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Learning and Teaching Irish in English-Medium Schools Part 1: 1878–1971

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Contents

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> Ordinary schools have a particularly important role in reproducing competence in Irish in each new generation. Because the rate of natural transmission of the language outside Gaeltacht areas is low, the renewal function of ordinary primary schools is central to maintaining existing levels of speaking proficiency in Irish nationally. (Harris et al., 2006, p. 165)

Introduction

For the majority of children in Ireland, especially those who live outside the *Gaeltacht* and are part of families who speak languages other than Irish in the home, the primary school classroom is the first site in which they encounter the Irish language. It is often the place where they have the most sustained exposure to Irish throughout not only their education, but their lifetimes. There are three main educational models in which children learn Irish—Irish-medium schools in the *Gaeltacht*, Irish-medium schools outside the *Gaeltacht* or in the *Iar-Ghaeltacht*, and English-medium schools in the *Iar-Ghaeltacht*—but it is the third model, i.e. English-medium schools, in which the majority of children, and hence the general population, is exposed to Irish. English-medium primary schools play a critical role in introducing children to Irish, in developing positive attitudes to the language, and in encouraging second or additional language (SAL) speakers of Irish. Learning Irish is a cornerstone of the child's primary education as seen by the time allocated to it during the school week, and the historical and contemporary importance of schools in revitalising Irish nationally. All of these factors make the teaching of Irish in English-medium schools of significance beyond the classroom walls.

Factors that impact directly on the child's experience of Irish in English-medium schools include the quality of teaching, the curriculum in place and the learning resources available, such as the class textbooks and other reading materials, the natural environment, artefacts of interest to the children, and multimedia resources. Other factors which impact on the teaching of Irish that are just as important but perhaps less visible at times, include community support for the language, general attitudes held by the public in relation to Irish, parents' experiences of learning Irish and their own attitudes and dispositions towards the language, and how these are communicated to children. The impact of language loss in previous generations, the association

of the Irish language historically with nationalist struggles, and the contemporary role of the Irish language in national and individual identity formation can contribute to a complex psychological relationship with the language. These additional issues have the potential to influence our views regarding the learning of Irish and subsequently other languages. Very often, national analysis of the success or otherwise regarding the teaching of Irish relies on the examination of census data, achievement in standardised testing, and national attitudes surveys. The main findings from these key sources will be presented, and their strengths and limitations in understanding the totality of the experience of learning Irish will be explored.

The two volumes which comprise this report explore, in chronological order, language and educational planning for the revitalisation and maintenance of Irish. Volume 1 focuses on the status of Irish prior to Independence and the first formal curriculum implemented in 1922. Volume 2 examines more recent experiences of learning and teaching of Irish, namely within the 1971, 1999 and 2019 curricula. The report considers some of the factors that impact on the affective dimension of learning Irish, including the transmission of negative attitudes from one generation to the next. Also examined are issues and decisions made outside the classroom, and other non-linguistic factors that have had the potential to impact on children's experiences of learning Irish. This report adopts an appreciative enquiry approach to the exploration of texts written for children and by children, particularly when Irish was first introduced formally to the education system, to challenge the simplistic view that the early immersion education models during the Free State, and audio-visual approaches adopted in the later curriculum, were largely unsuccessful or under-resourced. Finally, this report offers some perspectives of pre-service teachers and how they anticipate their future role.

There is a continuing long-term growth in the percentage of the population reporting some ability in Irish in the census (Ó Riagáin, 2001). Watson and Nic Ghiolla Phádraig (2011) estimate that about 16% of the population can engage in all or most conversations in Irish, and studies show that the majority of the population (89%) remains positively disposed to the language (MORI Ireland, 2004). More women identify themselves as daily speakers of Irish in the Republic of Ireland compared to men (see census data from 2016), and it is noteworthy that there is a predominance of females in the teaching profession at primary level. Although it may be difficult to understand the level of proficiency that respondents actually hold, the fact that a

large number consistently report ability in Irish shows that many people perceive the language as part of their identity, and that schools are the domain in which most speakers use their Irish.

It is over one hundred years since Ireland's first Dáil (1919) in which the formal teaching of Irish in primary schools was initially formulated. Over the past century, there have been at least four significant revisions in the teaching of Irish, responding to new understandings of how children learn, with the backdrop of an evolving society. As we approach the full implementation of an integrated language curriculum in primary schools and other more general curriculum changes, it is timely to reflect on experiences of learning and teaching of Irish to date.

Approaches to the systematic literature review

Several approaches have been used in the past to explore the learning and teaching of languages in Ireland, e.g. census data, specific studies of language achievement, and national attitudes surveys. A synthesis of effective language teaching (Harris & Ó Duibhir, 2011), as well as comparative studies of minority language education, are also available (Ó Duibhir et al., 2015). In the 2011 synthesis of effective language teaching, a best evidence search was used to locate empirical evidence for the period 1980–2010. A best evidence approach has strength in identifying studies on achievement that include conditions and characteristics that are very similar to the Irish context, e.g. studies with children of a similar age. A comprehensive overview of the search items used and the databases explored are also available in the synthesis for the reader.

Aspects of the best evidence search were employed in the initial stages of the current literature review, but it was not considered entirely appropriate for a number of reasons. First, in earlier periods of the teaching and learning of Irish in primary schools (1878–1922, and 1922–1971) there is little empirical data available on children's achievement in Irish. Second, through an initial analysis of the key texts relating to the teaching and learning of Irish in primary schools—*Teaching and Learning Irish in Primary School: A Review of Research and Development* (Harris & Murtagh, 1999); *Irish in Primary Schools: Long-Term National Trends in Achievement* (Harris et al., 2006); the *Chief Inspector's Report, 2010-2012* and the *Chief Inspector's Report, 2013-2016* (DES, Inspectorate, 2013; 2018); *Beginning to Teach*, (DES, Inspectorate, 2005); *Irish in the Primary School* (DES, Inspectorate, 2007); and discussion

documents by the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO)—it became obvious that there are several factors that impact on experiences of learning Irish besides the direct teaching of the language.

