An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

Preliminary Report to Inform the Development of a Policy for the Irish-medium Sector Outside of the Gaeltacht

Irish-medium primary schools outside of the Gaeltacht: what inspectors had to say

April 2021

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1. Introduction

An Irish-medium primary school or Gaelscoil is a school in which all activities are carried out through the medium of Irish apart from the teaching of English. Currently, there are 149 Irish-medium primary schools operating outside of the Gaeltacht that cater for 37,742 pupils[1]. From January 2017 to March 2020, the Inspectorate carried out an inspection or an advisory visit to 74% of these schools.

The following evaluation models were employed in these inspections:

- advisory visits to support school self-evaluation
- unannounced incidental inspections
- follow-through inspections
- curriculum evaluations, in which specific curriculum subjects were evaluated
- whole-school evaluations
- evaluations of provision for pupils with special educational needs.

This publication is based on the analysis of findings of evaluations carried out in Irish-medium primary schools prior to the arrival of COVID-19 and the subsequent interruption of schooling. The report provides a review of the inspection reports published on the Department of Education's website[2] between January 2017 and December 2020. The report outlines inspectors' findings and recommendations from curriculum evaluations, whole-school evaluations and evaluations of provision for pupils with special educational needs. These inspections were carried out in 33% of the Irish-medium primary school sector outside of the Gaeltacht.

Table 1: Number of inspections in the sample by model and year

Evaluation model	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total
Whole-school evaluation	6	0	0	0	6
Whole-school evaluation: management, leadership and learning	5	6	6	2	19
Curriculum evaluation	5	10	7	0	22
Evaluation of provision for pupils with special educational needs	0	0	2	0	2
Total	**16**	**16**	**15**	**2**	**49**

2. Methodology

Forty-nine inspection reports were analysed with reference to eight areas of quality and the commentary given in Section 4 of this report is laid out according to these areas. The eight areas of quality are outlined in Table 2, and are drawn from the Quality Framework for Primary Schools included in the Appendix at the end of this report.

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[1] Enrolment in Irish-medium primary schools as per the Census date of 30 September 2020, but is subject to change once the final figures are published in June 2021.
[2] Reports on advisory visits or on incidental inspections are not published. In follow-through inspections, the focus is on the implementation of the recommendations from another evaluation.

Table 2: The areas of quality

Area A	Use of Irish
Area B	Quality of learning
Area C	Teachers' individual and collective practice
Area D	Assessment
Area E	Support for pupils / provision for pupils with special educational needs
Area F	Additional learning opportunities / co-curricular and extra-curricular activities
Area G	Leadership of learning, teaching and school development
Area H	Partnership with parents and with the school community

Arising from the analysis of the eight areas of quality, recommendations were made to support Irish-medium primary schools in continuing to improve their educational provision through their school self-evaluation processes. The recommendations are presented in Section 5 of this report.

Table 3 describes the quantitative terms used in this report and the percentage range of each.

Table 3: Explanation of the quantitative terms used in this report

Quantitative terms	Percentage
Almost all	More than 90%
Most	75-90%
Majority / more than half	51-74%
Half	50%
Less than half / a significant minority	25-49%
A small number / less than a quarter	16-24%
A few	Up to 15%

When reporting, inspectors use a quality continuum as a reference framework for the quality of educational provision across the various areas of practice. The continuum has been adapted to assist inspectors to arrive at an evaluative evidence-based judgement and to give an accurate description of the standard of educational provision or of various aspects thereof. The quality continuum may be found in *A Guide to Inspection in Primary Schools* here. Table 4 provides a summary of the quality continuum.

Table 4: Summary of the Inspectorate's Quality Continuum

Level	Description
Very good	***Very good*** applies where the quality of the areas evaluated is of a very high standard.
Good	***Good*** applies where the strengths in the areas evaluated clearly outweigh the areas in need of improvement.
Satisfactory	***Satisfactory*** applies where the quality of provision is adequate.
Fair	***Fair*** applies where, although there are some strengths in the areas evaluated, deficiencies or shortcomings that outweigh those strengths also exist.
Weak	***Weak*** applies where there are serious deficiencies in the areas evaluated.

3. Context of the Irish-medium primary schools in the sample

The number of Irish-medium schools in the education system, and the number of pupils in these schools, are increasing. Table 5 shows the number of Irish-medium schools and the number of pupils in these schools in the period 2017 to 2020.

