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Learning and Teaching Irish in English-Medium Schools Part 2: 1971–Present

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Learning and Teaching Irish in English-Medium Schools Part 2: 1971–Present

Primary schools have a special role in promoting the Irish language amongst Ireland’s youngest population. Since 1922, the Irish language has formally been a core subject in the primary school curriculum, and most children gain experience in speaking, reading and writing in Irish from their first year in school. This report examines the second major revision of the Irish primary curriculum in 1971 and the introduction of the audio-visual approach to language learning. The implementation of the 1971 curriculum is contextualised within broader attitudes to the language as collected in national surveys. Next, the report examines the communicative approach to language learning as implemented in the 1999 curriculum, and the more child-centred approaches to learning and teaching inherent in this curriculum. Data on the achievement of children during this period with regard to Irish are also presented. As we approach the full implementation of the Primary Language Curriculum, an integrated language curriculum, this report explores the theoretical underpinnings of this approach and examines the supports needed for its effective implementation. In analysing the four main curricula and periods in the learning and teaching of Irish, we can see issues beyond the classroom walls that impact on children’s and teachers’ experiences with the language.

The vision of the 1971 curriculum

1971 marked a major revision of the curriculum and occurred almost 50 years after the national education system was set up post-Independence, and when the Irish language was first formally introduced as a subject in primary education in Ireland. Understandings of childhood and its significance in human development had developed since the 1922 curriculum, and the function of schooling had also evolved, with primary school no longer being the endpoint of a child’s educational journey (DES, 1971, p. 15). The curriculum aimed to respond to the emerging needs of children and teachers.

Curriculum design in Ireland was informed by international educational practice and in particular by the Plowden Report (1967) in England (Walsh, 2012). More consultation occurred before its implementation than had been done for the 1922 curriculum, and there was a more co-

ordinated approach to help empower schools to implement the curriculum. Several positive general educational changes occurred during this period. The improvement in physical structures of schools, as well as reduced class sizes, contributed to a more positive classroom climate. Key principles of learning, such as group work and differentiation, were incorporated, and there was a move away from teacher-directed learning. This new curriculum aimed to address some of the issues that had arisen in the 1922 curriculum, such as focusing on a narrow range of subjects, and the new curriculum aimed to cater for a range of needs. Some contradictions existed in the 1971 curriculum, however. Kelly (2002) notes that even though the 1970's curriculum espoused a child-centred emphasis, there was the expectation that education prepares you for adulthood. Another contradiction is that children were frequently referred to as 'pupil' limiting their identity to learners.

Colmán Ó Huallacháin acted as an advisor to the Minister for Education at this time. *Comhairle na Gaeilge*, established in 1969, devised five separate reports between 1970 and 1974 in relation to the Irish language in education. As Hyland and Milne have pointed out, there was great merit in their recommendations, such as ensuring teachers were trained in contemporary language teaching methods and allowing student teachers to study other subjects through Irish during their college years (1992, pp. 548-550), however these recommendations were not implemented in full.

Emphases in the 1971 language curriculum

The 1970s heralded a new language teaching approach, the audio-visual method, which was in keeping with international practice. Theories of cognitive psychology were influential in the design of the language curriculum, particularly the importance of rich language input. Teaching resources in the form of the conversational *Buntús* programme were brought out in the 1960s, which provided more tangible support for teachers. Recommended texts for reading were also provided. Harris and Murtagh (1999) outlined some of the strengths in the teaching of Irish at this time, characterising language teaching as a second language (SL) as opposed to a 'foreign' or modern language because of the all-Irish character of the lesson and use of Irish outside of the official Irish lesson.

The language curricula (*Gaeilge* and English) were available in their respective languages, making an assumption that teachers had the ability to access content provided in Irish. The curriculum for Irish-medium schools in the *Gaeltacht* was distinct from English-medium schools outside the *Gaeltacht*. A curriculum for Irish-medium schools outside the *Gaeltacht* was not included, probably because the renewed interest in Irish-medium schools was in its infancy. A challenge in implementing the language curriculum was the emphasis on whole group instruction, especially for oral language (DES, 1971, p. 76), which significantly diminished the potential of conversations to be natural or to take place between peers.

Indeed peer learning was underdeveloped. Studies on the significance of learners' errors, e.g. Corder (1967) were starting to emerge, but it appears that this body of international research did not influence the design of the 1970's language curriculum greatly. The curriculum described the teacher as a role model of accurate language use. The teacher's need for modern terminology in Irish, and their role in error correction was stressed (DES, 1971, p. 27). The negative influence of English on the child's spoken Irish was mentioned, but the potential transfer of language skills was not. Practical suggestions to get children talking, such as structured pair work, were also lacking.

Arguments have been put forward that certain skills were not emphasised enough in the curriculum, e.g. writing (Comhairle na Gaeilge, 1974; Greaney, 1978), or the potential of language skills to influence each other, e.g. reading helping to develop oral language and vice versa (Hickey, 2001). Additionally, schools often did not have the physical spaces to allow for the group work and activities suggested in the curriculum, or suitable spaces for the audio-visual resources (Andrews, 1978).

Supporting teachers to implement the 1971 curriculum

The new audio-visual approach contained many new and innovative resources such as film reels and short cartoons. The ABC method in the *Nuachúrsaí* (New Courses in Irish) focusing on conversation aimed to engage all children and to build proficiency, particularly in spoken language. For teachers who would implement the 1971 curriculum, proficiency in the language was developed at pre-service level. Preparatory colleges also gave pre-service teachers a good grounding in Irish. Indeed some former students of preparatory college went on to contribute to

Irish-language writing, such as Breandán Ó hEithir. After the closure of the last preparatory college in the 1960s (Walsh, 2012), the weight of professional development for Irish occurred during initial teacher education. An interview to gain access to the Bachelor of Education programme was necessary, and candidates were tested on their ability in Irish and music as well as undertaking a general interview in English (Ó Nualláin, 1983). Colleges of Education began a longer degree programme in the 1970s, and some places were reserved for native speakers.

In terms of developing appropriate teaching methodologies, Ó Dubhghaill (1987) suggested that teachers did not receive sufficient training in how to implement the new curriculum. He showed in particular how teachers had difficulty with the final step of the recommended teaching method, *saorchomhrá*, or free conversation. A key premise of the *Nuachúrsaí* was that reading was based on the vocabulary learned in the oral lessons (Ní Argáin, 1991). Ní Argáin suggested that the rigid format of the *Nuachúrsaí* posed issues for the writing of engaging textbooks, and the textbooks were not sufficient to test the competence of the children. Teachers reported that they spent a lot of time explaining the new vocabulary, often through English. Ní Argáin further claimed that the textbooks were old fashioned and lacked engaging aspects such as humour for the young reader. Walsh (2012) noted the omission of material of interest to girls.