In choosing the studies, policies, and other sources of evidence reviewed here, a number of approaches were therefore used. First, the key studies relating to the learning and teaching of Irish, as identified by Harris and Ó Duibhir (2011) were selected. In order to identify other relevant empirical studies outside of the time limits in the Harris and Ó Duibhir (2011) synthesis, a search was done on several databases using the keywords 'Irish language' and 'Gaeilge' (and its variant forms), and 'primary education'. This Boolean search identified thousands of studies: an analysis of the abstracts revealed that there was a limited number of studies conducted in Ireland beyond those originally identified by Harris and Ó Duibhir (2011).

It was necessary to engage in a hand search, as was adopted in the Harris and Ó'Duibhir synthesis. Certain sources have not been digitised and appear as chapters in edited books, or indeed form an entire book, so the following collections were consulted: *Teangeolas* (the periodical of Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann); *Oideas* (the periodical published by the Department of Education and Skills, formerly the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Education); publications by the Literacy Association of Ireland, formerly the Reading Association of Ireland; and the conference proceedings from the first all-island conference on immersion education: *An Tumoideachas Bua nó Dua?* At the time of writing, the conference proceedings from the second conference had not yet been published. It was also necessary to consult relevant Irish-language sources, and so the indexes of the following journals were examined: *Comhar Taighde, Taighde agus Teagasc, Teagasc na Gaeilge, Teanga*, and *Léann Teanga An Reiviú*.

The status of the Irish language in Ireland

> Language planning in Ireland is still largely about the protection and regeneration of Irish, rather than about the implementation of a given articulated and well-labelled language policy that incorporates English, Irish and other languages in Ireland. (Ó Laoire, 2005, p. 252)

This section explores the position of Irish as a minority language in Ireland, and the historical context of the revitalisation of Irish, to illustrate the important role assigned to primary schools in transmitting a minority language such as Irish to the next generation.

Irish is one of the three minority indigenous languages in Ireland along with Traveller Kant and Irish Sign Language, and one of the estimated 200 languages spoken in Ireland. Ó Laoire (2005) shows how language separation has traditionally been a feature of national policy because of the minority status of Irish. Defining the status of Irish in Ireland today is a complex task. Irish is a minority language in the sense that its pool of speakers is a significant minority; but it is the first official language of the state and so under the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages (ECRML), it cannot technically be classified as a minority language. For the purposes of this research, the term 'minority language' is used to indicate that a minority of people speak the language.

It should be noted that the case of Irish as a minority language differs from other minority languages because of four notable characteristics (Harris, 2008a, p. 50):

1. The weak position of the language in the *Gaeltacht* heartlands at the time when the revitalisation initiative of the state originally began.
2. Despite its minority status in terms of number of speakers, it was installed as the first official language of the new state.
3. The failure in the interim to improve the rate of intergenerational transmission of the language within families and homes—either in the *Gaeltacht* or Irish-speaking areas in the West, or in the rest of the country more generally.
4. The heavy reliance placed on the education system to compensate for this failure of natural transmission.

To understand the role that schools took on in the teaching and transmitting of the Irish language to the next generation, we must take into consideration the extent to which the language had been in decline before it was introduced to primary schools, and explore views on whether language shift was imposed in the country or whether it was a choice made by citizens.

Irish was once the first language spoken by the people of Ireland, but the use of the Irish language as a mother tongue is reported to have been in decline since the 17th century which can be attributed to historical events during struggles with the colonial power. The Fitzgerald study (2005) examined data from the 1911 census for people born before 1851 and still alive in 1911, and hence was able to map out the dramatic decline of Irish as the first language of the population. Some of this decline was influenced by explicit educational and governmental policies to curtail and eradicate the use of spoken Irish in schools. Significantly in the 1831 British national education system, any report of speaking Irish was dealt with using physical punishment despite the fact that Irish was the first language of almost a third of the school-going population (Mac Mathúna, 1988). The *bata scóir*, or tally stick on which incidences of speaking Irish were recorded, was also the instrument used to physically punish children for speaking Irish. Shame now began to be associated with the use of Irish, and the impacts of this shame are reported frequently in later years, e.g. Douglas Hyde's famous speech *The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland* (1892), which revealed the long-term impact of these negative and traumatic experiences on collective memory.

Other scholars suggest that those citizens of Ireland chose to speak English for academic and economic advancement, e.g. Kelly (2002). The Great Famine and subsequent mass emigration of Irish speakers reduced the number of first language speakers dramatically in Ireland. Over half a million Irish speakers are estimated to have emigrated to America, for instance (Doyle, 2006, p. 221). Patterns of emigration to English-speaking countries encouraged many citizens to switch to English before they left and very often emigrants did not continue to speak Irish in their new environment. The profile of emigrants also had an influence on language shift in Ireland. Unlike emigrants from other countries at this time, the profile of up to half of these people leaving was often young, unmarried women who rarely returned to Ireland (Dolan 2008; Doyle 2006). In other emigration situations where men emigrated, women sometimes remained at home and raised children through their mother tongue. The permanent movement of such a large number of women from Irish-speaking regions resulted in reduced amounts of

children born into Irish-speaking households in Ireland, and thus the tradition of intergenerational transmission was severed.

As some authors suggest, the 'choice' to speak English over Irish for this generation was circumscribed by enormous external pressures towards conformity (McCloskey, 2001; Ó Tuathaigh, 2015). The two language options were not balanced, the consequence of choosing Irish carried with it more limiting life opportunities so could be seen as a free choice or one that people would necessarily have made under different circumstances. The trends in language shift in homes and communities, from English to Irish, in order to enable young citizens to emigrate to English-speaking regions, meant that many parents and children might have considered the acquisition of fluency in English as a key priority in primary education. Identity as an Irish speaker was, however, still important for many citizens. In 1851, for the first time, a question about Irish speakers was included in the census. This high proportion who wished to be recorded as an Irish speaker is indicative of the importance of the Irish language in people's identities, a trend that has continued in national attitudes surveys, e.g. Ó Riagáin & Ó Gliasáin (1984; 1994).