Table 5: Number of Irish-medium primary schools outside the Gaeltacht and number of pupils enrolled

School year	Number of schools	Number of pupils
2019/2020	148	38,008
2018/2019	147	37,935
2017/2018	147	37,234

Irish-medium schools cater for a wide range of socio-economic contexts. Five Irish-medium primary schools in the sample were participating in Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS), the Department's action plan for educational inclusion. Irish-medium schools also cater for a wide range of levels of ability. At present, there are 18 special classes in 13 Irish-medium primary schools[3] outside of the Gaeltacht. Four Irish-medium primary schools within the sample inspected had special classes. These included classes for pupils with autistic spectrum disorder.

The average enrolment of Irish-medium schools is higher than the average enrolment in primary schools nationally. Therefore, there is a lower percentage of small schools and a higher percentage of large schools in this sample than there would be in a representative sample of all primary schools nationally. Table 6 provides information on the number of pupils enrolled in the schools inspected.

Table 6: Schools inspected during the period 2017-2022 according to the number of pupils enrolled

Number of pupils	0-100	101-200	201-300	301-400	>400	Total
Number of schools	10	6	14	6	13	49

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[3]Source: Statistics, Department of Education (2020/21)

4. Key findings in the eight areas of quality

4.1 Area A: Use of Irish

In almost all of the Irish-medium primary schools outside of the Gaeltacht, inspectors reported that boards of management and school leaders had a strong vision for the Irish language, and stimulating learning environments were created to support the provision of Irish-medium education. Most inspection reports stated that pupils had developed a respect and positive attitude towards the Irish language and their fluency in the language was developing well. Pupils were provided with opportunities to participate in beneficial co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. It was reported in the majority of inspections that there was a need to develop the pupils' cognitive and social language further to enable them use the language independently and with competence and confidence.

Table 7: An overview of strengths and areas for development regarding the use of Irish

Strengths	Areas for development
It was reported that ✓ boards of management and school leaders had a strong vision in relation to the Irish language ✓ stimulating learning environments were provided ✓ teachers' competence in the Irish language provided a good example for pupils ✓ there were examples of very effective practice in immersion education	It was reported that there was a need for ○ an effective whole-school plan for oral, cognitive and social language ○ more attention to be given to the development of language enrichment in cases, particularly for pupils with a high level of proficiency in Irish ○ all communication outside of the English lesson to be conducted through Irish ○ the development of an inspiring, stimulating learning environment and atmosphere conducive to the Irish language in a few schools

4.2 Area B: Quality of learning

In most Irish-medium primary schools, pupils' learning outcomes were good overall and some pupils were fluent and confident in Irish. In these schools, inspectors reported that there was a need to develop pupils' communication skills in relation to vocabulary enrichment, language structure and language accuracy, to enable pupils express themselves independently and with creativity. It was also reported that the range and diversity of reading and writing opportunities could be improved in some cases.

Table 8: An overview of strengths and areas for development regarding the quality of learning

Strengths	Areas for development
It was reported that ✓ the quality of learning across a range of curriculum areas was good overall in most schools ✓ the quality of learning was very good in a significant minority of schools ✓ pupils were enjoying their learning through Irish, an exciting Irish atmosphere was fostered, and pupils were positively disposed towards the Irish language ✓ pupils were actively engaged and worked collaboratively during the lessons ✓ pupils were given regular opportunities to engage in project work across a range of curricular areas ✓ pupils' communication skills were good in most schools and effective use was made of drama as a means of fostering pupils' confidence in speaking Irish ✓ pupils' listening and comprehension skills in Irish were well developed ✓ pupils had learned many rhymes and songs and their skills in visual arts and music were well developed ✓ pupils' accuracy and confidence in reading in both Irish and English were good ✓ early reading and phonology skills were well developed ✓ pupils' functional writing was good in both languages ✓ pupils' learning in Mathematics was good or very good in almost all Irish-medium primary schools	It was reported that o pupils' learning was satisfactory or fair in a few schools o in some cases, the ability of pupils to use the Irish language accurately was limited o in a significant minority of schools. pupils had difficulties in expressing themselves with appropriate specific terminology in various curriculum areas o in a small number of cases, pupils had limited opportunities to write across a range of genres in both languages o in some cases, pupils had limited experience of a range of diverse reading texts

4.3 Area C: Teachers' individual and collective practice

In most Irish-medium primary schools, the quality of teaching was good and a range of effective teaching strategies were employed. Inspectors reported, however, that the terminology relating to all curriculum subjects needed to be taught more systematically. In the majority of inspection reports, it was stated that a differentiated teaching approach was needed to respond to the

different learning and language needs of pupils. The need to reinforce immersion education in junior classes and to avoid translation as a teaching method was also mentioned.

