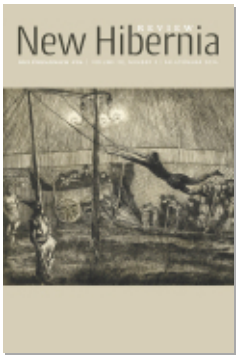
Perspectives on the Irish Language in Education in the Early- to Mid-Twentieth Century



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New Hibernia Review, Volume 28, Number 3, Fall/Fómhar 2024, pp. 70-75 (Article)

Published by Center for Irish Studies at the University of St. Thomas

DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/nhr.2024.a949085*

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The Irish Language in Education Today

MANY MINORITY LANGUAGE revitalization movements globally strive for the status the Irish language today enjoys in formal education: as a core subject in mainstream primary and post-primary schools, as a medium of instruction in a mature system of immersion education, as a required matriculation subject for the constituent universities of the National University of Ireland and for entry into initial teacher education for primary school teaching. Furthermore, a dedicated policy for Gaeltacht education has been in operation since 2017, a new policy framework for Irish-medium education outside the Gaeltacht has recently been published, and a new national plan is in development for Irish language provision in early learning and care and for school-age childcare. In addition, the Primary Language Curriculum and the Junior Cycle post-primary specifications for Irish differentiate between the needs of students who learn through Irish and those who learn through English. Likewise, a new specification for Irish at Senior Cycle post-primary is in development and will likely make similar alternative provisions for students in Irish-medium versus students in English-medium settings.

None of this is to say that challenges do not remain with respect to Irish in education or that the various policies listed above are always sufficiently dynamic to meet the Irish-language needs of all learners. Each of the policies has been subject to critique and, indeed, criticism, and there are doubtless many policy areas where the position of Irish in education could be improved. Teacher supply and teachers' Irish-language proficiency is a long-standing issue, for instance: it exercised members of the Gaelic League in the early years of the organization at the end of the nineteenth century, it has presented challenges to successive governments since the foundation of the state, and it remains an issue today.

Balancing the needs of learners who come to the school already knowing Irish versus those who have little or no knowledge of the language is also a significant challenge. Relatedly, the system does not always fully include and meaningfully engage migrant learners or those with additional educational needs in the learning of Irish. These learners are underrepresented in Irish-medium education, and many learners in English-medium schools opt out of the learning of the language altogether through the exemptions system or elect not to take state exams in the subject. Substantial gaps are also evident in including Irish in the preschool and higher education sectors and, to a lesser extent, in providing Irish-medium education at post-primary. In focusing on the various strengths and shortcomings of current provisions, it is very easy to lose sight of the fact that Irish is in an enviable position relative to many other minority languages worldwide and that its current status in education was hard won and required strong advocacy and a robust defense over the past century and a half. This collection of essays focuses not on the current position of Irish in education but on its historical development and trajectory, beginning in the late nineteenth century.

Background to the Integration of Irish into Education

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Irish language began to occupy a central position in the public consciousness in Ireland and became an important focal point in the burgeoning nation-building enterprise, including through education.[1] This status contrasted starkly with the preceding three-hundred-plus years during which Irish had been marginalized in government and public administration and during which the proportion (although not necessarily the overall number) of Irish speakers in the population gradually decreased. The first three decades of the nineteenth century was a pivotal time for Irish; during this period the language shift from Irish to English became firmly established and began to progress at a dramatic pace, following more steady decreases in the last three decades of the eighteenth century.[2] Although the great majority of Irish speakers at the time were Catholic, the Catholic Church was essentially an anglicizing influence, and its distrust of printing in Irish also meant that a print culture did not develop in the language as it had in other minority languages.[3] Catholicism,

1. Philip O'Leary, *The Prose Literature of the Gaelic Revival, 1881–1921: Ideology and Innovation* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).

2. Garret FitzGerald, "Irish Speaking in the Pre-Famine Period: A Study Based on the 1911 Census Data for People Born Before 1851 and Still Alive in 1911," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 103C, no. 5 (2003): 5–283.

3. Niall Ó Ciosáin, "Gaelic Culture and Language Shift," in *Nineteenth-Century Ireland: A Guide to Recent Research*, ed. Laurence Geary and Margaret Kelleher (Dublin: Univerity College Dublin Press, 2005), 136–52.

and not the Irish language, was also the touchstone of political movements in Ireland in the first half of the nineteenth century, and English was the language of political expression, with Irish confined to the periphery in this respect. Mortality and emigration during the Great Famine greatly and disproportionately affected Irish speakers as well, decimating the number of speakers of the language and their proportion relative to the overall population, with the additional psychological trauma of the Famine also reinforcing links between the Irish language and poverty.

