University of Pannonia

Multilingualism Doctoral School

REVIEW OF THE PhD DISSERTATION

Melinda Fürész-Mayernik

Title: **Multilingual children during the transition from nursery school to primary school: Hungarian teachers' knowledge, attitudes and pedagogical practices**

Supervisor: Dr. habil. János Ollé

Reviewer: Prof. Dr. István Csernicskó

Research focus and scholarly relevance

The dissertation examines an important issue at the intersection of multilingualism research, applied linguistics and education: how Hungarian nursery-school and primary-school teachers understand and respond to children's multilingual linguistic repertoires at the point of school entry. The transition is a particularly revealing context because expectations concerning school readiness, classroom participation and proficiency in the language of schooling may be interpreted as indicators of general developmental or academic ability. The author appropriately questions such a straightforward equation.

The study's distinctive value lies less in proposing a new theory of multilingual development than in bringing together several perspectives on teachers' professional knowledge, attitudes and reported practices within the Hungarian educational context. Its emphasis on teachers and institutions, rather than treating multilingual children themselves as the source of the "problem", is both intellectually productive and pedagogically relevant. The dissertation is therefore clearly situated within the remit of a doctoral programme in multilingualism, even though its practical implications also extend to teacher education and school development.

Theoretical framework and conceptual contribution

The extensive theoretical chapter engages with holistic and dynamic accounts of multilingual competence, metalinguistic awareness, language development, inclusive pedagogy and translanguaging. It also considers the Hungarian public-education setting and the institutional organisation of the nursery–primary transition. This breadth provides a useful background for interpreting the empirical material. The author's treatment of multilingualism as an integrated and context-dependent repertoire is particularly appropriate: linguistic performance in Hungarian cannot simply be taken as a complete measure of a child's knowledge or capacities.

At the same time, the theoretical coverage is wider than the set of concepts directly operationalised in the empirical instruments. The relationship between the dynamic/holistic models and the specific questionnaire indicators could have been made more explicit. This is a matter of analytical focus rather than a fundamental weakness: the dissertation is strongest when it uses theory to illuminate the tension between multilingual realities and largely monolingual institutional expectations, rather than when it surveys the full range of adjacent theoretical debates.

Research design and interpretation of evidence

The empirical design combines a questionnaire completed by 155 teachers (80 nursery-school teachers and 75 primary-school teachers), focus-group interviews with 17 teachers, observations in two first-grade classes, and supplementary interviews and DIFER-based assessment involving eight Mongolian-speaking children. The different sources provide a richer account of educational experience than a questionnaire alone would permit. Particularly useful is the opportunity to read teachers' self-reports alongside situated classroom observations, although these sources do not constitute independent verification of every reported practice.

The questionnaire results are principally descriptive, and the participating teachers do not form a representative sample of Hungarian educators. Moreover, self-reported preparedness, favourable attitudes and observed pedagogical competence are related but analytically distinct phenomena. The dissertation's conclusions should consequently be understood as a contextually informative, exploratory account, not as population-level estimates or causal demonstrations. The final chapter generally acknowledges this boundary. In particular, the author explicitly distinguishes hypotheses supported by descriptive or qualitative material from H5 and H7, for which the necessary inferential tests were not undertaken (printed pp. 136–138).

The child-based component has a legitimate but narrower role. The eight children's responses help illustrate why tasks administered in the school language require careful interpretation, yet they cannot establish the independent effect of multilingualism on measured readiness. I welcome the dissertation's explicit treatment of these data as supplementary rather than as a separate generalisable assessment. The distinction between illustrative evidence and a demonstrated explanatory relationship is essential to the scholarly interpretation of this material.

Findings and their significance for multilingual education

One of the most interesting results is the coexistence of broadly favourable teacher attitudes towards multilingualism and uneven theoretical and methodological preparation. Teachers report using visual aids, repetition, simplified instructions, differentiation and individual assistance; these strategies can facilitate access to classroom activity, but many are general inclusive practices rather than specifically multilingual pedagogical interventions. The dissertation usefully shows that positive dispositions do not automatically translate into systematically planned language-responsive teaching.

A second contribution concerns the differing emphases of the two educational settings. In the author's descriptive comparison, nursery-school teachers tend to understand readiness through a wider developmental lens, whereas primary-school teachers give relatively greater weight to the language of instruction and academic functioning (printed p. 137). This is not evidence of change observed longitudinally in the same children. It nevertheless identifies a potentially consequential mismatch of expectations at the institutional boundary. In my view, this finding deserves particular attention because the transition is not merely a child's individual adjustment: it is also a negotiation between two educational cultures and their assessment practices.

The observations of spontaneous language switching and translation are also instructive. They suggest that multilingual practices may already be present even where educators do not articulate a conscious translanguaging pedagogy. The important question is not simply whether more than one language appears in the classroom, but under what conditions children's entire linguistic resources become legitimate tools for learning, participation and assessment. Here the dissertation opens a promising line of applied-linguistic inquiry, while appropriately stopping short of claiming to have measured the effects of a planned translanguaging intervention.

The recommendations for teacher preparation, institutional guidance and communication with families follow plausibly from the evidence. Their status should nevertheless remain clear: they are research-informed proposals, not interventions whose effectiveness has been experimentally established. In this respect, the work offers a useful basis for further design and evaluation rather than a finished model of best practice.

Critical observations and questions for the public defence

My reservations concern primarily the reach of the conclusions, not the relevance of the research question. The theoretical-to-empirical connection could be more selective; the distinction between language-specific and broadly inclusive support strategies could be more systematic; and the study's cross-sectional and supplementary components limit claims about developmental trajectories or the effects of institutional practices. These points do not negate the value of the collected material. They help identify where a subsequent, more tightly specified research programme could advance the field.

For the public defence I would invite the candidate to address the following questions:

1. Which of the support practices identified in your data would you regard as specifically responsive to multilingual repertoires, rather than as general differentiation or inclusive teaching? What empirical criteria would allow researchers to distinguish the two?

2. Your results suggest different emphases in nursery-school and primary-school conceptions of readiness. What concrete changes in information exchange or assessment practice at the institutional transition would follow from this finding, and how might their effectiveness be evaluated?

3. How would you design a follow-up study to investigate whether teachers' favourable attitudes towards multilingualism are translated into sustained classroom practice, while avoiding reliance solely on self-report?

Overall evaluation and recommendation

Melinda Fürész-Mayernik has produced a coherent and substantial dissertation on a significant problem in multilingual education. Its principal scientific contribution is an empirically grounded, teacher-centred account of the gap between positive orientations to multilingualism and the uneven availability of systematic professional knowledge and language-responsive pedagogical practice. The study also draws attention to the institutional assumptions shaping school readiness and to the risks of interpreting language-dependent performance through an exclusively monolingual lens. These contributions are meaningful even though the findings are primarily descriptive and exploratory.

Taking its strengths and acknowledged limitations together, I consider the dissertation to meet the substantive scholarly standard expected of a PhD thesis in linguistics, with a clear applied-linguistic orientation. I recommend its acceptance for public defence. Subject to the candidate's satisfactory defence and the decisions of the competent doctoral bodies, I regard the dissertation as a suitable basis for the award of the PhD degree.

Veszprém, 27 October 2026



Prof. Dr. István Csernicskó

Reviewer