative interviews

While the Growing Up in Ireland study provides a wealth of information on many aspects of the lives of second-generation children and their families, in order to better understand the lives, motivations, and expectations of migrant families in Ireland, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 families.

To this end, we employed a purposive sampling method to include the main family types identified in the initial quantitative phase of the project. Furthermore, the interview guide was developed to correspond to the topics covered in the survey information.

In May 2014 we started this exploratory qualitative research on migrant families living in the Dublin area. We interviewed 20 families in-depth, asking them about their family context, local surroundings, early childcare for their young children, their labour market integration, and their social integration.

A profile of our participants

The 20 families who participated in our qualitative study had at least one parent from a migrant background and at least one child born in Ireland. In total, 14 couples and six lone mothers were interviewed.

Two of the families included an Irish parent, with the other parent from an EU Accession country, EU-13 and ‘Other’ European country respectively. Six of the families were from African countries, five from Asia, and one from South America. Our sample also included one family with one parent from the EU-13 and the other from Africa. The remainder of the parents were from European countries.

Participants reported diverse migratory patterns. While some of the parents came to Ireland as asylum seekers who subsequently were granted refugee status and/or leave to remain, others initially entered Ireland on student visas and later became skilled professionals. Some of the parents came to join a spouse already living in Ireland, while a large number came as skilled professionals or – to a lesser extent - as low skilled labour migrants.

Together, the families had 29 children born in Ireland. Of these, one family had three children, seven had two children, and twelve had one child only. Three of the families also had older children that were not born in Ireland but had immigrated here. The youngest of the children born in Ireland was three months old and the oldest was seven years of age. The ages of their siblings who had migrated here from their birth country ranged from five to 18 years.

Language maintenance

The population Census of 2011 shows that recent migration to Ireland has resulted in far greater linguistic diversity with Polish and Lithuanian in particular, spoken by a large number of families. This increased diversity in language can have both positive and negative implications for children and their families. For example, fluency in the language of the country of residence is
considered an important factor for integration and an important determinant of the lives of migrants more generally\(^1\).

This does not, however, have to come at the expense of not learning the heritage language. Indeed, contrary to previous beliefs about this matter, bilingualism has been shown to have positive effects on children, such as improved cognitive awareness\(^2\).

Among the sample of families interviewed in the *Growing Up in Ireland* study, we found that even in families for whom English was not the native language of one or both of the parents, a large majority spoke to their infant children in English while at home. However, as shown in Figure 1 below, this was not the case among all group, with less than half of parents from EU Accession States interviewed speaking English in their home.

Figure 1 Language spoken to study child in the home

Among households where the Primary Caregiver was from one of the EU Accession States and English was not the main language spoken in the home, the most commonly spoken languages were Polish (66.2%), Lithuanian (17.2%), Russian (8.7%), and Romanian (5%). In households where the Primary Caregiver was born in Africa, the most common spoken languages in non-English speaking households were French (57.5%), Arabic (36.3%), and Portuguese (7.1%). Chinese (74.4%) was the main non-English language spoken in households where the Primary Caregiver was from Asia. In a small number of these households, Arabic and Spanish were also spoken.

The importance of heritage language was highlighted in our in-depth interviews conducted with the families. Parents often felt strongly that their heritage language provided a sense of cultural belonging and family:

‘I wanted my child to be able to speak to my parents when they come to visit us here and when we are going to visit them. I would be embarrassed if my child is not able to greet my parents or my in-laws in their language’.

*(EU Accession Country mother)*

In many cases multilingualism was also viewed as having a positive impact on the intellectual development of their children:

‘I read a lot about introducing a child to more than two languages and I found that it is beneficial for a child’s mental development. So we kept talking to him in two languages in the house: I spoke my heritage language and my husband spoke his heritage language. Then, it was English, because we communicate between us in English, so now, he speaks three languages.’

