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Learning and Teaching Irish in English-Medium Primary Schools Executive Summary for Parts 1 and 2

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Primary schools have traditionally held and continue to hold a very important role in the promotion of the Irish language nationally. When the primary school curriculum was redesigned in the Free State, the spread of Irish to future generations was seen as one of the most important functions of schooling. The formal inclusion of Irish as a primary school subject has had a long-term impact on the general public's access to the Irish language, an opportunity which may not have been afforded to them in such a frequent and sustained manner otherwise (Tittley, 2004). Primary teachers have been key players in the wider language maintenance initiative for almost a century and exhibit certain traits that set them apart from the general public, such as an above-average interest and ability in Irish. Though the primary school curriculum has been reimagined at different intervals over the past one hundred years, early career teachers still report that being a teacher of Irish is central to their overall professional identity.

Curricula designs are influenced by contemporary understandings of how languages should be taught. Ireland has embraced a number of different approaches to the teaching of Irish: the grammar-translation method, the audio-visual approach, the communicative approach, and now an integrated approach. Each of these approaches has its own merits and suits different types of learners, but the changeover to a new approach can raise new and sometimes unforeseen issues. For example, the Payment by Results system in the 1831 curriculum prompted a reduction in the rates of illiteracy but led to didactic teaching methods for a narrow range of subjects. Another example was the move from an audio-visual approach in the 1971 curriculum to a communicative approach in the 1999 curriculum. The 1971 language curriculum was teacher-led, and had an advantage in terms of the all-Irish character of lessons, but researchers noted that the move from such a didactic approach, to group work and paired work could lead to an increased use of English in Irish lessons (Harris & Murtagh, 1999). Evaluations of the teaching of Irish while the 1999 curriculum was in place did indeed show a tendency for teachers to use English while teaching Irish (DES, Inspectorate, 2005). This tendency was also related to teachers' insecurity with their proficiency in Irish and concern around children's ability to understand the lesson. More recently, we have seen that in response to children's reported low level of interest in Irish lessons, teachers

began introducing more games, and while this led to higher levels of enjoyment in classes, the games sometimes had limited value in developing communication skills (DES, Inspectorate, 2007; DES, Inspectorate, 2018). The following sections give a brief overview of each significant period in the teaching of Irish.

Early periods in the learning and teaching of Irish

The first formal education system was set up under British rule in 1831. The use of Irish was not permitted amongst children and staff under this model, but Irish was introduced as an additional subject in primary schools in 1878. Though the Irish language was already in decline before the British school system was implemented, the education system did contribute significantly to the negative associations with speaking Irish, which were arguably communicated to the next generation. There are examples of rich teaching experiences outside of the classroom during this period, however, as well as some high-quality literature for young children.

The introduction of Irish in the 1922 curriculum

1922 saw the first formal introduction of Irish to the primary school curriculum. The curriculum design, though often criticised for being too narrow, had some merits. It underscored the importance of target language use, which has been retained in later curricula. It also placed emphasis on developing reading skills in Irish: this was important as literacy is a lifeline for minority languages (Hickey & Stenson, 2016). There were also examples of vibrant writing for and by children at this time and children's engagement in Irish-language pastimes.

In the early periods of the revitalisation of Irish, policies were by and large accepted by the public as a collective effort. Through exploring language and educational policy at this time, a range of challenges facing teachers and school communities become apparent. A lack of support outside of school, the removal of highly-qualified women teachers under the marriage bar, and limited continuous professional development, all undermined teachers' ability to teach Irish effectively, and impacted on teacher morale. Children's writings showed that they were in some ways aware of this strain, and negative attitudes to Irish were linked to negative attitudes to schooling more generally. Some of the weaknesses evident in the earlier British educational model in 1831 impacted on the implementation of the 1922 curriculum, especially limited understandings

of effective early years' pedagogy. There is evidence that some attempts were made to change teaching methodologies and resources but in a very delayed manner.