Table 9: Overview of strengths and areas for development regarding teachers' practice

Strengths	Areas for development
It was reported that ✓ the quality of teaching in most schools was good ✓ the quality of teaching in certain subject areas such as History and Music was very good ✓ a range of teaching strategies was used effectively across the curriculum ✓ teachers' questioning skills were of a good standard ✓ in certain cases, rich language inputs were included in lessons in various subject areas ✓ in a small number of schools, *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* was used effectively to develop pupils' collaborative skills ✓ the teachers' skills and expertise were shared with each other on a regular basis ✓ in a few cases, the professional development policy was linked to the identified priorities of the school	It was reported that there was a need for o differentiated teaching strategies, with more challenging learning activities where appropriate o greater emphasis on fostering higher-order skills o specific vocabulary and terminology for all curriculum subjects to be taught systematically, and to provide opportunities for pupils to use this language across a wider range of oral and written scenarios o greater use to be made of the school environment to support the teaching of Mathematics o translation into English to be avoided as a teaching method o a communicative stage to be part of each Irish lesson to provide opportunities for pupils to practise the language o the use of a wider and more diverse range of texts, including novels, in the teaching of reading to support the enrichment of pupils' Irish language skills o a clear writing plan to be implemented to foster the development of pupils' progress systematically, across a range of writing genres, and to enable the pupils to write independently and creatively in both languages

4.4 Area D: Assessment practices through Irish

The quality of assessment ranged from satisfactory in a significant minority of schools to very good in a few Irish-medium primary schools. Good practice was observed with regard to both assessment *of* learning and assessment *for* learning. However, most inspection reports indicated that mainstream teachers needed to make more effective use of assessment results. In particular, further analysis of assessment results was necessary as part of the planning process, so that the teaching could target the pupils' learning needs in Irish.

Table 10: Overview of strengths and areas for development in assessment practices

Strengths	Areas for development
It was reported that ✓ assessment was very good in a few Irish-medium primary schools ✓ in a small number of schools, there were useful systems in place which showed clear evidence of pupils' progression ✓ in a small number of cases, there was a consistent whole-school approach to assessment for learning ✓ formal feedback on written work was provided to pupils ✓ standardised tests and teacher-designed tests were used to assess pupils' achievement in Irish ✓ assessment tools based on learning objectives were used in a few cases ✓ self-assessment and peer-assessment were implemented in a few schools and pupils had experience of identifying their own learning goals	It was reported that there was a need to o develop and implement a whole-school assessment system to assess pupils' attainment in the Irish language o make greater use of assessment outcomes to adapt learning objectives and pupils' learning experiences in accordance with their ability, particularly their language ability o share learning objectives with pupils at the beginning of the lesson and make reference to them again at the end of the lesson to review the effectiveness of the lesson

4.5 Area E: Support for pupils / provision for pupils with special educational needs

The quality of support for pupils with special educational needs was reported to be good or very good overall in most Irish-medium primary schools in which this aspect of provision was evaluated. Notwithstanding this, the inspection reports indicated that there was scope for the more effective use of the continuum of support guidelines provided by the National Educational Psychological Service. A significant minority of inspection reports indicated that mainstream teachers and special education teachers worked together effectively to provide support in the classroom or in the support room. In most Irish-medium primary schools, however, there was a need for more widespread use of in-class support. Inspectors indicated that it was very important that the support plan for each pupil be focused on the pupil's specific learning needs as identified in assessment reports provided by external professionals, where appropriate.

Table 11: Overview of strengths and areas for development in relation to support for pupils

Strengths	Areas for development
It was reported that ✓ the quality of provision for special educational needs was very good or good in more than half of the schools	It was reported that there was a need for o a greater percentage of the special education support to be provided in the pupils' mainstream classroom where possible

Strengths	Areas for development
✓ the National Educational Psychological Service support continuum was used to plan and provide support for pupils with special educational needs in most schools ✓ there was effective co-operation between mainstream teachers and special education teachers in more than half of the schools ✓ teaching was of a high-quality when there was a combination of approaches between the provision of in-class support and withdrawal	o ensuring that the learning objectives and learning experiences are consistent with the pupils' learning and language needs, as identified by external professionals, where appropriate o review the provision of additional support through Irish at whole-school level, including early intervention and team-teaching

4.6 Area F: Additional learning opportunities / co-curricular and extra-curricular activities

In most inspections on Irish-medium primary schools, it was reported that Irish culture was strongly promoted through various activities, particularly in the arts. Music, singing, poetry and drama were often cited. However, it was recommended that a more diverse range of additional learning opportunities be provided, in order to develop social language and cognitive language across a wider range of language contexts.