The position of Irish in the school curriculum prior to Independence

The establishment of The Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language in 1876, The Gaelic Union in 1880, and the Gaelic Athletic Association in 1884, were key efforts in promoting Irish language and culture at a time where the language was being suppressed. *Conradh na Gaeilge* or The Gaelic League established in 1893 represented a more concerted effort to encourage people to use Irish in their everyday lives. Kelly (2002) notes that *Conradh na Gaeilge* was successful in the spread of the language even before it was introduced to primary schools after Independence. Children's literature in Irish emerged in the at the beginning of the 20th century when *Athbheochan na Gaeilge*, or key efforts to revitalise the Irish language, were in full swing. At this time, children were not allowed to formally learn Irish in school. Pádraig Mac Piarais and other teachers and advocates, began writing stories and dramas so children would have access to texts in Irish that they could read at home or in classes run by *Conradh na Gaeilge* (Nic Congáil, 2012). The vitality of children's books in Irish is often overlooked in the discussion of limited resources for the teaching of Irish, a point that will be returned to later in the section Children's experiences of Irish and the primary education system during the 1922 curriculum. *Timirí Teanga* or visiting teachers travelled the length and breadth of the country to teach the language

to other citizens. These grassroots initiatives experienced a lot of success despite the explicit oppression of Irish in formal structures (Kelly, 2002).

Two grassroots groups that worked to ensure Irish was included in the curriculum were The Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language and *Conradh na Gaeilge*, which had a further aim of making Irish the medium of instruction in schools. While under British rule, Irish had not formed part of the national curriculum, but from 1878 it was decided that Irish could be included as an optional subject (Ó Murchú, 2001). In 1883 teachers and inspectors were granted permission by the commissioners to use Irish with Irish-speaking children in their class. In practice, however, most teachers and managers were not aware of this provision, with the result that classroom interactions were conducted in the most part solely through English (Ó hÉallaithe, 2008). Under the Revised Programme of 1900, the Irish language was retained as an optional subject during ordinary school hours. The 1883 decision to allow teachers and inspectors to use Irish as a means of communication with Irish-speaking children in Irish-speaking regions was formalised in 1904 under the Bilingual Programme. Irish-language advocates and educators were very influential in the design of educational policies in the initial years of the revitalisation, produced many pamphlets on the topic, and were also instrumental in bringing about educational reform. Indeed there were early reports that members of Sinn Féin were visiting schools to ensure Irish was being used (Kelly, 2002). Another significant contribution of *Conradh na Gaeilge* was the establishment in 1918 of the Education Committee and its subsequent publication of a Comprehensive Programme for Irish at all three levels of education. Under this programme, Irish was no longer relegated to the status of an optional subject but was rather to form a core component of the primary school curriculum with all subjects to be taught through Irish in the *Gaeltacht*, a bilingual programme was to be established in *breac-Ghaeltachtaí* (partial Irish-speaking areas) and Irish was to be taught for at least an hour a day in the *Iar-Ghaeltacht* or English-speaking areas. Irish language 'enthusiasts' were often criticised for their influence on the nature and content of the curriculum. By referring to this group as 'enthusiasts' their pedagogical knowledge, and general interest in children's welfare may have been overlooked. Many of the advocates for the promotion of Irish in primary schools were *Timirí Teanga* or those who had teaching experience.

In reviews of the British education system in operation in Ireland, several weaknesses were reported. The Powis Commission (1868-1870) found that infant education needed considerable improvement (O'Connor, 1988). The Dale Report conducted later in 1904 also found that infant education was one of the weakest elements of the education system (Walsh, 2012). There were also differences in reported perceptions amongst teachers and other stakeholders in relation to children's educational experiences and outcomes (Máirtín, 2003). Nevertheless, some enlightened pedagogical thinking was present during this time. Kelly (2002) notes the general progressive nature of the Revised Programme of Instruction (1900), which focused on practical subjects such as cookery, singing, drawing, school discipline, drill, laundry and needlework. While the vision of this curriculum is to be praised, the fact that it was not fully implemented should also be noted (Walsh, 2012).

Other progressive educational models include the development of a bilingual model of education in Mac Piarais' Scoil Éanna. Elements of innovative thinking are evident in his writing and the school structure in terms of the child-centred and experiential focus in learning, the international flavour of his thinking, and the provocative critique of the former British educational system, especially in his most famous article, *The Murder Machine* (Ó Buachalla, 1980). In particular, his articulation of the pastoral role of the teacher or *oide*, a synonym for foster-parent, and his promotion of the arts through Irish, were very innovative for their time. Bilingual teaching in this model, however, was understood as teaching the subject in Irish and then in English rather than teaching it bilingually, i.e. using two languages, and this monolingual separatist approach to language learning is a key feature of later curricula.

It is interesting to note that in the first Dáil in 1919, there was a ministry for Irish and responsibilities for national education were held within this department (Ní Ghallchobhair, 2014). The Department of Irish was transferred a week later to the Department of Education on the recommendation of Éamon de Valera, but the Department of Education was not legally established until 1924. In its earliest formal inception, therefore, the Irish language and primary education were seen as inextricably linked. This is understandable in the context of the government's aim to revitalise and renormalise the language, focusing on the youngest citizens of Ireland.

There was a spectrum of views in relation to the extent that people believed the education system could increase the number of Irish speakers and encourage bilingualism. Timothy Corcoran, Professor of Education in University College Dublin and a very influential voice in the revitalisation of Irish, held the strong conviction that educating children through the medium of Irish would ultimately result in society switching to a majority use of Irish (1930). Other language advocates and educators such as Hyde and McNéill, members of *Conradh na Gaeilge*, espoused a more balanced view of a bilingual society (Ó Laoire, 2005). Indeed Ó Laoire notes that *Conradh na Gaeilge* did not have an anti-English ideology and that there was no explicit reference to the total replacement of English by Irish. As the language revitalisation initiative progressed, differences in views were presented as polemical, with one side in total support of Irish and the other against it, but it is important to remember that from the outset, people were in favour of varying degrees of promoting the language. It is interesting to see how similar the logic used in both sides of the debate was: language advocates and educators, e.g. Mac Piarais suggested that because language promotion was successful in the Belgian context, it would work in Ireland (Ó Buachalla, 1980), while dissenting voices of other educators, such as members of the INTO, suggested that because efforts failed in Alsace-Lorraine (1941), the language revitalisation effort would not work in Ireland. Both sides largely held the view that the sociolinguistic context of another jurisdiction was applicable to Ireland.

Another point to remember is that some of the weaknesses evident in this early educational model—especially the differing views between the various stakeholders and the limited understandings of effective early years pedagogy—impacted on the implementation of subsequent curricula.

The revitalisation of Irish and the role of primary schools in the Free State

> …Just as the schools had allegedly killed the language in the nineteenth century, so they could revive it in the twentieth. (Lee, 1989, p. 671)

This section explores the first formal introduction of Irish in primary education from 1922, including a discussion of the issues, linguistic and otherwise, that impacted on the implementation of immersion schooling in previously English-medium schools, and the pressures that this put on teachers and the school community.

As Reynolds has pointed out, 'at decisive moments in social history, children have been at the centre of ideological activity' (2007, p. 2). With the foundation of the Free State in 1922, and independence from British rule, the emergent national identity was strongly linked to the revitalisation of the Irish language (Ó hÉallaithe, 2004), and a co-ordinated effort was made to restore and maintain the Irish language, starting with the youngest citizens. As secondary schools were not yet attended by the majority of children, primary schools were regarded as formative institutions for societal change. Coolahan (1981) goes so far as to say that the spread of the Irish language was the most important function of the primary school programme, a point which other authors cite as detrimental to the general educational attainment of children during this period (Kelly, 2002).

An Coiste Téarmaíochta or the Terminology Commission was founded in 1926 to support schools in the teaching of Irish, especially by producing dictionaries for different domains. It is not simply the case that the Irish language inherently lacked words for certain concepts, but rather that some words had fallen out of use orally. Between 1928 and 1942, the Department of Education produced nine terminology guides to help teachers teaching through Irish, and from 1962 *An Gúm* published over 30 dictionaries. In the 1930s dictionaries for children were also produced (Ní Ghallchobhair, 2014). In coming up with appropriate terms in Irish, experts from different fields were consulted to understand the nuances of concepts, and efforts were made to examine the etymology of the word and hence choose an accurate term. These principles still underpin the work of the *An Coiste Téarmaíochta* (Ní Ghallchobhair, 2014).

The unpublished Pollack Review commissioned by the government at this time also pointed to weaknesses in terminology for the teaching of different subjects through Irish (Kelly, 2002). As can be seen in later curricula, this type of input, though necessary, is not enough to ensure that children can have opportunities to acquire and use new vocabulary in a communicative way. Translations were a way to counteract the shortfall in books available, and this was facilitated largely by *An Gúm*. Supplying works in translation and some original texts encouraged Irish writers (Titley, 2000) and made international texts available in the Irish language.

It is understandable that primary schools had a key role in the revitalisation of Irish in education. A major government initiative for minority languages such as Catalan, Basque and Welsh was to include them in formal education, as was the case in Ireland. Education is the site where larger political, social, ideological values are transmitted and reflected; the very values which fuel language revival struggle (McCarty, 1998). Schools are for the large part in receipt of state funding and can readily be used as an agency of state language planning. Finally, as a formative institution, schools can help to nurture and develop attitudes and behaviours of members of society (Ó Laoire & Harris, 2006). The presence of a minority language in schooling can also have an impact on the number of younger speakers (e.g. Catalan speakers); the absence of a minority language from formal education diminishes possibilities for younger generations to develop favourable attitudes to the language and to use it as a means of communication with peers (Lasagabaster & Huguet, 2007).

Relying on the educational system to revitalise a language can pose some difficulties, however (Spolsky, 2004). Support for the use of the minority language outside of the classroom walls is also needed, involving families and the community, and this support needs to be underpinned by governmental support (Lasagabaster, 2007). Where the goal of education has been to revitalise the minority language that had once been suppressed, there has been limited success. There is, of course, the notable exception of Hebrew, however that was due to other key supports outside of the school (Ó Laoire, 1999; De Barra, 2019). While the presence of a minority language in formal education is critical to the spread of the language, it can be argued that as a result, schools bear the entire burden of language planning implementation (Ferguson,

2006), and this can have a negative impact on teacher morale and children's experiences of learning the language.

The 1922 curriculum

> There was a hostility towards Irish at the very moment it was introduced to schools, indeed long before, and... this legacy of hatred plays a much bigger role in the animosity that exists towards Irish today than simply our collective experience as school children. (De Barra, 2019, p. 121)

1922 represented a time of radical change in national educational policy. This was the longest standing curriculum, as later curricula were revised after shorter periods of time. The implementation of the 1922 curriculum in the first half of the twentieth century will first be examined, and then changes in the perceptions of the role of education in the second half of the century will be presented, showing the shift in views regarding the importance of Irish as a cultural symbol in children's education, to the role of education in national economic expansion.

Although the state had around 90 years' experience of a primary education system, Walsh notes that 'many of the issues that had previously marred Irish education were inherited by the Free State' (2012, p. 21). This is important in understanding some of the resistance and difficulties experienced by teachers and schools in implementing curricular changes. The issue that is given most attention in the discussion of this era is the new expectation that teachers would teach through Irish, particularly in infant classes. This issue will be explored first, and then other infrastructural weaknesses will be examined. Next the increased diversity of primary classrooms will be explored, as well as the residual psychological trauma associated with language loss in the previous generation.

In 1923, there were just 12 school inspectors appointed, 8 of whom were involved in visiting and evaluating all primary schools in Ireland, so the pressures relating to this workload are understandable (Máirtín, 2003). Inspectors' reports from this period focus on children's achievement in Irish, but there is a lack of empirical data available regarding the observation of classroom interactions. There is, therefore, a lack of qualitative data on how Irish was taught at the time. Inspectors' reports are partially published between 1925–1930, and there are some short accounts of the work in schools published by the Department of Education until 1964

(Walsh, 2012, pp. 176-183). However it is very likely that teachers' low levels of morale and feelings of inadequacy would have impacted negatively on children's experiences. Indeed Walsh suggests that school life during this period was generally 'difficult' and 'joyless' (2005, p. 263).