The second half of the twentieth century saw a deeper questioning of the position of Irish in the education system with a particular focus on children's future employment and the country's economy. Several other challenges and issues were present, including schools' physical structures and makeup, resources available, strained relationships with other stakeholders, and meeting the diverse needs of children. These were not solely language issues, so would not necessarily have been alleviated even if English had been the language of instruction. Ultimately the first curriculum for the teaching of Irish showed the importance of the presence of minority languages in education, but that schools needed to have in place the necessary infrastructure to successfully teach the language. Creating and maintaining a bilingual society cannot be delegated to the school; it needs to be reinforced in the community, and intergenerational transmission needs to be fostered (Fishman, 2001).

The 1971 curriculum and an audio-visual approach to language teaching

The implementation of the 1971 curriculum marked the introduction of an audio-visual approach to the teaching of Irish and the use of some engaging film reels and short cartoons to interest children. The curriculum was more child-centred and broad-based and engaged more stakeholders than the previous curriculum during the design process. The emphasis in the general curriculum on child-centred learning, though positive, was not enough to exact major change, and more practical supports were needed to help teachers manage children's interlanguage and create opportunities for children to engage in dialogue. Clarity around how other language skills could be meaningfully integrated, and how parents could be supported to support the Irish language was also lacking.

Reading was marginalised in this curriculum owing to perceptions of the previous curriculum being 'too literary'. The most extensive study of children's experiences of learning Irish at this time signalled that a communicative approach to learning Irish would have many benefits for increasing children's positive experiences but stressed that a curriculum in itself was not a remedy for all issues involved. Other factors, such as the contraction of hours allocated to Irish, the reduced number of children experiencing other subjects taught through Irish (content and

language integrated learning [CLIL]), and limited parental encouragement in relation to progress in Irish, all impacted on the learning and teaching of Irish. The difficulties of reversing language shift in a minority language primarily through the education system were beginning to be understood by the 1970s. A decline in children's abilities in Irish and their difficulties in mastering the language skills intended to be taught in the *Nuachúrsáí* (New Courses in Irish) was also observed.

National attitudes surveys available for this period are useful in shedding light on the emotional and affective aspect of learning Irish. The main conclusions to be drawn from these findings are that society assigned a clear role to teachers and primary schools in the revitalisation of Irish. Despite support for the revitalisation and maintenance of Irish in education, negative attitudes to the actual experience of learning Irish in school still prevailed, and there was limited use of Irish outside of formal education. These negative or ambivalent attitudes could be communicated to children outside of the classroom.

The 1999 curriculum and a communicative approach to language teaching

The 1999 curriculum placed more emphasis on the holistic development of the child and was arguably more child-centred than its predecessor. The implementation of the curriculum was done in a more systematic way, and teachers were consulted at different stages. A communicative approach to language teaching underpinned the curriculum, and enjoyment and nurturing positive attitudes were core principles, but some inconsistencies in how Irish was taught were still evident. A review of children's experiences with the 1999 curriculum found some positive change in their disposition to Irish. Contemporary Irish children's books were reported to be underutilised in classrooms however, in keeping with the general marginalisation of reading experiences of children in the classroom.

Though teachers represented the most active users of Irish, they still reported some insecurities in their language competence. Teachers also noted the demoralising effect of feeling their efforts did not match the children's achievement in Irish. A major decline in children's performance in Irish was noticed in the early years of implementing the 1999 curriculum, but these concerns were not addressed in a timely manner. It became obvious that the curriculum alone would not be enough to counteract some of the challenges in teaching Irish. Strategies such as

using informal Irish and CLIL could be of great use in increasing exposure to Irish, but their potential was not fully realised.

The Primary Language Curriculum and an integrated approach to language teaching

The current Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) offers an integrated view on language learning and acknowledges the increasingly-diverse linguistic and cultural profile of Irish classes. This curriculum builds on the foundations of the 1999 curriculum in terms of its main approach and thus does not have the radical changes that characterised earlier curricula implementation. The PLC also responds to teachers' experiences with the 1999 curriculum and provides opportunities for teachers to implement more innovative approaches to teaching Irish, e.g. CLIL, as well as emphasising the reciprocal nature of communication and the development of digital and critical literacy. The online supports on the NCCA website allow for materials to be added as the curriculum is implemented and for teachers to contribute to the effective teaching of Irish. In the coming years, there will be more empirical evidence available regarding teachers' and children's experiences of such an integrated approach.