Table 12: Overview of strengths and areas for development in relation to additional learning opportunities

Strengths	Areas for development
It was reported that ✓ an extensive programme of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities was provided by most Irish-medium primary schools ✓ Irish cultural events were central to the co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, with many references to traditional Irish music, drama, poetry and sean-nós singing ✓ many schools were participating in local and national competitions and festivals in order to foster pupils' awareness and interest in Irish culture	It was reported that o stronger links could be formed between the school and the community to support pupils in their use of the Irish language in social contexts o co-curricular and extra-curricular activities could be initiated with other schools and Irish language communities o extra-curricular and co-curricular activities and events should be used in a more focused way to develop pupils' language ability by, for example, identifying the Irish-language vocabulary relevant to each activity and providing opportunities for pupils to acquire and practise this vocabulary

4.7 Area G: Leadership in learning, teaching and school development

Most inspection reports on Irish-medium primary schools indicated that there was good leadership in relation to the provision of resources and the creation of secure and safe Irish-language environments. Principals, in general, had high expectations regarding the use of Irish as the main language of communication in schools. The most frequent recommendation in this aspect of provision was that clearer guidance be provided in the school plan on the language learning to be expected at the various class levels, and to implement appropriate language strategies to support the learning of Irish.

Table 13: Overview of strengths and areas for development in relation to leadership

Strengths	Areas for development
It was reported that ✓ the quality of leadership of learning and teaching was generally good in most Irish-medium primary schools ✓ the quality of school self-evaluation and whole-school planning was good in most schools ✓ high expectations were held by the principals in most schools in relation to the promotion of Irish as the primary language of communication in the school ✓ the management of resources was very effective in almost all schools	It was reported that there was a need to o place greater emphasis on whole-school planning in relation to the expected progress in pupils' Irish-language learning as they moved from one class level to another o monitor pupil achievement at whole-school level and implement interventions in accordance with pupils' identified language needs o provide additional guidance, in the school plan, with regard to intended Irish-language learning outcomes at each class level and the teaching approaches to be used o ensure that an appropriate whole-school planning system was in place to develop and review curriculum policies o enable the in-school management team[4] to lead teaching and learning in a small number of schools o identify measurable targets as part of the school self-evaluation process and to carefully monitor the actions planned to achieve the targets

4.8 Area H: Partnership with parents and with the school community

Overall, the quality of partnership with parents in Irish-medium primary schools was good. Inspectors reported positively on the active participation of parents' associations in schools. In most Irish-medium primary schools, however, this partnership focused on school activities which were not directly related to pupils' learning. In almost all schools, inspectors indicated that there was a need to strengthen parents' participation and input in the development of school policies

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[4] The in-school management team comprises the principal, deputy principal and as many assistant principals (I and II) as are assigned to the school in accordance with Circular 44/2019.

relating to learning and teaching. It was highlighted that this involvement would enhance parents' ability to support their own children, the school and the development of Irish-medium education in general. The need to strengthen links between the school and the local community to support the use of Irish was identified as an area for development.

Table 14: Overview of strengths and areas for development in relation to partnership

Strengths	Areas for development
It was reported that ✓ a welcoming atmosphere was created in almost all Irish-medium primary schools and a very good relationship was fostered with parents ✓ there was regular contact between the primary school and parents and parents were kept informed about school life ✓ parents played an active role in school life in the majority of Irish-medium primary schools	It was reported that there was a need for o greater involvement of parents in the school's self-evaluation process and in the development and review of school policies and practices, particularly in relation to teaching and learning o improvement in communication between the board of management, the parents' association and the school community in a small number of Irish-medium primary schools

5. Concluding remarks and key recommendations for Irish-medium primary schools outside of the Gaeltacht

5.1 Concluding remarks

The inspection reports analysed for this publication provide a valuable insight into the quality of educational provision in Irish-medium primary schools outside of the Gaeltacht. Irish-medium schools contribute greatly to the daily use of the Irish language across the country and they foster pride in the Irish heritage in their school communities through their participation in a range of cultural activities and events. Through their language-immersion education experiences, pupils attending Irish-medium primary schools are enabled and encouraged to respond confidently through Irish to the opportunities and challenges of the twenty-first century. This has been inspired by the vision of the school leaders, the commitment of the teachers and the active involvement of the parents.