The exclusion of Irish from formal education following the establishment of the national school system in 1831 further compounded issues. The "official neglect" of Irish that occurred early on as part of this system precluded the school-going population from developing initial proficiency in Irish, from learning through what was, for many, their everyday vernacular, or from developing literacy in the language.[4] It is not entirely clear what level of appetite to learn Irish or to learn through Irish existed amongst children and parents in the nineteenth century. However, it has been posited that in the absence of widespread knowledge of the dynamics of bilingualism, the high-prestige status of English at the time likely meant there was limited interest in developing proficiency in Irish through education, even in those areas where Irish was the only language spoken in the home and community.[5] This is an important point given that where changes were subsequently made to increase the presence of Irish in education, they came about in response to public agitation, particularly by groups such as the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language, the Gaelic Union, and the Gaelic League. Irish (Celtic) was introduced into the national school curriculum in 1878 as an extra subject taught after school hours for pupils in the fifth and sixth standard, following a campaign by the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language. However, there was limited implementation of this provision until a notable concession was made almost a quarter of a century later to allow the teaching of Irish as an extra subject to all classes and as an ordinary school subject so long as it did not impact the teaching of other subjects, thanks to a campaign by the Gaelic League. This provision was followed in 1904 by the establishment of the Bilingual Programme and its implementation in areas where Irish had a strong presence in the community.

These early years of the twentieth century are described as a period of resurgence for Irish in education, a resurgence that occurred in the context of wider educational reforms and in the face of stiff opposition among the Commissioners

4. Séamas Ó Buachalla, "Educational Policy and the Role of the Irish Language from 1831 to 1981," *European Journal of Education* 19, no. 1 (1984): 75–92.

5. See, for example, Cormac Ó Gráda, "Cé fada le fán [Although a long time astray]," *Dublin Review of Books* (2012): 34.

of National Education and efforts by the treasury to control the rise in spending associated with Irish after 1904.[6] Formative years in many ways, they saw the first meaningful integration of the Irish language into the education system in the modern era and provided the foundation on which many subsequent initiatives were built, at a time when Irish was in sharp decline as an everyday language and when Irish was fundamental to ongoing nation-building efforts. Throughout the decades that followed, and right up to the present day, Irish has maintained a central position in the curriculum as a stand-alone subject and as a medium of instruction. But by no means was the position of Irish in formal education static throughout the period. Notable changes occurred in the status of the language, in the officially endorsed pedagogical and assessment approaches, and in the interplay between the state, schools, and the public on issues relating to Irish in education, as illustrated in the articles that comprise this collection.

The Present Collection of Essays

Presented chronologically, these essays cast a critical eye on historical aspects of Irish in education. Together they provide a window into changing currents in official policy toward Irish at critical junctures from the beginning of the twentieth century up to the 1970s, analyzing the roles of key protagonists, the effects of specific policy initiatives on Irish and on education, and the way policies toward Irish in education were reflective and constitutive of broader currents in language and state policy.

The period of initial resurgence at the start of the twentieth century is the focus of the first two articles. Teresa O'Doherty and Tom O'Donoghue's contribution takes a macro-level approach to their analyses of the Bilingual Programme of Instruction that was introduced in 1904. In this respect, the article builds on the authors' 2019 monograph, *Irish Speakers and Schooling in the Gaeltacht, 1900 to the Present*, and on earlier work by O'Donoghue.[7] The article is concerned with the Gaelic League's campaign for the introduction of the program, as well as its implementation and acceptance in schools and communities. The authors point to the combativeness adopted at times by the Gaelic League and intimate that the approach likely had a divisive effect. The article furthermore illustrates the complexity of attitudes toward teaching through Irish at this

6. Ó Buachalla, "Educational Policy and the Role of the Irish Language from 1831 to 1981."