An issue in children accessing the books published during this time was the lack of standardisation in print. There was no consensus as to whether the Gaelic script or Roman script should be used (Ó Murchú, 2012). Kelly (2002) pointed out that this was confusing for emergent readers. As Pollack suggested in his analysis of the revitalisation of Irish, the change to using the Roman alphabet was key to making Irish accessible to new speakers (as cited in Kelly, 2002). It should be noted that publications such as *An Gael Óg*, a magazine published by the Christian Brothers that had a wide readership in primary schools provided a forum in which these issues of different scripts were explained to children.

The high quality of some reading material available at this time, as was recommended in the curriculum, should be acknowledged. There has recently been a renewed appreciation of early Irish language literature for children which was more than a resource for literacy (see Nic Congáil, 2012). Although the editorial concerns and processes of *An Gúm* and other publishers has been criticised at times (see Ó Conchubhair, 2009), particularly during the early years of the

Free State, it is worth noting that many of the decisions made in terms of vocabulary, structure and style were made on sound pedagogical reasons such as focusing on a core number of words and the inclusion of simple repetition, as in the work of Máiréad Ní Ghráda, whose books were recommended texts in the curriculum. These represent strategies that are still used amongst commercial producers of children's reading texts.

Children's achievement in Irish

There is a paucity of published research during this period. The 1967 Towards a White Paper on Education was never published, and despite the fact that during 1968 and 1971 a pilot project of the new subjects was introduced, no official review of the pilot project was undertaken (Walsh, 2012). There is, therefore, limited discussion of children's actual experiences of learning Irish during the time the 1971 curriculum was in place, but some data on the attainment of children is available. Kellaghan, Macnamara and Neuman (1969) found that teachers perceived children to have more difficulty with Irish and mathematics compared to English. Children also tended to rate their performance in Irish as lower than their performance in other subjects (Kellaghan, Madaus & Airasian, 1982).

There were several classroom observations conducted as part of the largescale Harris and Murtagh study published in 1999. This study provided the most comprehensive account of the teaching and learning of Irish during this time period. The study was conducted just before the introduction of the revised 1999 curriculum and reflected on the strengths and weaknesses of the audio-visual approach, as well as anticipating the issues involved in implementing a communicative approach to language teaching. Between 1978 and 1982, children's attainment of mastery of the oral objectives attached to the *Nuachúrsáí* were tested. The research was commissioned at this time because of claims that standards of achievement were declining in senior classes and in secondary school (Harris & Murtagh, 1999). The Harris and Murtagh (1999) study employed very rigorous sampling methods for the 20 classes chosen, which allows it to be generalisable. It will be recalled that sampling was a weakness of the 1966 Macnamara study, reported in the first volume of this report, which undermined the credibility of its findings. Observations of classes were a key feature of the 1999 study and provided rich data on interactions in the Irish lesson.

Harris and Murtagh (1999) suggested some influences on achievement. There appeared to be a gender factor in the learning of Irish with girls being more favourable to SAL languages, and they also found that smaller class sizes contributed to better achievement in Irish. Harris and Murtagh (1988) showed that only a small proportion of children experienced another subject taught through Irish, but that general achievement in Irish improved for children who did have this experience. A small-scale research study was conducted by Lindsey (1975) which revealed that there was a lot of attitudinal support amongst teachers for optional Irish-medium streams. History, geography, music, and visual arts were the subjects that teachers thought were most suitable to teach through Irish. Two resource books for teaching other subjects through Irish were produced in the late 1980s: *Lean den Ealaín* and *Bain Triail As!* The resources were devised in collaboration with teachers and were not simply translations. Apart from these studies, there is little other empirical data in relation to content and language integrated learning (CLIL) available for this decade.

The levels of achievement in Irish was also linked to general academic ability, school location and social class, and to a lesser extent, parental encouragement and use of Irish in the home. One of the disappointing results of the twenty-class study was the decline in the standards achieved by children in certain language skills. The decline in standards will be discussed further when the results of Harris et al. (2006) are presented. Inclusion of children's voice in the 1999 study was important. Issues that were relevant for children which may not be apparent to adults were examined, such as children's comments about the portrayal of men and women in textbooks (e.g. McGowan, 1992). Children in 'low-achievement classes' mentioned other affective dimensions of their learning of Irish such as the *Nuachúrsaí* lessons being 'boring, old-fashioned and repetitious' and reported that they would prefer more meaningful interaction through games, conversations, songs and rhymes. This passivity is linked to general approaches to teaching within this time period. The Burke and Fontes (1986) study showed how the vast majority of teachers during this time expected silence for most of the classroom time, an approach that is not conducive to encouraging children to engage with material generally, but is particularly detrimental for language teaching. Mixed views were reported regarding reading, but it should be noted that the children's experience of reading materials was limited and mostly reliant on the school textbook. Children were generally in favour of the idea of learning another

language but did not enjoy the experience of learning Irish. A communicative approach to language teaching was advocated for in the Harris and Murtagh (1999) study, and a report of the communicative materials project was provided.

Harris and Murtagh anticipated that a move to communicative language teaching (CLT) might alter some of the positive aspects of the teaching of Irish. The authors suggest that the all-Irish character of the lesson might be linked to whole-class and teacher-directed strategies but that the emphasis on group work might involve an increase in switching to English or the children's home language. In classes where there was a high achievement, 37% of the class was devoted to communicative practices, whereas in classes where there were low-achieving children, only 10% were devoted to communicative teaching. Harris and Murtagh suggested that about 50% of the lesson should be communicative (1999, p. 327).

Parents' influence on children's attitude to and competence in Irish

A curriculum in itself is not sufficient to exact positive change, and much support is also needed from key stakeholders. The role of parents was changing around this time. Although parents were named as the primary educators of their children, their ability to meaningfully engage in their child's education was hampered by a number of systemic factors. The dominance of church and state in Irish education resulted in the diminished role of parents in educational policy and parents were effectively removed from centre stage to outside the school gates (Coolahan, 1988). The 1960s saw more questioning of school and societal structures, and in 1975, parents were allowed to be on school Boards of Management for the first time. In 1985 the National Parents Council Primary was established, with the aim of involving parents in the formation of educational policy-making for schools. Parents' rights were articulated more fully in the 1995 White Paper on Education.

Parents could still positively influence their children's achievement in and attitude to Irish however, even before these formal structures were in place. Language attitudes surveys conducted by the Committee for Irish Language Attitudes Research (CILAR) at this time show that fathers' proficiency impacted positively on children's proficiency, and there was a positive correlation between the father's job in the civil service and the use of Irish in the home (CILAR, 1975). No correlational analysis of this kind is provided for mothers, probably because the

marriage bar was still in place in the civil service around this time. It is worth mentioning that the mother's general attitude to Irish is a statistically significant factor, more so than the father's, on the child's attitude to Irish (CILAR, 1975), showing the impact of parents in 'stage setting' or introducing children to the Irish language (Jackson & Harbison, 2014). Conversely, negative attitudes could be communicated implicitly to children. An example of this is Harris and Murtagh's (1999) finding that parents tended to adopt a 'hands-off' approach to Irish homework and that Irish was less likely to be praised by parents compared to English or mathematics which subtly conveys a message about the status of Irish. Parental encouragement when it did occur in relation to Irish, impacted positively on children's motivation.