Teacher proficiency and other issues in teaching through Irish

From St. Patrick's Day in 1922 it was announced that 'the Irish language shall be taught, or used as a medium of instruction, for not less than one full hour each day in all national schools where there is a teacher competent to teach it' (Hyland & Milne, 1992, p. 88). Tomás Ó Deirg, the Minister for Education, stated that the language revitalisation effort rested largely on primary schools (O'Donoghue, 2002). There was a great optimism amongst Irish-language advocates surrounding the introduction of Irish to the primary curriculum. Teachers, however, bore the greatest responsibility and burden in promoting the language. As Kelly (2002) comprehensively outlined, the expectation that primary teachers would begin teaching all aspects of the primary curriculum through Irish was very onerous and sufficient training was not provided for teachers. For instance, in 1922 only 1,100 out of 12,000 primary teachers held the bilingual certificate (Ní Ghallchobhair, 2014, p. 67). There was a limited number of teachers, therefore, who felt confident and competent to not only teach Irish as a subject but also to teach through Irish.

There was a conflation during this period of teacher competency in the language and their ability to teach the language, or through the language. After only a short time, teachers' insecurities in their ability to teach Irish effectively were emerging, even where they held a bilingual certificate. The education system responded in some ways to the emergent needs of teachers and children, mainly through the provision of Irish-language courses (Kelly, 2002). In the early years of the Free State, teachers and inspectors attended *Gaeltacht* courses in the summer for up to 8 weeks to improve their general language skills. This experience was useful in allowing teachers and inspectors to be part of the co-ordinated effort to improve their Irish, and also to see Irish spoken in a naturalistic environment.

Though infrastructural supports for local people in the *Gaeltacht* were not given much attention, the *Gaeltacht* was seen as a great resource for learners of Irish. Scholarships and subsidies were offered to children and their families. Cadbury's, for example, advertised a scholarship to Gibstown, Co. Meath. The brevity of these courses is cited as one of the reasons

why teachers did not attain a high-level mastery of the language to enable them to teach effectively through Irish (Kelly, 2002). In 1926, preparatory colleges were opened in Cork, Dingle, Donegal, Dublin, Galway and Mayo in which secondary schooling was conducted through Irish in order to prepare young people to later enter colleges of education. The preparatory colleges were continually opposed by different government and union groups and eventually closed in the 1960s (Walsh, 2012).

Difficulties in teaching through Irish began to be noted a few years after the curriculum was implemented. During the 1930s, there was continuous questioning from different stakeholders, who viewed the language policy as educationally unsound and detrimental to the revival effort (McAdory & Janmaat, 2015). Teachers showed great dedication to promoting Irish, indeed a great deal of the resources available such as translated reading materials were produced by the teachers themselves (Ní Chuilleanáin, 2014), but this did not compensate for the limited support given to them to improve their Irish language skills or continuous professional development regarding immersion methodologies. Teacher morale was negatively affected by working conditions such as the three-tiered payment system established in 1924 (Kelly, 2002), with Irish-medium schools being favoured.

Some changes were introduced in the first decade of the formal teaching of Irish, which largely pertained to the role of the Irish language. In 1927 it was agreed that English could be used before ten and after two, but this was when some schools closed for the day. This change was in response to teachers' expressions of concerns about the welfare of children being taught through a language that was not their mother tongue. The INTO reports from this era reveal a groundswell of opposition to the curriculum and highlight some parents' objections to the immersion system as communicated to teachers (INTO, 1941). There was a clause for parents to object to their children learning Irish; this was mostly to cater to Protestants who felt that the language curriculum, in particular, was not aligned with their values.

Overall, the 1922 curriculum was ambitious and reflected much of the optimism around a new and emerging Irish identity, post-Independence. It was a radical departure from its predecessor but was not implemented in a considered or staged approach (Kelly, 2002; Walsh, 2012) which impacted on classroom experiences.

Pedagogical approaches to teaching Irish and other subjects

Kiberd (2005) notes that in newly-independent states, the education system often focuses on rote learning. O'Donoghue and Harford (2012) challenge us to think of this period not as 'post-colonial' but as 'continual colonisation of the mind' (p. 338), so it is worth looking at the types of pedagogical approaches and educational values that were inculcated in the Free State.

In terms of appropriate and effective teaching methodologies, progressive views on child development as put forward by Montessori, Pestalozzi etc. were rejected by key figures in the design of the Irish curriculum, and instead, traditional methods such as the direct method were used. Certain people appear to have had a disproportionate amount of power in decision making at this time, such as Timothy Corcoran, who has been described as the 'master builder' of education during this period (O'Neill, 1943, as cited in O'Connor, 2004). His voice dominated educational discourse for the first two decades of the Free State (Titley, 1983). As O'Connor says, 'His work displays a lack of willingness to reconcile the Irish cultural revival with the then-contemporary theories of infant education and practice' (2004, p. 45).

Corcoran advocated a return to the older tradition of primary schools with a narrow focus on literacy and numeracy, a system that was in place when there was only a minority of children attending primary school and when the curriculum was very academic. He also encouraged memorisation and repetition as teaching methodologies. The direct method espoused by Corcoran was recommended in all primary schools to increase exposure to the Irish language. Ó Laoire (2003) showed how the direct method often encourages closed questioning and does not necessarily allow for meaningful communication.

The Irish language curriculum at this time focused on the grammar and translation method which is useful for certain types of learners, but may not give rise to communicative competence. Given the limited focus on oral language, the expectation that children were passive in classes, a culture of corporal punishment, and the pressures on teachers, it is not surprising that negative attitudes to learning Irish grew amongst the school-going population. In the INTO *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Use of Irish as a Teaching Medium to Children Whose Home Language is English* (1941), a survey to which 10% of teachers responded, the authors cited the teaching of Irish as the most controversial of all educational questions and showed how the teachers they represented were not happy with the progress achieved by

children. The affective dimension of teaching was mentioned as well as the potential for bad educational experiences in learning Irish to impact negatively on children's views of the language. Teachers responding to the survey suggested that these negative experiences may be 'unpleasant' and 'distasteful' for children (1941, p. 105). They also questioned the issuing of the *deontas* or grant to children in the *Gaeltacht* only. The INTO report criticised the teaching methods recommended by the curriculum for teaching Irish as being too rigid and suggested that greater links between the different strands of reading and oral language might be a better educational approach.

Walsh (2012) notes the concern of courses being 'too literary' which was understood as a focus on rote memorisation of complex texts (p. 34). There is arguably a legacy of this resistance to a strong emphasis on reading in later curricula. An additional issue in the teaching of Irish was the use of the Gaelic script, which was in existence in educational documents, and supported by Fianna Fáil, until 1963 (Ní Ghallchobhair, 2014). Efforts were made to introduce a more coherent spelling system, but early committees in 1941 established by Éamon de Valera were largely unsuccessful. This script presented a difficulty in encouraging early literacy in Irish.

Issues in the primary education system that impacted on the teaching of Irish

We must consider how other non-linguistic factors impeded the teaching of Irish, and arguably other subjects during this time period. The vision of the 1922 curriculum was a step back in many ways from the more practical and child-centred aims of the 1900s curriculum (Kelly, 2002). Some Irish-language advocates and educators were also disappointed at the conservative approach and myopic vision of new Ireland adopted by key policymakers post-Independence, e.g. Úna Ní Fhairceallaigh (Nic Congáil, 2010). The role that could be played, in particular by women and children in this emerging nation, as outlined in the Proclamation was curtailed by several national policies. On a societal level, key policymakers were drawing on the security and romantic ideals of Ireland's past to forge new identities in Independent Ireland.

Coolahan, in his introduction to Walsh's work, notes how the radical nature of change resulted in missed opportunities for reflection (2012). It is still the case that individuals and groups, particularly teachers and Irish-language advocates, were imbued with a sense of purpose and they continued to promote education, care and language development for children during this

timeframe, despite working under several restrictive conditions. Cummins (1978) characterised this early period of immersion education as top-down, i.e. the impetus for such as system was government dictated, which differed from the later renaissance in immersion practices which was parent-led, and so constituted a bottom-up approach. In the former scenario where individual choice was absent, understandable resistance emerged to the educational model being advocated. In the early meetings regarding the teaching of Irish in primary schools, almost half of the attendees were from backgrounds other than teaching, showing that there was a wider interest and investment in the role of the education system to revitalise Irish. There are suggestions that citizens were afraid to voice concerns about educational approaches during this period, with some people actively supporting the government's plan to reverse language shift, and others acquiescing (Kelly, 2002). These conditions did not lend themselves to a shared vision of education, which impacted on the curriculum's successful implementation.

Another issue related to accountability and testing. While the Payment by Results system was abolished in the 1922 curriculum, the introduction of the Primary Certificate placed an onus on teachers to achieve certain standards, and many of the same issues involved in standardised testing emerged (Conway & Murphy, 2013). The Primary Certificate prioritised reading and writing over speaking skills. Adding to this was the evaluation of teachers' general ability as being synonymous with their ability in Irish (Cummins, 1978), which was problematic when teachers saw their role as more holistic.

Significant new challenges also faced teachers. In 1922 when schooling was made compulsory, the school population increased dramatically. In 1925, an estimated 77% of children were now attending school. Classes were more diverse, hence strategies that worked for a more academic minority were not suited to the range of needs now present in classrooms. In 1922, 80% of schools were one or two teacher schools (Walsh, 2012) so individual teachers were under great pressure to implement new changes in multigrade classes. Schools were often not well equipped with suitable educational spaces. Teachers' needs for training on differentiated teaching approaches to support these children, many of whom were the first in their family to attend school, were not adequately addressed. It is obvious from the reports of the INTO that teachers always regarded their role as helping the holistic and general development of the child, and these concerns were to the fore in the 1941 report. Teachers' accounts in this report showed

increased sensitivity in teachers towards the wide range of needs of this diverse population now attending schools, with vivid descriptions of teachers' concerns over children's malnutrition, including defective teeth, and sleep deprivation.

In the 1941 INTO study, teachers suggested that reading was a way to help children relax and that this was especially effective for children who were sleep-deprived, perhaps involved in agricultural work that required them to work during the night. Teachers saw that the benefits of reading went beyond the acquisition of literacy skills (INTO, 1941). The Department of Education rejected the findings of the INTO survey on the grounds that there were no women on the committee of inquiry or teachers with sufficient experience of infant teaching (Kelly, 2002, p. 51). They claimed that this survey captured the views of 'middle-aged, somewhat tired and not too linguistically equipped teachers' (p. 52). Whether completely representative or not, accounts from teachers highlight that the ethical, moral and pastoral role of teachers has always been a critical dimension of the primary teacher's identity.

Women and the teaching of Irish

Another key systemic issue at this time was the marriage bar in place from 1933–1958, (although the bar continued in the civil service until later) whereby women were forced to retire upon marriage, and early retirement was enforced for women aged 60, as opposed to 65 as in the case of their male counterparts. In 1932, the Irish government, in response to an economic downturn, announced a marriage bar in primary schools (Redmond & Harford, 2010, pp. 645-646). Though there was significant opposition from other stakeholders on the grounds that the ban would lead to fewer marriages, and that married women were, in fact, more suited to teaching children, it remained in place until 1958. Women didn't have the solidarity of fellow women and other female workers did not join in their campaign for better working conditions. This was probably due to a divide that existed between middle-class and working-class women. As Redmond and Harford (2010) suggested, 'the lack of sympathy is most likely due to the fact that as a privileged and educated elite, women teachers' claims held little interest for those struggling for basic rights such as holiday pay and safe working conditions' (p. 643). Women also did not have much support from other groups involved in key decision making, in relation to progressing their working rights.

The marriage bar produced a dramatic decline in the number of serving female teachers, who had up until that point been in the majority (Redmond & Harford, 2010, p. 644). The effect of the marriage bar was more pronounced in primary schools than it was in secondary schools because free fees for secondary schools were not introduced until the 1970s, and so the secondary school teaching population was significantly smaller. At that time, the average age of marriage was 31, an age at which the teacher would have spent around a decade in service. Colleges of education did not take in new entrants at this time either. By the 1940s, when the effects of the marriage bar were first felt, there was a shortage of teachers, and about a quarter of teachers were unqualified (Redmond & Harford, 2010, p. 652). The marriage bar systematically removed women from teaching at a time when they had acquired significant experience of teaching methodologies, most often with infant classes, which was critical in implementing the revised curriculum. It should also be noted that female Irish speakers also slightly outnumbered male Irish speakers, in areas outside of the *Gaeltacht*, in the 1946 census. It is surprising that the removal of people of such high calibre and the requisite skills set has not been explored more in the discussion of issues surrounding the early periods of teaching Irish.