Curricula and changes in language learning and teaching

Though each of the curricula had different emphases, an analysis of each period reveals that monolingual approaches are favoured for the teaching of Irish, i.e. that Irish is taught mainly through Irish. The direct method, audio-visual method, and communicative language teaching all constitute monolingual approaches (Thomas et al., 2019). A monolingual approach has the general aim of using as much Irish as possible in the lesson, and is linked to theories of language acquisition, such as the emphasis on critical periods for language acquisition and initial development of oral language. Though the PLC actively encourages the integration of the child's full linguistic repertoire, it is still recommended that Irish is taught primarily through Irish, and English is taught primarily through English.

Some changes in emphases are evident in the different language curricula outlined above, such as the prioritising of different language skills. Changes in emphases are necessary to respond appropriately to a changing educational landscape. The delays witnessed, however, in

implementing requisite changes in response to the evolving needs of children and teachers significantly impacted on teachers' and children's experiences of Irish.

Issues impacting on the learning and teaching of Irish: Inside and outside of the classroom

It is obvious that certain systemic structures and limited support outside of the school have impacted on experiences of learning and teaching Irish. Although there have always been very committed teachers who were cognisant of the needs of the children, and many of whom who wanted to support the spread of Irish, the expectations on teachers in the very early years of the formal teaching of Irish were too great. Contemporary teachers too are aware of the responsibility assigned to them in teaching and more generally promoting the Irish language (Dunne, 2019). Early curricula were implemented in a rash manner. More recent curricula design has included a wider range of perspectives, with more stakeholders engaged at the draft stages of the curriculum, which will hopefully lead to more of a shared vision. National attitudes surveys show us that there is a general consensus in society that Irish has a clear role in the education system, but citizens have a complex relationship with the language. Apathy amongst the general public and residual negative feelings towards previous policies are likely to be communicated directly and indirectly to children in the home and in the community, and hence influence their experiences of learning Irish in the classroom.

There is a well-documented decline in the proficiency of children in relation to Irish in national testing between 1985 and 2002 (Harris et al., 2006). Some of this decline is attributable to the narrow-based curriculum that was in place in the earliest periods in the teaching of Irish; the subsequent contraction in the time allocated to Irish when new subjects were introduced in the 1971 and 1999 curriculum; the reduction in the amount of English-medium schools teaching another subject through Irish from the 1980s onwards (Harris & Murtagh, 1999); and the unrealistic expectations on the education system to reverse language shift. Children's and teachers' limited access to Irish-speaking communities means that they rely on the school environment for exposure to Irish. The ambivalence shown by the general public in relation to a decline in children's achievement shows a lack of co-ordinated effort to pass the language to the next generation. Teachers can, therefore, feel isolated in their roles. A further issue is that teachers' morale is affected when they do not feel that their efforts in teaching Irish are matched by children's

achievement in national testing. No curriculum is a panacea, however: realistic expectations as to what can be achieved, as well as structured support are needed by the whole school community for its successful implementation.

Conclusion

The introduction of the 2019 Primary Language Curriculum offers the opportunity to respond to the emergent needs of learners and teachers in dynamic and creative ways. In designing innovative approaches to teaching Irish, it is important to focus on the skills and dispositions we want to inculcate in learners and to target weaknesses that have been identified in the teaching of Irish. Primary schools constitute the site where the majority of the population first experience Irish, and in which they have the most sustained exposure to the language. As Harris reminds us ‘any initiative which enhances, however modestly, the success of such schools has the potential to affect a large number of pupils, and thereby make a substantial contribution to the language-revival effort nationally’ (2006, p. 54). Promoting Irish amongst our youngest citizens grew out of a vibrant grassroots movement, and the commitment of teachers in particular. Indeed highly proficient speakers of Irish often cite an inspirational teacher as impacting on their own language journey. Primary teachers are interested in the holistic development of the child, but their role as teachers of Irish is a core part of their professional identity. Any successful initiative for the teaching of Irish needs to be forward-thinking but also mindful of our experiences to date. Our cultural memory of almost a century of teaching Irish is critical because what is remembered, misremembered, and forgotten from earlier experiences in primary education can still influence current experiences of learning Irish.