National attitudes to the Irish language

...murderous one-liners in the language debate... are always greatly reduced when they are set in the context of other data on the same issue. (Mac Aogáin, 1990, p. 4)

Because children's negative attitudes to Irish were linked to limited enjoyment and dissatisfaction in learning Irish, it is worth looking at factors that contributed to this negative attitude. Children's attitudes to the 1970's curriculum can be situated within national attitudes surveys. These surveys tell us about the responsibility that society assigned to schools in the revitalisation of Irish, and they also reveal societal attitudes which can be transmitted to children outside of school.

The Committee for Irish Language Attitudes Research (CILAR) was established by the Minister for Finance and the Gaeltacht in 1970. Several national language surveys were conducted, particularly while Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann (ITÉ) was in existence, which allows us to track the growth and development of attitudes to Irish. In these studies, the general public expressed favourable attitudes to Irish, for example, most people were in favour of investment in the teaching of Irish and in the development of *Gaeltacht* areas, and most people wished for Irish to be present in the education system (CILAR, 1975; INTO, 1985). The general public, therefore, assigned a role to primary teachers in the revitalisation and maintenance of Irish through the strong agreement that Irish should be an obligatory subject in schools.

In 1985 the INTO conducted a survey on the teaching of Irish, specifically accessing teachers' views (INTO, 1985). Teachers were shown to be more positive, to have an above-

average ability in Irish, and to engage in aspects of Irish culture more regularly than the general public. Teachers implicitly identified the central role of schools in language promotion. The majority of teachers in 1985 was not in favour of the promotion and maintenance of Irish being left wholly to voluntary organisations. The majority of teachers surveyed also felt that Irish was taught badly however, which reveals negative experiences of these adults in learning Irish.

At times, people expressed complex views about their relationship with Irish. A disparity existed between an interest in the Irish language, and a commitment to using the language regularly, which other scholars have commented on (CILAR, 1975; Murtagh, 2007; Ó Murchú, 2006). The public sometimes held views on aspects of the Irish language that were not aligned with current policies and practice, for example, compulsory Irish. In 1973 compulsory Irish, or the policy whereby a pass in Irish was necessary to obtain an overall pass in the Leaving Certificate, was removed. The public however, was shown to have a limited understanding of this change and the what was meant by compulsory Irish. For instance, in the 1983 study conducted on behalf of ITÉ, a substantial amount of respondents believed that children failed their exams if they failed Irish (see Ó Riagáin, 1988, p. 19). A study conducted in 1988 by Irish Marketing Surveys for Bord na Gaeilge sought to ascertain the public's awareness of the regulations governing the position of Irish at Leaving Certificate level, since 1973 (Ó Riagáin, 1988). Ó Riagáin (1988) concluded by the responses that around 40% of citizens still did not fully understand the policy. Some attitudes to the Irish language, therefore, are not based on current regulations but may reveal 'residual antagonism towards compulsory Irish as understood in the controversies prior to 1973' (Ó Riagáin, 1988, p. 20). A question in relation to grammar was included in many of the national surveys, which was probably linked to the standardisation of the language and the introduction of Roman script around this time. The fact that people regarded grammar as a potential issue in the learning of Irish deserves further interrogation.

The thrust of correlational analysis in these studies relies on static background factors—the place of birth, language of the home, language of schooling—particularly looking at the impact of early bilingualism, which does not necessarily capture current engagement with the language. More recent research shows that children who begin learning an additional language early in life have some advantages, e.g., early exposure and potentially more time engaging with the language. Older learners, and even adults, however, can achieve the same level under the

right circumstances (Baker, 2011). The analysis of language attitudes at this time is revealing of societal views on bilingualism, showing native bilingualism was valued, but sequential or late bilingualism was not given as much consideration.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the implementation of the 1971 curriculum marked the introduction of an audio-visual approach to the teaching of Irish. The curriculum was more child-centred and broad-based and engaged more stakeholders than the previous curriculum. 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. Factors outside of the classroom, including negative attitudes amongst the public, were likely to be communicated to children directly or indirectly, and to influence their experiences of Irish in the classroom.

The 1999 curriculum and a communicative approach to language teaching

Almost 30 years after the implementation of the 1971 curriculum, the primary school curriculum was revised once again. The 1999 curriculum was praised by many as being a holistic, child-centred curriculum, incorporating the importance of emotional expression and recognising the abilities of all children (Downes, 2003). The published curriculum represented another approach in how the curriculum was made available to teachers. Each curriculum subject was contained in a separate hardcopy document, with subjects colour coded by area. Separate teacher guidelines and curriculum content documents were provided. Later the curricula were made available on the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

In terms of the language curricula, there was no separate document for Irish-medium and English-medium schools though differences between schools in which Irish was the main school language or *Teanga 1*, were noted. The curriculum objectives were the same in both language curricula regardless of the language of the school, and no further distinction was made between schools in the *Gaeltacht* and Irish-medium schools outside the *Gaeltacht*. The communicative materials were trialled, and feedback was sought before a communicative approach to language teaching (CLT) approach was formally accepted as the main approach (Harris & Murtagh, 1999).

Emphases in the 1999 Gaeilge curriculum

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was the main approach underpinning the *Gaeilge* curriculum which focused on the use of Irish in a meaningful, engaging, and naturalistic way in order to promote Irish as a living language for communication. The drafting of the *Gaeilge* curriculum included pedagogical and linguistic experts, who were listed at the back of the curriculum document. As the curriculum documents were longer, there was a more detailed account of the aims and objectives for each class grouping. There was a key emphasis on enjoyment in *Gaeilge* lessons, and many of the exemplars provided to teachers included games and paired work activities.

The *Gaeilge* curriculum was provided in Irish only, like the previous curriculum, which some teachers perceived as a barrier to their understanding of content (Uí Choistealbha, 2012). The English and *Gaeilge* curriculum had very little crossover though there is some mention of the transfer of general skills. Exemplars were given in the teacher guidelines, but a list of suitable reading materials was not present, as had been in the 1971 curriculum. While the emphasis on developing communicative competence in a language was a key feature of modern language curricula internationally (Harris & Ó Duibhir, 2011), some felt the 1999 curriculum represented a further marginalisation of reading (Hickey and Stenson, 2016). Children were, of course, encouraged to develop reading skills through the *Gaeilge* curriculum, but Irish reading was viewed mostly as a means to reinforce oral language acquired (Hickey, 2001). Equally, there was no explicit guidance on how to teach decoding skills. A later report by the Inspectorate noted that there is that there is little by way of a formal approach to teach reading skills in Irish (DES, Inspectorate, 2007). The various language skills were named individually in the 1999 curriculum, although their interrelated relationship was noted in the curriculum and by several authors, e.g. Clay (2001) and Kennedy, Dunphy et al. (2012).