5.2 Key recommendations for Irish-medium schools outside of the Gaeltacht

An insight into the strengths and areas for development in Irish-medium primary schools is provided in Section 4 of this report. The following are the key recommendations which principals and staff of Irish-medium primary schools can implement in order to enhance the educational provision in these schools. These recommendations are based on circumstances as they existed in schools prior to the arrival of the pandemic and the subsequent interruption to schooling and to the immersion education experiences of pupils.

i.   Schools will need to engage in self-evaluation to identify and address any deficits and gaps in pupils' learning and monitor their progress on an ongoing basis, due to the exceptional circumstances caused by the pandemic.

ii.   In every lesson and learning activity, pupils should be encouraged to speak Irish as early and as often as possible, in order to promote ownership, independence and creativity in the use of the language in a range of communicative contexts.

iii. The management of Irish-medium primary schools should focus attention on whole-school planning, particularly in relation to immersion education and the development of cognitive language, to support continuity and progression in teaching and learning.

iv.   Irish-medium schools should gather more evidence of pupils' language needs through the use of appropriate assessment tools and use this evidence on a whole-school basis to ensure that all pupils are placed on an Irish language journey appropriate to their learning needs.

v.   Mainstream teachers should give more attention to the use of assessment to guide their teaching and to respond to the differing language abilities and learning needs of pupils.

vi.   An opportunity exists for Irish-medium school communities to promote the Irish language and culture in the locality, develop networks and Irish-language hubs, and create opportunities to use the language in the community outside of the school context. This will enable pupils to appreciate Irish as a living language that is relevant to their own lives and their communities

Appendix: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools
(Looking at Our School 2016, lch 12)

	Domains	Standards
TEACHING AND LEARNING	**Learner outcomes**	Pupils: • enjoy their learning, are motivated to learn, and expect to achieve as learners • have the necessary knowledge and skills to understand themselves and their relationships • demonstrate the knowledge, skills and understanding required by the primary curriculum • achieve the stated learning objectives for the term and year
	Learner experiences	Pupils: • engage purposefully in meaningful learning activities • grow as learners through respectful interactions and experiences that are challenging and supportive • reflect on their progress as learners and develop a sense of ownership of and responsibility for their learning • experience opportunities to develop the skills and attitudes necessary for lifelong learning
	Teachers' individual practice	The teacher: • has the requisite subject knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and classroom management skills • selects and uses planning, preparation and assessment practices that progress pupils' learning • selects and uses teaching approaches appropriate to the learning objectives and to pupils' learning needs • responds to individual learning needs and differentiates teaching and learning activities as necessary
	Teachers' collective/ collaborative practice	Teachers: • value and engage in professional development and professional collaboration • work together to devise learning opportunities for pupils across and beyond the curriculum • collectively develop and implement consistent and dependable formative and summative assessment practices • contribute to building whole-staff capacity by sharing their expertise

Domains	Standards
Leading learning and teaching	School leaders: • promote a culture of improvement, collaboration, innovation and creativity in learning, teaching and assessment • foster a commitment to inclusion, equality of opportunity and the holistic development of each pupil • manage the planning and implementation of the curriculum • foster teacher professional development that enriches teachers' and pupils' learning
Managing the organisation	School leaders: • establish an orderly, secure and healthy learning environment, and maintain it through effective communication • manage the school's human, physical and financial resources so as to create and maintain a learning organisation • manage challenging and complex situations in a manner that demonstrates equality, fairness and justice • develop and implement a system to promote professional responsibility and accountability
Leading school development	School leaders: • communicate the guiding vision for the school and lead its realisation • lead the school's engagement in a continuous process of self-evaluation • build and maintain relationships with parents, with other schools, and with the wider community • manage, lead and mediate change to respond to the evolving needs of the school and to changes in education
Developing leadership capacity	School leaders: • critique their practice as leaders and develop their understanding of effective and sustainable leadership • empower staff to take on and carry out leadership roles • promote and facilitate the development of pupil voice, pupil participation, and pupil leadership • build professional networks with other school leaders

(Left vertical heading spanning all rows: LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT)