



Making Homework Work Across Languages

What multilingual families teach us about inclusive homework

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Research in Brief

This linguistic ethnography examined how multilingual migrant learners in Ireland navigate homework between school and home. The study followed two families—five learners and their primary caregivers—over four months. The families used multiple languages at home while their children encountered English, Irish English, and Irish in school. Observations, interviews, recordings, photographs, documents, and learner materials were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

The study found a mismatch between school language practices and the multilingual resources used by families. At home, learners and caregivers moved flexibly between languages, but homework tasks often required a particular school language. This could create difficulties with spelling, pronunciation, reading, oral tasks, and even mathematics. In one family, for example, mathematics discussion moved between currencies and languages used at home and those required by the school task.

The findings also show that multilingual learners and caregivers actively draw on their available languages and, in some cases, online resources to navigate homework. However, caregivers may still struggle to help when they are unfamiliar with the language or methods expected by the school.

For teachers, the study suggests that homework can become more inclusive when students' full linguistic repertoires are treated as learning resources rather than obstacles.

✓ Try Tomorrow

- Allow students to discuss or plan a difficult task in the language they are most comfortable using before producing the required school-language response.
- Provide pronunciation, vocabulary, worked examples, or visual support when homework depends heavily on language.
- Check whether a task requires parents to know a particular language or school method in order to help.

★ One Key Takeaway

A multilingual home is a learning resource; homework should not assume that learning happens through only one language.

Keywords

multilingualism, homework, inclusion, language policy, migrant learners, family learning,

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