Challenges and supports in implementing CLT for the teaching of Irish

Pre-service teachers received input into CLT approaches during initial teacher education. Practising teachers received some support in implementing CLT too. The School Development Planning Support (SDPS) advisers (formerly the Primary Curriculum Support Programme) assisted schools in the whole school planning process, and Irish was one of the first subjects in which teachers received support. *Cuiditheoirí* or facilitators visited schools and advised teachers on the implementation of the *Gaeilge* curriculum and provided useful sources of information in relation to resources and teaching materials. Suggestions on how to implement CLT and the sharing of resources were further facilitated through the PCSP website, certain publications such as the Literacy Association of Ireland's (formerly the Reading Association of Ireland) newsletter and conference proceedings, and through some educational websites.

A challenge for some teachers in implementing CLT was that they might have experienced the audio-visual or grammar-translation method of language teaching during their own primary schooling, and therefore a paradigm shift in thinking and practice was needed

(Wilbur, 2007). The challenge teachers of Irish faced in implementing a CLT approach was evidenced by the fact that there was an inconsistency in its application in Irish primary schools (Ó Néill, 2008). Inspectorate evaluations on the teaching of Irish showed that there was a bigger inconsistency between the teaching of Irish across different schools than any other subject (DES, Inspectorate, 2007; INTO, 2004).

Teacher proficiency understandably played a role in implementing CLT, in that Irish was usually taught primarily through Irish, although this was not overtly stated in the curriculum (Ó Néill, 2008). Harris and Murtagh (1999) claimed that target language use by the teacher represented the most authentic form of communication. In ensuring that the lesson is conducted primarily through Irish, group work can sometimes pose difficulties because learners might not automatically speak in the target language (Grenfell, 2002). Teachers may wish to be in control of the linguistic progression; they fear that the child will go off-task, and they worry that they will be exposed to deviant forms of the language (Ó Neill, 2008). A tendency for pre-service teachers to give instructions and to explain new words through English during an Irish lesson has been criticised (DES, Inspectorate, 2007). Some international authors, however, have suggested judicious use of L1 in the language lesson (Orland-Barak & Yinon, 2005).

Developing cultural awareness

As a language, Irish is unique to this country and is, therefore, of crucial importance to the identity of the Irish people, to Irish culture and to world heritage. Irish is a vehicle of cultural expression and intangible cultural heritage, essential to identity. (Ó Ceallaigh, 2015, p. 180)

Language teaching is usually supplemented with the exploration of literature and art forms unique to the language, to validate the target language culture (Romero-Little & McCarty, 2006). Hawaii and Alaska, for example, have Native Cultural Standards which advise teachers on how to promote and assess the respective culture in their teaching. Though an exploration of Gaelic culture was advised in the curriculum, no specific cultural standards exist for the teaching of Irish. The English-language and Irish-language speech communities in Ireland are broadly similar. This similarity makes it difficult to design a distinctive cultural component in the school programme. Nuances in differences between the languages are therefore described in abstract terms relating to a way of thinking or being as opposed to the two communities having very

distinct value systems, social norms or art forms. Exploring Irish culture with children has been reported to be relatively underdeveloped, and concrete examples in the whole school and individual planning were lacking (DES, Inspectorate, 2007).

Promoting Irish outside of the formal Irish lesson

Other elements of the 1999 *Gaeilge* curriculum included the use of the target language outside of formal lessons, a practice that was prevalent in the past (Harris & Murtagh, 1999). Use of informal language is used in other minority language contexts to increase exposure to the language (e.g. in Wales, see Thomas et al., 2018). Some schools take part in initiatives such as *Scriobh Leabhar* and *Gaelbhratach* to encourage children to use their Irish in other contexts. The *Gaelbhratach* initiative, for example, is a good way to encourage teachers and children to use more Irish in a communicative way (see www.gaelbhratach.ie). This is all the more important when teachers report that informal Irish is often understood as the teacher giving instructions, e.g. *Tógaiú amach bhur leabhair* (Dunne, 2015). While this approach is successful in building some receptive language, it does not necessarily encourage expressive language or interactions amongst children. Harris et al. (2006) suggested content and language integrated learning as an effective way to increase the use of Irish during the school day. In relation to expanding CLIL practices however, Harris, the lead author, was cognisant of issues that arose in previous curricula such as the perception that the immersion methods of the 1922 curriculum were forced on teachers. Harris also suggested that any CLIL or extended core programme be developed in consultation with parents and teachers, and acknowledged that some parents might not be interested in such an option.

Achievement in Irish during the 1999 curriculum

The changing landscape of early years education, the diverse profile of Irish classrooms, and differences in how children enjoy learning all have implications for children's experiences with Irish. The most substantial empirical data on children's experiences of learning Irish during the 1999 revised curriculum is found in the Harris et al. (2006) study.

The Harris et al. (2006) study showed that there had been a major decline in the mastery of language objectives during the period 1985–2002. While a majority of children attained some level of mastery regarding key objectives, there was an increase in the percentages failing. Harris

provided some startling figures: 65.9% of children failed on the speaking vocabulary component, 76.5% failed on the morphology of verbs, and 64.1% failed on the control of the syntax of statements. Very few children in English-medium schools were shown to attain high levels of performance. Harris pointed out that this should not necessarily be viewed in entirely deficit terms, i.e. focusing on the aspects that were not achieved. He further acknowledged that certain children would have made some progress in relation to the strand even if they did not attain the 6th class level that was envisioned. Other issues impacting on this decline included the very small number of Irish-language books available in school libraries (Harris et al., 2006), and the reliance on the school textbook (DES, Inspectorate, 2007; Uí Choistealbha, 2012).

This decline in performance by children understandably impacted negatively on teacher morale, as they felt that their efforts did not match children's performance. Teachers in their first year of professional service reported enjoyment in the teaching of Irish (Dunne, 2015) so it is likely that there was a cumulative negative effect of efforts not translating to higher achievement amongst children. Harris et al. (2006) showed that between 1985–2002 the percentage of children whose teachers derived satisfaction from teaching Irish had fallen by 25%, while at the same time 16% more teachers reported dissatisfaction. Harris et al. (2006) also found that teachers were increasingly influenced by school and national policy as to the emphasis they placed on the Irish language and that they were less personally invested in the language than teachers in previous generations.

Some improvements were noted since the introduction of the 1999 curriculum, particularly regarding the affective dimension of learning with an increase in children's enjoyment of Irish lessons, and in their sense of pride in the language (NCCA, 2008). Data published in the 2009 in the Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) study of nine year olds suggested that at least no major decline in children's attitudes had occurred (Devitt et al., 2018), and that attitudes to Irish were broadly similar to attitudes amongst Welsh children (Pearse, 2015), and minority languages in Spanish autonomous regions (Huguet, 2006). Another positive aspect of learning and teaching Irish in schools was that the profile of Irish speakers had become more diverse. The GUI study showed that EAL learners generally had a similar disposition to the Irish language, but there was no negative orientation to the language reported amongst this group, possibly because they had not been exposed to negative attitudes in the home (Devitt et al.,

2018). Parents of migrant children reported favourable attitudes to Irish (O'Toole, 2016), and teachers noted the strengths of EAL learners (Dunne, 2015). Reports from the Department of Education and Skills' Inspectorate also revealed similar informal observations (DES, Inspectorate, 2007).