Children's experiences of Irish and the primary education system during the 1922 curriculum

In understanding childhood, we often rely on official policies and reports, anthropological studies, and the memoirs of individual writers (Walsh, 2005). There is a paucity of research available relating to the general experiences of childhood in Ireland in the first part of the twentieth century. Our discussion is therefore supplemented with some evidence of children's experiences of the education system drawing on articles penned by children in the school-based periodicals *Tír na nÓg* and *An Gael Óg,* and the *Bailiúchán na Scol* collection now available on the *Dúchas* website (www.duchas.ie). *An Gael Óg* was chosen because it represents the most substantial and long-running reading material available to children in Irish for sixty years (1938-1998). It is estimated that 35,000 copies of the periodical were sold each month and so they had a wide reach (Caomhánach, 1996, p. 249). The *Bailiúchán na Scol* collection in the 1930s was a commissioned piece of writing from primary school children. It provides rich social commentary on their perspectives of the primary school experience and other issues relating to the Irish language at the time when Irish was first introduced to primary schools.

The first issue of *Tír na nÓg*, on which *An Gael Óg* was later based, was published in 1923, the first year after the new schooling had been introduced: the editors hinted at the tensions between the teachers and other stakeholders. The editors attempted to show that there was more of a co-ordinated effort in relation to language revitalisation, which was overdue: 'Is mar sin ba cheart dóibh a bheith riamh ach is fearr déanach ná choíche' (1923, p. 2), and described how both teachers and inspectors were going to the *Gaeltacht* to brush up on their Irish. Assessment of the teaching of Irish was reportedly a stressful experience for teachers. In the 1923 edition of *Tír na nÓg*, there were stories about the teacher trying to flee the room on the day of the inspection. In later editions of *An Gael Óg* and *Tír na nÓg*, and in writings that form part of the *Bailiúchán na Scol* collection, we see that children often composed short funny stories or jokes based on these tense assessment experiences (Dunne, 2019b).

It is important to acknowledge the work produced in *An Gael Óg* and *Tír na nÓg* in producing non-traditional literature for children, encouraging children to read a range of different genres and to create Irish-speaking networks at a time when there were limited supports available to teachers. *An Gael Óg* and *Tír na nÓg* also encouraged the development of *Ógra Éireann* and social groups for young Irish speakers. Other hobbies at this time that involved the Irish language included drama groups. Irish-language drama flourished in the 1930s and the competitions run by *An Cumann Scoildrámaíochta* provided a space for children to use their Irish recreationally (Kirwan-Keane, 2012; Dunne, 2016). The figures for children attending these competitions are particularly high in the early years of the Free State, and governmental support was very obvious with the hosting of the awards ceremony in *Áras an Uachtaráin*, as well as support from the then Minister for Education, Tomás Ó Deirg. Book clubs such as *Club Leabhar na Sóisear* were influential in getting children engaged in issues related to language revitalisation, and indeed in giving them access to works in Irish.

An analysis of data from the 1975 language attitudes survey conducted by the Committee of Irish Language Attitudes Research revealed that people who were in school in the first two decades of the new curriculum showed more positive attitudes to Irish. This is likely linked to early enthusiasm and interest in the language question nationally. As Ó Riagáin (1997) notes, the success of earlier policies was probably based on the language requirement to enter the civil service labour force and not on pedagogy. Children who had a father working in the civil service

around this time report increased use of Irish in the home (CILAR, 1975). On the other hand, negative experiences of education contributed to negative attitudes to Irish. Data from the 1975 study also showed that the cohort with the most negative attitude to the Irish language, and to schooling generally, was in school in the 1940s and 1950s, when key infrastructural support was lacking, the marriage bar was in place, and teachers reported significant stress in their role (CILAR, 1975, p. 75). Attitudes to and memories of learning Irish are, therefore, bound up in complex ways with larger systemic issues.

Changes in policies in the second half of the twentieth century

Major changes in relation to the Irish primary curriculum were obvious in the second half of the twentieth century. 1948 saw a break from the restrictive views of infant education that was promoted by Corcoran in particular and in the system more generally, where teachers were allowed half an hour of English teaching per day (O'Connor, 2004). Circular 11/60 issued by the DES in 1960 gave infant teachers a choice between using Irish as a medium of instruction or teaching Irish as a subject only (O'Connor, 2004). Despite changes in policy, there remained a tradition for many years afterwards of using Irish informally and of teaching certain other subjects through Irish in some schools showing teachers' commitment and innovation in the teaching of Irish (Harris & Murtagh, 1999).

From the 1960s onwards, the focus in education was increasingly for economic purposes to help children get jobs upon completion of primary and secondary schools. The advent of free fees meant that more people were able to continue on to secondary school. Prior to the 1960s getting an education was seen as important, with a general education being seen as useful; in the second half of the century the value of individual subjects became the focus of discussion (Mac Aogáin, 1990). It was during this time that the Language Freedom Movement (LFM), a group that campaigned for the compulsory nature of Irish to be removed, was founded. The compulsory nature of Irish at this time meant that children had to pass the state examinations in Irish in order to secure a place in one of the national universities, and that competence in Irish was required to gain a position in the civil service. Kelly claims that this arrangement in the civil service 'sacrificed [talent and competency] on the altar of language revitalisation' (2002, p. 110). The LFM believed these conditions unfairly discriminated in favour of Irish speakers. Christopher Morris, the founder of the Language Freedom Movement, recalled how fellow architects were

unable to register fully because they had not received a pass in Irish in the Leaving Certificate. Frank Crummey, another member of the LFM, outlined the conditions faced by postal workers where their lack of a pass in Irish meant that they could not receive a full pension (Rowland, 2016). As Rowland (2016) points out, there was some overlap in the thinking of LFM and other Irish-language groups. People in both of these seemingly extremist groups shared some of the same interests in wider educational reform, e.g. Proinsias Mac Aonghusa, a member of *Conradh na Gaeilge*, and Frank Crummey, a member of the LFM, who both campaigned for the removal of corporal punishment.