7. Tom O'Donoghue and Teresa O'Doherty, *Irish Speakers and Schooling in the Gaeltacht, 1900 to the Present* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Tom O'Donoghue, "Bilingual Education in Ireland in the Late-Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Centuries," *History of Education* 17, no. 3 (1988): 209–20; Tom O'Donoghue, "Bilingual Education at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century: The Bilingual Programme of Instruction in Ireland 1904–1922," *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 15, no. 6 (1994): 491–505.

time. While the program was well received by teachers in schools implementing it, a more complex picture emerges in how the program was regarded among church figures and parents. Examples of the strong support and opposition that existed are linked to local understandings of the program and its goals and how these were perceived to align or not with the educational and linguistic needs of the local population.

While the first article focuses on the national picture, with illustrative examples from a selection of areas, the second piece, by Tadhg Ó hIfearnáin, narrows the lens to carry out a micro-level analysis of the dynamics of language shift and regeneration in southwest Limerick in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the role formal education played in both processes. Drawing on data from the 1901, 1911, and 1926 censuses, as well as from the 1925 Gaeltacht Commission survey, Ó hIfearnáin illustrates how schooling was a significant factor in the language shift from Irish to English that occurred around Abbeyfeale, County Limerick, following the establishment of the national school system, but how schooling was also instrumental in the regeneration that occurred in the area, particularly among younger cohorts, following the introduction of Irish into local schools. The role undertaken in both processes by teachers from successive generations of the same families is particularly salient and highlights the potential for local language managers, specifically teachers and others involved in education, to influence the language practices and proficiencies of those in their areas.

Claire Dunne's contribution is primarily concerned with textbooks published to aid with the teaching and learning of Irish in the decades immediately before and following foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922. The article surveys textbooks by such authors as Charles Davis, the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language, Eoghan Ó Gramhnaigh, the Christian Brothers, Peadar Mac Ginley, Katharine Cruise O'Brien, and Máire Ní Cheallacháin. Although the extent to which the selected publications shaped pedagogical practices in Irish schools seems limited, the textbooks are illustrative of the authors' stances on questions such as the target variety of Irish that should be promoted in teaching and learning the language, the type of content that should be the focus of classroom discourse, and the sorts of pedagogies that should be employed in teaching Irish. As such, these textbooks reveal how the authors' positions on these questions and others reflected the ideological climate of their time and the authors' affiliation with organizations such as the Gaelic League or the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language at an important point in history, when the teaching and learning of Irish were imbricated with the identity of the developing Irish nation.

Since the introduction of the Irish language to formal schooling, there has always been some level of opposition to the initiative. The campaign of the Language Freedom Movement (LFM) is the subject of Hugh Rowland's article. The LFM arguably represents the most organized and influential campaign against

the status of Irish in the current era and the most successful in terms of meeting its stated goals. Drawing on archival material as well as interviews with key figures, Rowland deftly argues that a symbiotic relationship existed between the LFM and the government at the time, specifically the Fine Gael party, which led the National Coalition Government of the mid-1970s. Although Fine Gael articulated its policy on Irish before the establishment of the LFM, partly as a strategy to distinguish itself from Fianna Fáil on a fundamental question of national identity, Rowland argues that the LFM became the vehicle through which the Fine Gael stance on Irish was promulgated. The existence and actions of the LFM confirmed to Fine Gael that there was support among sections of the population for a change in language policy, with the ultimate result being the 1973 removal of the requirement of a pass in Irish in order to be awarded the Leaving, Intermediate, and Group Certificates.

This small collection of essays is part of a wider renewal of interest in historical aspects of the Irish language in education that is being spearheaded by a small but dedicated group of scholars. It follows in the footsteps of the publication of an edited volume earlier this year, *Irish in Outlook: A Hundred Years of Irish Education*, and a two-part report on learning and teaching Irish in English-medium schools from 1878 to 2020.[8] This wider enterprise is playing an important part in enhancing our understanding of the relationship among the Irish language, the formal education system, and wider policy goals in the state following its foundation. It perhaps also provides instructive perspectives in the context of present-day policy developments. This work is only beginning, and much remains to be explored in this area of research—one that is at the very heart of policy, nation building, and identity in the state and that investigates issues that are still very much alive in Irish society today.

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8. Nicole Volmering, Claire Dunne, John Walsh, and Noel Ó Murchadha, eds., *Irish in Outlook: A Hundred Years of Irish Education* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2024); Claire Dunne, "Learning and Teaching Irish in English-Medium Schools Part 1: 1878–1971" (Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2020); Claire Dunne, "Learning and Teaching Irish in English-Medium Schools Part 2: 1971–Present" (Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2020).