This is not to suggest that previous concerns relating to negative attitudes have all been overcome. There are still some issues in relation to children's attitudes to learning Irish. McCoy, Smyth and Banks (2012) noted that children had less favourable views regarding Irish compared to reading and mathematics, with only a fifth reporting that they always liked it. Boys were reported to be more disengaged than girls. There is a danger in interpreting these findings as unchangeable however, especially since interventions that focus on increasing engagement have been shown to close the gender gap (e.g. Dunne & Hickey, 2017). We should also expect a spectrum of views in relation to Irish, as is shown in the adult population.

Harris et al. (2006) explored the idea that the growth in the Irish-medium sector may have resulted in a reduction of the numbers of children with high proficiency in Irish, and whose parents are more supportive of Irish. While it is true that parents who have an interest in Irish may opt to send their children to an Irish-medium school, a choice that became more feasible since the 1970s, the effect of the achievement levels of this small cohort (around 5%) might have raised the national average in a small way but not enough to reach the levels attained in the 1980s. The movement of high proficiency teachers to the Irish-medium sector though is most likely linked to the reduction in the amount of English-medium schools in which subjects other than Irish were taught through Irish. The Harris et al. (2006) study, while examining the impact of the language of schooling on achievement, did not explore in an in-depth manner the experiences of children and teachers in different types of schools, e.g. schools in areas designated as disadvantaged (DEIS). Equally, the experiences of EAL learners in the Irish lesson had not been formally examined as part of data on national achievement besides anecdotal evidence and a small number of studies. To date, language planning in Ireland has not addressed, in a comprehensive way, the many languages of Ireland or Irish classrooms (Ó Laoire, 2005). The teaching of Irish has been regarded as separate to the teaching of other modern languages in national policies and curriculum, and often distinct from the discussion of the language and cultural needs of EAL speakers.

Insights from DES inspections

Other sources of data on achievement are the Whole School Evaluations and incidental visits by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) which are available in four major reports—*Beginning to Teach*, a report on early-career teachers published 2005; *Irish in the Primary School*, a dedicated report specifically looking at the Irish language in primary school published in 2007; and the *Chief Inspector’s Report* from 2013 and 2018.

In *Beginning to Teach* (DES, 2005) inspectors identified about one-third of newly qualified teachers as having difficulty in teaching Irish, a tendency to use English in Irish lessons, and limited resources for language development. The teachers in the sample reported feeling well prepared to teach Irish, but the frequency of inspectors’ advice and recommendations in these areas suggested that there was scope for development. Recommendations were given in relation to the following areas (DES, 2005, p. 35):

- use Irish informally and more frequently throughout the school day
- ensure the accuracy of their own spoken and written Irish
- plan according to the strands of the curriculum; in particular, planning should include activities that would develop listening and oral skills (*éisteacht* and *labhairt*)
- adapt the programme in Irish to the pupils’ interests and backgrounds
- allocate the appropriate time to the teaching of Irish on a daily basis.

In the second report *Irish in the Primary School* (2007), almost a quarter of teachers were reported to have unsatisfactory levels of Irish. The standard of teaching was considered poor or fair in half of the classes observed. In almost one-third of classrooms, children were taught Irish through the medium of the English language, and they had few opportunities to experience Irish being spoken as a living language. Teachers had difficulty in structuring oral language lessons, and there was a focus on introducing new nouns but without providing children with the opportunity to practise this new vocabulary in context. Though there was enjoyment associated with many of the language games, the learning outcomes were not clear. This report suggested that increased proficiency in the language was generally linked to more effective teaching

methodologies. Weaknesses were evident in whole-school planning in Irish in most schools. Insufficient consideration had been given to the use of differentiated teaching methodologies, and to the breadth of teaching approaches that might be used to assist teachers in delivering the curriculum.

In the *Chief Inspector's Report (2010–2012)*, inspectors' findings with regard to Irish were significantly less positive than those for English or mathematics, and inspectors reported that the quality of Irish teaching was problematic in one-fifth of the lessons inspected during incidental inspections and that the quality of pupils' learning of the language was problematic in approximately one quarter (24%) of those lessons (DES, Inspectorate, 2013). Teachers' accuracy and fluency in the Irish language, not surprisingly, impacted on the teaching of the language. Most worryingly was the finding that 'a sizeable proportion of primary schools need to change their approach to the teaching of the Irish language' (p. 50). In many lessons, children did not have opportunities to learn through talk and discussion. Teachers also displayed difficulty preparing for language-rich experiences and assessing children's progress in the Irish language.

In the Chief Inspector's Report (2013-2016), the same issues raised in the previous report were outlined (DES, Inspectorate, 2018). Though positive outcomes were associated with the teaching of English and mathematics, there was a disimprovement evident in the teaching of Irish, and the Inspectorate noted that a significant cohort of children was not making appropriate progress in Irish. One contributing factor was classroom methodology, and data from inspectors' evaluations revealed that there were still significantly fewer opportunities for talk and discussion in Irish lessons compared to English and mathematics, which had a detrimental effect of children's communication skills. Devitt et al. (2018) suggested that some teaching methodologies were more traditional in the Irish lesson, such as having reduced opportunities for group work. Assessment approaches in Irish were also weak, and Irish was the subject most likely to receive a recommendation for improvement in whole-school evaluations. While inspectors observed a wide range of games and activities in classes, many of these planned activities lacked a linguistic or educational goal (DES, Inspectorate, 2018). There was a correlation shown in these studies between higher proficiency in Irish and the use of more engaging methodologies for teaching Irish, however these are not synonymous concepts, and one does not guarantee the other. Continuous support is needed in developing and maintaining

teacher proficiency as well as effective teaching methods throughout the continuum of a teacher's career.

A key point that should be made here is that the findings of these reports need not be solely interpreted in a negative way. Acknowledging and identifying current weaknesses in the teaching of Irish point us to areas that need to be improved and targeting these areas will be of benefit to the learning experience. In the case of introducing more paired and group work, for instance, we have seen that these structures are in place for other subjects, therefore this experience could easily be adopted in Irish lessons.

Successes in the teaching of Irish

While much of the discourse around Irish focuses on the perceived failings of the educational system, Ní Chlochasaigh (2016) and Ní Longaigh (2015) shift the focus to the successful learners of Irish. Positive traits that successful learners display include welcoming corrective feedback, implementing a strategy after receiving such feedback, and an interest in the structure of the language. These are skills, therefore, that primary teachers should encourage from a young age. The commitment and enthusiasm of teachers when teaching Irish, not surprisingly, has positive effects on children's learning experiences. Walsh and O'Rourke (2015) focused on the experiences of highly-proficient second or additional speakers of Irish, some of whom learned Irish in English-medium schools. They showed that critical moments in the learning of a language could have a bigger influence on the decision to make the language part of one's daily life, compared to other static background factors. Speakers in this study who received their schooling in English-medium schools most often cited an inspirational teacher as impacting positively on their attitudes to Irish.