*(EU Accession state mother)*

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As well as identifying multilingualism as culturally, and cognitively beneficial, participants also identified other advantages of speaking multiple languages. For example, many parents supported the belief that early exposure to languages in the home would better equip children for learning further languages in school and might also encourage an openness and acceptance of other cultures, including their own heritage.

Similarly, parents spoke of language attainment in terms of an overall ‘expansion of interest’ in languages that encourages children to ‘look at the world from different perspectives’. As one parent from an EU-13 Member State put it:

‘There is a saying about being much better toward other cultures and understanding other people if you speak more languages, so we try to push our children to speak more languages for their own benefit.’

Some of the parents desire to expose their children to their heritage language was motivated by economic reasons. For these participants, speaking more than one language was considered a useful skill with regard to the global economy, as children may use their parents’ heritage language to enhance their future professional development:

‘Our heritage language is French and we speak in the house English and French, because we want our child to know well these two languages. He might need them in the future if he wants to travel or looking to get a job abroad, yeah, is going to come in very handy!’ (African mother)

**Sense of belonging**

_Growing Up in Ireland_ asked families whether they considered themselves settled in their local communities, and also if they intended to continue living in their current local area.

As shown in Figure 2, a large majority of all families reported that they felt settled in the communities in which they lived at time of interview. Almost one-in-five families from EU Accession States, EU-13, and Africa, however, did not feel settled.

**Figure 2 Agreement that families feel settled**

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<th>Agree</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>92%</td>
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<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>91%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accession States</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>81%</td>
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<tr>
<td>EU-13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>88%</td>
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Variations between the groups in their sense of being settled in their local area were reflected in their intention to remain living in the same area in the future. While a large majority of households reported that they intended remaining in the same area, a sizeable minority of those from EU Accession States, EU-13, and Africa did not. As shown in Figure 3, African households (25%) were the most likely to state their intention to move to another area.

**Figure 3 Families intention to continue living in their local area**

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<tr>
<td>Accession States</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU-13</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>85%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>80%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>87%</td>
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The qualitative interviews also provided a diversity of views with regard to the participants’ sense of belonging in their local area. In general, we found that families that lived in neighbourhoods with a diverse mix of nationalities tended to be more settled and intent on remaining in the same area:

‘We love to live here. It is close to the seaside. We have a very nice and quiet area. The rent is manageable and we have neighbours with kids from all around the world. We love this.’

(EU Accession state mother)

Families who lived in culturally diverse residential areas also reported being very happy to raise their children there:

‘We love this area, there are many nationalities living in our estate, it is culturally mixed. Our kids really enjoy playing here and all parents are open minded. It is very good to have your children growing up in this environment.’

(EU-13 mother)

However, some families did not feel very settled in their local area and expressed a desire to move. Among the most common reasons for wishing to move elsewhere were the high cost of rent, inadequate space for living and playing, and an unfriendly neighbourhood:

‘The apartment is very small for our two young children and our neighbours are not very friendly. The kids have no friends here to play with and there is no park with playing areas for them. We would like to move.’

(Asian mother)

In general parents that lived in the inner-city, often in small apartments, found it more difficult to integrate their children in the local area due to the lack of locally accessible, safe spaces for playing:

‘I live in the Inner City and we have only one big park for kids that is safe and close by. I go there with my child, but I cannot make friends. Nobody from my flats has young children that go there and there are always different people coming to the park.’

(Asian mother)

Some families with older children that were not born in Ireland mentioned that they wanted to move house in the beginning because their children felt alienated and had found it difficult to make friends in the area. In general, the experience of the children born in Ireland appears to be a more positive one. Compared to their foreign born siblings, parents reported that these children found it much easier to connect and make friends with other children in the neighbourhood:

‘It was very hard with the older kids in the beginning. Nobody wanted to play with them. We wanted to move house that time, but when the little ones came, we saw that they are interacting better with other kids and even the older kids were able to make friends then.’

(African mother)

Full results from the qualitative part of the ‘New Irish Families’ project will be published early in 2015 and will be available on the website.

The ‘New Irish Families’ report and all newsletters are available to download from: www.tcd.ie/merc/publications.

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