Critics of the language requirement based their argument on principles of equality, i.e. that all applicants should be given the same opportunity. De Barra (2019) noted that a language requirement in the civil service is in place in countries such as France and Norway to reduce the likelihood that people will switch to the hegemonic language of English. Because there was such an unequal relationship between English and Irish, the arguments for favourable conditions for Irish speakers were made on the grounds of equity, i.e. that positive discrimination was needed in order to support speakers of the language. Nevertheless, the focus would more reasonably be placed on ensuring a sufficient cohort of people were able to conduct their work through Irish rather than expecting each individual to hold these qualifications. In later years, particularly after key policy documents on inclusion, such as the Education Act in 1998 and the Education for Persons with Special Education Needs Act 2004 were published, issues of equity and the need to provide additional supports for certain groups were revisited. In reviewing the early policies of promoting Irish in the civil service, the structures were often interpreted negatively as discriminating against the general public, rather than providing neccessary support for Irish speakers.

Critics of immersion schooling and the revitalisation policy became more prominent in the 1960s, and they pointed to the fact that many children educated through Irish would eventually emigrate to English-speaking countries (e.g. Macnamara, 1966). The aforementioned language requirement in the civil service was one measure to address this, but the underlying logic in the argument against schooling in a language different to the language of home or community, deserves some interrogation. Curricula are not designed solely for the present time. If we had introduced a curriculum focusing on preparing future builders and developers during

the Celtic Tiger years, mirroring the current economic climate, we would have had a crisis in 2008 with the skills of the majority no longer aligned to the needs of the country (O' Breacháin & O'Toole, 2013). Curricula are necessarily forward-thinking and far-reaching, but as these critics rightly pointed out, they must to be revised at intervals: something which did not happen with the first formal curriculum. The second issue in the previous argument, in relation to emigration to English-speaking countries, is that curricula need not be utilitarian: this undermines the capacity of children to be agents of social change—to not simply be prepared to fit into the society in which they are born but to challenge and change it.

Doubts in the ability of the education system to produce competent speakers of Irish were, however, understandable considering the lack of professional development that teachers received, and the limited reinforcement of Irish beyond the school gates. The 1965 White Paper—*An Páipéar Bán um Athbheochan na Gaeilge*—referred to the aim of national bilingualism rather than reversing language shift as outlined in earlier policies. There was a reduction in the educational budget between the 1920s and the 1960s. Whereas in 1926, it comprised 80% of government spending, in 1961, it comprised 59% (Walsh, 2012, p. 94). The Investment in Education Policy (1965) placed a renewed emphasis on the importance of investing resources in the education system for the prosperity of the nation.

Adding to the diminishing faith in the education system was the publication of the Macnamara (1966) report claiming that children in Irish-medium schools were lagging behind their English counterparts in relation to the English language and aspects of mathematics. In an era where there were not many published studies on the teaching of Irish, this damning report had a big impact. Cummins (1978) later examined the Macnamara report, exposing the shaky sampling methods—the schools in which the pretest occurred were not representative of the immersion schools in Macnamara's study. A further issue was that the effects of receiving instruction through a weaker language were conflated with the effects of performing a test in a weaker language, which may have produced some inflated claims. Cummins' later evaluation of the test results suggested that the achievement of children had not been negatively impacted by their learning through Irish. As Mac Mathúna notes, though, this did not fully dissipate the fears people had about Irish-medium education (1988). Other studies commissioned by the government around this time such as the Pollack study were not published, so our understanding

of classroom experiences is limited (Kelly, 2002). Equally, studies regarding non-linguistic advantages of learning a second or additional language are not available for this period.

Conclusion

The Irish language was already in decline before the British school system was implemented in 1831, but the education system did contribute significantly to the negative associations with speaking Irish which were transmitted to the next generation. In the early periods of the revitalisation of Irish, policies were by and large accepted by the public as a collective effort. While some see this as a return to an 'idealised past', in looking at insights from terminologists e.g. Ní Ghallchobhair (2014), it might be better reframed as an effort to renormalise the use of Irish, and an acknowledgement that Irish society's knowledge was advanced in several respects but the loss of the Irish language meant that there was a loss in the collective memory of these advances and progress.

In exploring language and educational policy at this time, a range of challenges facing teachers and school communities become apparent. Despite these challenges, teaching still remained a sought after profession. The increased pressures placed on teachers in terms of teaching Irish and contributing to language shift were undeniable. A lack of support outside of school, the removal of highly-qualified women teachers under the marriage bar, the narrow view of infant education, and limited continuous professional development undermined their ability to teach Irish effectively, and impacted on teacher morale. Children's writings from the period show that they were in some ways aware of this strain, and negative attitudes to Irish were linked to negative attitudes to schooling more generally.

The 1922 curriculum 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 which is important as literacy is a lifeline for minority languages (Hickey & Stenson, 2016). There are also examples of vibrant writing for children at this time and children's engagement in Irish-language pastimes. Titley (2004) maintains that people who reported proficiency in Irish did so as a direct result of the educational policy in place at that time.

A curriculum alone is not enough to guarantee success, however. The first curriculum was a departure from the previous 90 years. There is evidence that some attempts were made to change teaching methodologies and resources, but it was in a very delayed manner. The second half of this period reveals a deeper questioning of the role of Irish in the education system with a particular focus on future employment and the country's economy. The rise and fall of immersion schooling in Ireland fits neatly with the global trend of nationalism during the first three-quarters of the twentieth century (McAdory & Jamaat, 2015). Several other issues were present, including schools' physical structures and makeup, resources available, strained relationships with other stakeholders, and the needs of a more diverse range of children. These were not soley language issues; even if English had been the language of instruction, these issues would not have been alleviated.

In the absence of comprehensive empirical data during this time period, we must be mindful of the sources of information we have on the learning and teaching of Irish. There is some divergence in views relating to the implementation of the 1922 Primary School Curriculum Findings from each of the different voices—children, teachers, inspectors, union groups, members of the government, and other stakeholders—represent slightly different perspectives, and each contributes to the totality of our understanding of the early periods in the learning and teaching of Irish.

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).

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