Conclusion

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. but some inconsistencies in how Irish was taught were still evident. A communicative approach to language teaching underpinned the curriculum and enjoyment and nurturing positive attitudes were core principles of the curriculum. In a review of children's experiences with the 1999

curriculum, there appeared to have been some positive change in their disposition to Irish. A major decline in children's performance in Irish, however, was noticed in the early years of implementing the 1999 curriculum and these were linked to classroom methodologies. Strategies such as informal Irish, more paired and group work, and CLIL could have been of great use in increasing exposure to Irish, but their potential was not fully realised while the 1999 curriculum was in place.

The Primary Language Curriculum and an integrated approach to language learning

The Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) is currently being implemented in primary classrooms. In the executive summary of the new integrated curriculum, Ó Duibhir and Cummins (2012) likened the approach to similar developments in Canada, Wales and Scotland, with an emphasis on viewing the entire linguistic repertoire of a child. As in the 1999 curriculum, a communicative approach to language learning underpins the PLC. Ó Duibhir and Cummins (2012) noted the insufficiency of cognitive approaches to language learning and underscored the importance of the social dimension of communication. This is a welcome especially considering the findings from the Chief Inspector's Report that children do not have as many opportunities for talk and discussion, and group work, in Irish lessons, compared to other subjects (DES, Inspectorate, 2018).

What is distinctive about the PLC curriculum is the emphasis on catering for children of all abilities, which is important in the context of the diversity of contemporary classrooms. Differences in the profile of primary school children today compared to years ago are acknowledged in the PLC. Some of this is related to the increased diversity of languages and cultures now present in Irish classrooms. It is more likely that the current school-going population will have availed of early years education as which was facilitated by the government's free Early Childhood Care and Education year introduced in 2010. Children who have had early years education may have exposure to elements of the *Aistear* framework and be more familiar with early literacy activities before they begin formal schooling and may be further along their progression milestones. Indeed, some of these children may have attended *naíonraí* or Irish-medium early childhood education settings. There is also an acknowledgement of home languages other than *Gaeilge* or English and the linguistic resources that these children bring to school. The relationship between learning Irish and learning a third or fourth language is also noted.

There are two versions of the curriculum: one for English-medium schools and one for Irish-medium schools. Differences between this curriculum and the previous 1999 curriculum are

outlined in the introduction to the PLC. The main shift is the focus on the child's learning rather than on the teacher's teaching, and in presenting learning as a continuum rather than as fixed outcomes to be achieved by all. It will be recalled that Harris et al. (2006) cited this as a weakness in previous attempts to assess children's learning. The support materials available to teachers provide concrete examples of children's learning corresponding to certain milestones.

Other distinguishing factors are the integrated approach to language learning and the focus on school context. Principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) are strengthened in this curriculum, such as meaningful interaction in the language amongst peers. The affective dimension of learning is also given attention. Differences between children learning English versus Irish as a SAL are outlined, and this is important in understanding the critical role that schools have in exposing generations of children to the Irish language.

Cultural awareness and the PLC

Cultural awareness and the exploration of different types of texts are emphasised in the PLC. This provides an opportunity to examine a very broad range of texts that are available in Irish, e.g. children's literature, music, dramas, short films, spoken word, twitter accounts and memes. Such an exploration will help children to explore vibrant examples of Irish language culture, and could indeed encourage them to contribute to these texts in the future. The emphasis on a range of texts is very welcome as there has been a reliance on the class textbook for the teaching of Irish heretofore (Uí Choistealbha, 2012). The online support materials also contain a range of materials to help teachers with many aspects of the teaching of Irish, e.g. reading picture books in the junior classes. These support materials can be used in conjunction with other resource packs available to teachers. The reading lists curated by Children's Books Ireland in 2020 are an invaluable source of high-quality children's books published within the last ten years. The resource will be updated annually to highlight the rich contemporary literature available to children of different ages (see <https://childrensbooksireland.ie/recommended-reads/>). The focus on contemporary literature, original works and translations, is helpful in addressing some of the complexity in developing cultural awareness in Irish. As Irish and English-language communities broadly share the same culture, there is a risk that teachers will revert to traditional static representations of Irish Gaelic culture. This approach was prevalent during the early

periods in the teaching of Irish and has been criticised for exposing children to a limited range of themes and genres (Dunne, 2016).

Content and language integrated learning and the PLC

The Primary Language Curriculum emphasises the potential of CLIL to increase exposure to the Irish language during the school day. A national pilot scheme to implement CLIL for the teaching of physical education was also announced by the Minister for Education and Skills in 2019. Since the PLC curriculum has begun to be implemented, some CLIL studies have been conducted. The benefits of CLIL lessons include more positive attitudes to Irish, the acquisition of new language in context, and enhanced listening skills (Seoighe, 2014). The strengths of EAL learners in CLIL lessons are also stressed (Ní Dhiorbháin & Ní Bhaoill, 2018). Children need a basic level of Irish, however, in order to meaningfully engage in CLIL (Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2017). Mehisto et al. (2008) in describing the implementation of CLIL note that vocabulary and specific terms need to be taught beforehand so that the CLIL lesson does not become a literacy lesson. Ó Ceallaigh et al. (2017) also mention pedagogical approaches that are necessary, including the use of multiple representations, so the teacher does not depend on an oral explanation. An analysis of the success or otherwise of CLIL programmes is often based on the achievement of children rather than on an analysis of their learning experiences and the methodologies involved (Marsh, 2002). Some researchers show how these lessons can become more teacher-centred (Dalton-Puffer, 2007). Teachers in their first year of professional practice express an interest in teaching another subject through Irish but they report that they have no actual experience of CLIL (Dunne, 2015).

International research has suggested that a linguistic model in which the minority language is taught as a subject only in school does not produce high proficiency in the minority language. Alternative linguistic models are offered in many jurisdictions, e.g. the Basque country, Catalonia, Luxembourg or in francophone Canada. A substantial amount of Irish parents showed an interest in expanding partial immersion programmes (Ó Duibhir, 2016). Providing more partial immersion or dual language programmes, an aspiration of the 20-Year Strategy for Irish, would offer more opportunities for children to have contact with Irish throughout their primary and secondary school years (GOI, 2010). Children who have experienced another

subject taught through the target language have reported more positive attitudes to the language. More research is needed into the practices that occur in relation to the use of Irish outside of formal Irish lessons in English-medium schools (Ó Ceallaigh & Ní Dhonnabháin, 2015).

Integrating language skills and the PLC

The PLC focuses on the entire linguistic repertoire of the child and allows the child to make connections between different languages. Throughout the curriculum a link symbol is present to show where skills can be transferred between the first and second language of the school, e.g. for English-medium schools where conventions of text are explored with children in English, and can be built on in the Irish-language curriculum.

Translanguaging is an approach that is gaining popularity in other language contexts. This involves the deliberate and structured switching from one language to another during a lesson. Though a useful linguistic pedagogy for various language contexts, it may not be useful for the teaching of Irish because the tendency would be to switch to English (Nic Pháidín, 2003; Ó Brolcháin, 2017; Ó Curnáin, 2009), which lessens children's exposure to Irish during the school day—exposure which is already limited. Teachers of Irish have reported a reluctance to introduce such an approach in the context of schools acting as a 'haven' for the minority language (Ó Duibhir, 2018; Ó Brolcháin). The possible inclusion of languages that are similar to Irish, e.g. Scots Gaelic, Welsh or Breton has not yet been investigated.

Native speakers, new speakers, and second or additional language speakers

Nic Flannchadha and Hickey (2016) showed how different language varieties of Irish are now present because of the emergence of different types of speakers of Irish. A critical issue is the terminology used to describe the identities of different speakers of Irish. The 'native' and 'non-native' characterisation of speakers in educational and policy documents is problematic for a number of reasons. Being deemed a 'native speaker' implies a person's location of birth. As several researchers have pointed out, the placing of speakers into definable, preservable unchanging groups may not show the actual interaction with the language or a person's developing and changing identity as a speaker of different languages (Jaffe, 2015; Ó hÍfearnáin, 2015; O'Rourke & Ramallo, 2011). Describing someone with the deficit prefix 'non' is quite limiting and does not focus on the speaker's actual abilities. Terms such as 'non-national' and

‘non-Irish’ are considered pejorative for this reason, and more inclusive language such as ‘English as an additional language learner’ has gained currency. ‘New speaker’ is a relatively recent term in minority language research. O’Rourke and Walsh define a new speaker as someone who acquired the language in a context other than the home who speaks it with ‘fluency, regularity and commitment’ (2015, p. 64). The perspectives of ‘new speakers’ are important in understanding the process of learning Irish as a second or additional language, which is the case for the vast majority of children in English-medium schools. Another issue is the representation of different speakers of Irish in the texts children encounter. Despite the diversity of speakers of Irish, and indeed the number of SAL writers of Irish, there is very often invisibility of SAL speakers in Irish-language children’s literature (Dunne, 2014).

Irish language and exemptions

Exemptions granted to primary school children from the study of Irish have previously been in accordance with circular 12/96, and an increase in the number of students receiving exemptions has been reported (DES, 2016). The new circular, 0052/2019 regarding exemptions supersedes circular 12/96 and the 2009 revision of that circular (ROS, 2019). A public consultation was conducted as the circular was being drafted, and the results are available online. The revised circular relates to children in English-medium schools only. As outlined in the document, the granting of an exemption is only in rare cases and usually for children in their final year of primary education, or in the case of children with significant and sustained learning difficulties, second class in primary school. Some of the differences in the new criteria for granting an exemption include the fact that IQ is no longer used as a measure when considering the granting of an exemption. Applications are also to be made at a local level, i.e. within schools, and should only be made upon completion of the following steps:

- regular reviews of learning needs as part of an ongoing cycle of assessment
- target-setting
- evidence-informed intervention and review, including test scores (word reading, reading comprehension, spelling, other scores of language/literacy) at key points of review.

Support and structured approaches to implementing these steps are needed in the first instance as it has already been shown that teachers display difficulty assessing children's progress in the Irish language (DES, Inspectorate, 2007). Children who have received their primary education outside of the state may also apply for an exemption. The provision of an intensive EAL course for these children is recommended, but no equivalent course for Irish is suggested. Equally significant is the fact that learning support is usually only provided in English and mathematics in English-medium schools. This decision to grant exemptions for children who would otherwise only begin learning Irish at around age 12, e.g. children who have lived outside of Ireland for a number of years, is perhaps linked to perceptions that it is easier to learn a language when younger. There is other evidence, however, that an older learner can achieve a high level of proficiency provided the adequate supports are in place (Baker, 2011). Also of note is the fact that most children begin learning another language when they enter secondary school but that this exemption usually only pertains to the learning of one language: Irish. It is recommended that children who obtain an exemption partake in cultural aspects of the curriculum, though as previously discussed this dimension of the curriculum is underdeveloped in primary schools, and so children in receipt of an exemption may have only very minimal experience with the language and culture. The use of bilingual texts and stories, e.g. the myths and legends on the Ask About Ireland website may be one way that all children in a class can explore the same content, albeit in different languages.

Mixed views were expressed during the public consultation in relation to the revised criteria. One area of contention was the use of a discrete test in Word Reading or Reading Comprehension (in English) to see whether a child is at or below the 10th percentile and the assumption that this would impact negatively on the learning of Irish. While there is some research conducted on special educational needs and practices in Irish-medium schools (e.g. Barnes, 2018; Ní Chinnéide, 2016), this is not the case in English-medium schools. With regard to children with language-specific needs and the granting of exemptions, it should be pointed out that children can still succeed in the second language, especially if it is a transparent language (see Miller Guron & Lundberg, 2000). A specific language difficulty interacts with the language in question (Barnes et al., 2017). Children with dyslexia reading in a very transparent language are shown to read at a slower rate, but children with dyslexia who are reading in an inconsistent

language can have low reading accuracy (Ziegler & Goswami, 2005; Landberl, Wimmer & Frith, 1997 in Barnes et al., 2017). Irish is a more transparent language than English, though it is inconsistent. Research into Irish reading shows that children often guess a word rather than relying on phonological awareness to sound it out. This strategy is linked generally to a lack of focus on explicitly teaching decoding skills in Irish in primary schools (DES, Inspectorate, 2007; Hickey & Stenson, 2011). Recently a handbook for Irish spelling and other targeted programmes for developing phonological awareness in Irish were introduced. This should help develop phonological awareness which will ultimately help children of all abilities in reading through Irish. Schemes that have been shown to be successful in Irish-medium schools such as the writer's workshop or reading clubs could be adapted for English-medium schools. Guidance for teachers on choosing appropriate texts is available in Inis reading guides as well as on the Children's Books Ireland website.

Finally, it should be noted that the learning of Irish for children who have a language difficulty need not be presented in deficit terms. The cognitive skills that bilinguals demonstrate, including flexible thinking, improved executive function and cognitive process, such as working memory and attention, should also be highlighted (Bialystok, 2009). The extent to which these skills manifest themselves in learners of a second or additional language (SAL) in formal schooling needs further research. It will be recalled that earlier studies that focused on the deficits that children learning Irish encountered had a negative impact on the public's view of bilingualism (Mcnamara, 1966). There is a danger in contemporary discourse that the benefits of bilingualism are not fully appreciated and that testing measures do not fully capture the positive skills, strategies, attitudes and dispositions that language learning develops.

Experiences in teacher education

Teacher education is an important component in preparing future teachers, and so an awareness of pre-service teachers' experiences help us understand aspects of their future teaching. Pre-service teachers, even in the very early stages of their teacher education, show some very positive views towards the language. They see the teaching of Irish as having a very key role in primary schooling. They have an above-average positive attitude to learning Irish compared to other Leaving Certificate students, namely students studying the Higher and Lower level Irish

programmes in English-medium schools (Dunne, 2015). Their positive attitudes to Irish are at the same level as other secondary school students who received their schooling through Irish. Pre-service teachers also report having spent time in the *Gaeltacht* more so than other secondary school students (Dunne, 2015). These traits are most likely linked to the entry requirements for colleges of education and highlight the early investment that teachers make in the Irish language, and the influences that their emergent identity as primary teachers have on their attitude to and competence in Irish. The Irish language entry requirement for colleges of education is sometimes cited as a barrier: for example, there is a claim that it disproportionately affects males (see Ó Braonáin [2008] for a counter-argument), and that the requirement mitigates against the diversification of the teaching population. More foundation courses and access programmes to help candidates achieve the desired level of Irish before entry to the Bachelor of Education (BEd) programme are needed in this regard. Increasing the diversity of the teacher profile will help enrich learning and teaching experiences. Indeed teachers who have experiences of learning and/or teaching other languages could bring this knowledge and experience to the teaching of Irish. More research is needed into the perspectives of people who perceive Irish as a barrier to entering the teaching profession.

Ní Dhiorbháin (2018) showed how pre-service teachers, despite being the most proficient speakers of the language, if the Leaving Certificate is used as a baseline, can have limited knowledge of common grammar rules or misunderstand certain rules. Language teaching in colleges of education is of great importance because pre-service teachers will become models of language use for the learners in their classroom. Results from her study highlighted the benefits of explicit grammar teaching, whether it is deductive or inductive, compared to methods which expect the learner to simply notice grammatical structures (Norris & Ortega, 2000). Ní Chlochasaigh (2016) recommended that explanations of the grammar rule are provided by the teacher, and then that the learner is encouraged to analyse the correction. In particular, pre-service teachers were receptive to grammar teaching, where they felt it was of relevance to their future teaching. Equipping pre-service teachers with explicit knowledge of grammar relevant to the classroom is, therefore, important because teachers who have a low level of explicit knowledge avoid spontaneous discussion of grammatical forms with learners and tend to stick very closely to the textbook (Borg, 2003).

Entry and exit requirements for the Irish language are important to ensure proficiency levels amongst teachers. As we have seen, particularly from the early periods in the teaching of Irish, teachers' language proficiency though important, is not enough to ensure high-quality language teaching. Exit requirements from colleges of education need to take into consideration Irish language proficiency relating to the language needed in the classroom and not just a generic ability in the language, as well as experiences of planning for, teaching, and reflecting on practice in relation to Irish on school placements.

Gaeltacht placement

One central aim of the Irish syllabus is that pre-service teachers will explore perceptions of Irish speakers within and outside of the *Gaeltacht*, and also to investigate characteristic features of an Irish speaker's identity (An Mheitheal um Theagasc na Gaeilge ar an Tríú Leibhéal, 2011). Two placement periods in the *Gaeltacht* form a core part of initial teacher education and the strengths of this placement in terms of cultural awareness, seeing Irish as a living language, and opportunities to speak Irish regularly, are noted by pre-service teachers (Dunne, 2015; Ó Laoire, 2018). In the remaining years of the Bachelor of Education programme, there is no equivalent language and cultural programme. Other positive aspects of the placement include the opportunity to socialise with peers and to form friendships. De Courcy (2002) shows how important relationships and friendships are in the context of language learning. This pre-service placement is of great importance because unlike other jurisdictions, the weight of professional development in language competency occurs during pre-service education as opposed to the in-service practice, as is the case of Basque. Another issue is that teachers have limited access to Irish-speaking networks when they begin their teaching career.

Although generally positive about the *Gaeltacht* placement in terms of the social and cultural experience, the financial strain it places on student teachers was mentioned (Dunne, 2015). It should be noted that the grant to attend a placement in the *Gaeltacht* was cut in 2012, which affected one cohort of pre-service teachers in this study. While the reinstatement of a subsidy will occur in the academic year 2020/2021 an element of financial strain is still likely to be an issue as this is a period in which they cannot engage in their regular part-time work. Student teachers have reported that their experiences in the *Gaeltacht* positively influenced to a certain extent their attitudes to the Irish language and to Irish speakers; however they do not

often report that their *Gaeltacht* experiences contributed to their perception of themselves as a speaker of Irish (Dunne, 2015). This may be linked to the fact that they travel in a large group unlike in other Erasmus programmes, which diminishes their opportunities to interact with local speakers of Irish.

School placement and experiences of teaching Irish

Pre-service teachers at the very early stages of their career regard the teaching of Irish as central to their role (Dunne, 2015), yet a substantial amount of them expect Irish to be ‘difficult’ or ‘very difficult’ to teach. Despite meeting the entry requirements for colleges of education, some teachers report insecurity relating to the demands that will be placed on them in teaching primarily through Irish, using Irish informally and teaching other subjects from time to time through Irish. These issues become more pronounced when the student-teacher engages in school placement. The vast majority of teachers express that they would like to speak as much Irish as possible but that they find this very challenging if they do not think the children understand, will disengage or do not have previous experience of this approach. The reliance on English in Irish lessons has been observed in inspectors’ reports (DES, Inspectorate, 2013). Pre-service teachers have noted that they would like more guidance on the role of English in the teaching of Irish (Dunne, 2015). The integrated approach to language teaching in the PLC should help teachers and children in making more connections between their language learning experiences.

It is clear that the majority of pre-service teachers feel they should have a substantial amount of the responsibility in the revitalisation and maintenance of Irish, but they feel that they are currently assigned too much of the responsibility (Dunne, 2015). Though generally enthusiastic about their role, they would like more support from parents and to make links with other community groups, e.g. the Gaelic Athletic Association and *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann*. More research would help us understand how emergent identities are facilitated by the *Gaeltacht* and school placements, both on a personal and professional level, as this has been shown to impact on the emphasis that teachers later place on Irish in the classroom (Harris et al., 2006).

Conclusion

A lot of people think of learning a language as being akin to downloading something from the internet. In this analogy the key to learning the language is to have the right “internet connection” to facilitate the download, equivalent to finding the “right” teacher, or some new methodology, or the “best” book. This mindset makes the learner passive, and puts the responsibility for learning the language on the “internet connection”. If the learner fails to “download” the language, it can be explained as the “internet connection” being faulty. (De Barra, 2019, p. 36)

Children in English-medium schools comprise the vast majority of the school population, and their experiences in learning Irish are extremely important to the general promotion of Irish. Primary schools also 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. 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 and of what we have learned 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.

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