



**COMHAIRLE
NA GAELSCOLAÍOCHTA**

**INQUIRY INTO THE
EDUCATION AND TRAINING INSPECTORATE
AND THE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROCESS**

26.09.13

COMHAIRLE NA GAELSCOLAÍOCHTA SUBMISSION

(Submitted by Dr. Micheál Ó Duibh, Chief Executive Officer)

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) was established by the Department of Education (DE) in August 2000 to promote Irish-medium Education (IME) and to act as the representative organisation for the IM sector. DE has a statutory duty to encourage and facilitate Irish-medium education and in accordance with the recommendations of the Review on Irish medium education, integrate the sector into the education system. It is vitally important that the needs and specific requirements of IME are considered systematically throughout DE policy and in this respect we submit that it is incumbent upon the ETI to address the needs and requirements of IME in re-evaluating its role in the School Improvement process. The vast majority of IM schools are independent schools and therefore are not subject to the same processes as IM provisions under the management and control of the CCMS or the ELBs.

1.2 IME has distinctive features such as immersion methodology, bilingualism, dual literacy and numeracy which differentiate it as a model of education from its English-medium counterpart. The Review of Irish-medium Education (DE 2008) emphasised the additional linguistic and cultural characteristics of IME which is based on early full immersion in Irish with the introduction of English beginning in P3/4. The aim of Irish-medium education is to deliver the Northern Ireland Curriculum through the medium of Irish and develop the linguistic ability of the child both in Irish and English. This model, known as ‘additive bilingualism’ refers to the process whereby pupils add a second language (Irish) to their intellectual skills, while also developing in their first language (English).

1.3 CnaG takes the view that the education system has displayed a lack of awareness at all levels regarding IM education, of its distinct features and of the diversity and richness it brings to education. This is reflected across the board and so too in the current practices of the ETI in aiding school improvement. The particular linguistic needs of IME have yet to be properly acknowledged and until DE recognise these specific needs, the policy and practice will continue to militate against IM pupils achieving their full potential. The central place of the Irish language in planning and development for literacy, numeracy and across the curriculum must be recognised by DE, the ETI and the ELBs in order to improve IM provisions.

2. Leadership and management

2.1 There is a gap in the selection of governors for independent IM schools in that there is no formal process and no formal monitoring of the selection of governors. Under ESAGS there is much more emphasis placed on the role of the governor and it would be important that a process to ensure that governors with the appropriate skills and experience are appointed to the boards of independent Irish medium schools. The skills and experience of governors needs to be assessed by the ETI and recommendations made to the school in relation to the composition of the board of governors to improve leadership in independent IM schools.

2.2 It is the view of CnaG that the management of the school must appreciate the particular needs and requirements of IME. The ETI must therefore assess whether or not the management of English-medium schools in charge of Irish medium Units, have the appropriate level of understanding, experience and expertise of Irish medium education to meet the needs of the pupils in the Irish medium Unit. Irish medium pupils currently receive an extra amount per capita in recognition of the added content in delivering this form of education and the management must monitor the allocation of the budget to ensure that the IM unit is provided for in line with the requirements of IME. Currently there is such no requirement on the board of management of schools to ensure that they have the necessary competencies to manage an IM unit. The needs of the IM unit must be considered in relation to the allocation of the budget; acquisition of suitable IM resources and school/CCMS/ELB policy in respect of selection for redundancies. The CCMS and the Boards need to ensure that the Principals and management of IM units and IM controlled schools have an appropriate level of understanding, knowledge and skills to manage and Irish medium provision. The gap in leadership and management needs to be filled with a systematic overhaul of the current policy for IM units and IM controlled schools.

2.3 The Teaching Appointments' Committee (T.A.C.) of the ELB's must address the gap by updating their own regulations to ensure that there is an IM assessor on the T.A.C. when appointing a Principal for an IM school. It would also be important however, that the ETI assess the ability of the Principal and management to meet the needs of IME and make the necessary recommendations.

2.4 There is no requirement to ensure that the co-ordinator of the IM unit is on the senior management team of English medium schools and we deem this to be mandatory to allow for

the IM unit to be considered systematically throughout school practice and procedure. It is important that the IM unit has input for example into how the SEN list operates in the school and to ensure that pupils in the IM unit are given appropriate weighting.

2.5 The ETI must assess the suitability of the management composition and make recommendations where necessary to ensure the quality in the IM provision within the school.

2.6 There is a gap in the advice being dispensed by DE in relation to the admissions criteria for IM schools and best practice as recognised by the ETI. It is our recommendation that the ETI and the schools admissions team in DE liaise in relation to IME in order to give appropriate advice to the governors of IM schools. It is important that Departmental guidance to the governors of schools is in line with best practice in immersion education. Currently DE advice all schools not to name a particular pre-school in the criteria however, there is an obligation on DE to provide a pre-school education under the European Charter for Minority and Regional Languages and attendance at an IM pre-school facilitates a better transition to an IM primary education and is in line with best practice. It is therefore recommended that the ETI engage with DE in relation to the specific needs and requirements of IME in formulating guidance for the governors of IM schools.

3. Quality of provision/Standards and Achievements

3.1 The ETI does not adequately assess the immersion environment which is essential for the delivery of a quality bilingual education. This is particularly important in the context of IM units and the ETI should assess the school routine and arrangements to determine whether the optimum conditions are provided by the school management to ensure successful language acquisition both formally and informally. Recommendations on foot of such an analysis should be made by the ETI where necessary.

3.2 In its submission to the IM Review the ETI provided an analysis of the benefits of bilingualism. ETI noted that bilingualism can be a 'sought after commodity with cognitive benefits in:

- i) Language acquisition;

- ii) Cognitive and academic development;
- iii) The self-confidence and self-esteem of the children;
- iv) Problem solving abilities, with children who are less afraid to get things wrong.’

It is important that the added value of this form of education particularly to children who have lower levels of achievement is assessed and highlighted by the ETI.

3.3 Linguistic outcomes in Irish must be monitored, evaluated and reported on and ETI should ensure that appropriate assessment tests are used to monitor these outcomes. The School Improvement process for IM schools should not be based upon evaluating and measuring improvement using tests which are not designed for IME. The report submitted by the IM Working Group on Literacy and Numeracy (Count, Read and Succeed-DE 2011) recognised the need for: - professional learning taking into consideration the sector’s particular needs; gaps in availability of data for the IM sector; targets to measure the Irish language at primary level.

CnaG recommends that the above areas are addressed to allow the ETI to monitor linguistic outcomes and ensure that ESA are in a position to monitor such outcomes. In doing so the added value of a bilingual education will be recognised formally and routinely and the data will provide a benchmark to IM schools.

3.4 It is recognised that there is a gap in SEN provision for IM schools and it is our submission that IM schools can only improve in their SEN provision by the establishment of a dedicated IM SEN unit in Belfast and in Derry city/Omagh. The need for a dedicated IM SEN unit has been recognised by the BELB and it the ETI should be pro-active in the establishment of such units to ensure equality in provision for IM pupils with special needs.

3.5 The dedicated service provided by the ELBs to IM schools is inadequate. The lack of personnel and the requirement for such officers to service the entire region results in a very sporadic and infrequent support for IM schools. It is our recommendation that the service needs to be bolstered with the employment of suitably qualified IM candidates to provide support to IM schools.

3.6 The advice of specialists employed by the ELBS to parents of pupils in IM schools is varied in relation to whether or not a bilingual education is appropriate for children with particular learning needs. It is the view of CnaG that there needs to be consistency in relation to the advice being administered by the ELBS to parents of pupils in IM schools and that this advice should be based on research and best practice. The ETI must ascertain the advice being given to IM schools in this regard and make recommendations where necessary.

3.7 CnaG recognises and values the work of ETI in supporting and improving IM schools. We acknowledge that inspectors with expertise in Irish language and with immersion experience have been appointed to the inspectorate. It is important that ETI ensure that there is a sufficient pool of inspectors to service IM school inspections ETI can ensure that the specific expertise in language acquisition and immersion education informs the inspection process. It is necessary that there is a general awareness and understanding of the distinctive features of IME within the ETI. The provision of a quality immersion education must be ensured and improved by ETI and to do so the ETI must be informed by best practice in immersion pedagogy and draw on research and best practice in Wales, Scotland and the South of Ireland. ETI should undertake an analysis of best practice informed by research on school inspection in immersion settings to support this (Count, Read and Succeed 6.3).

3.8 Inspectors must evaluate the following aspects of IME such as:

- Early years immersion/transition from pre-school setting;
- Transition to IM primary school-including children with IM Early Years' experience, some without this experience, some native Irish speakers;
- Early total immersion including linguistic outcomes;
- Introduction of English including linguistic outcomes;
- **Bi**-literacy;
- **Bi**-numeracy;
- Curriculum;
- ICT;
- Assessment,
- SEN;
- Leadership of learning;
- Transition to post-primary;

- Post-primary subject specialisms;
- Child protection;
- Pastoral care;
- Careers.

3.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 The central place of the Irish language in the planning and development for literacy, numeracy and across the curriculum must be recognised by DE, the ETI and the ELBs in order to improve IM provisions.

3.2 It is important that the added value of a bilingual education is assessed and documented routinely by the ETI.

3.3 A process to ensure that governors with the appropriate skills and experience are appointed to the boards of independent Irish medium schools. The skills and experience of governors needs to be assessed by the ETI and recommendations made to the school in relation to the composition of the board of governors to improve leadership in independent IM schools.

3.4 The ETI must assess the management of English-medium schools in charge of an Irish medium Unit to ensure that the management has the appropriate level of understanding, experience and expertise of Irish medium education to meet the needs of the pupils in the Irish medium Unit.

3.5 The Teaching appointments committee of the ELBs must address the gap by updating their own regulations to ensuring that there is an IM assessor on the T.A.C. when appointing a Principal for an IM school.

3.6 It would also be important however, that the ETI assess the ability of the Principal and management to meet the needs of IME and make the necessary recommendations.

3.7 To ensure that the co-ordinator of the IM unit is on the senior management team of the schools and we deem this to be mandatory to allow for the IM unit to be considered systematically throughout school practice and procedure.

3.8 The ETI must assess the suitability of the management composition and make recommendations where necessary to ensure the quality in the IM provision within the school.

3.9 It is recommended that the ETI engage with DE in relation to the specific needs and requirements of IME in formulating guidance for the governors of IM schools.

3.10 ETI should assess the school routine and arrangements to determine whether the optimum conditions are provided by the school management to ensure successful language acquisition both formally and informally particularly in Irish Medium Units. Recommendations on foot of such an analysis should be made by the ETI where necessary.

3.10 It is important that the added value of this form of education particularly to children who have lower levels of achievement is assessed and highlighted by the ETI.

3.11 CnaG recommend that diagnostic tools are developed to allow the ETI to monitor linguistic outcome; ESA to monitor such outcomes and IM schools to benchmark.

3.12 In doing so the added value of a bilingual education will be recognised formally and routinely and schools will provide a benchmark to IM schools.

3.13 The need for a dedicated IM SEN unit has been recognised by the BELB and it the ETI should be pro-active in the establishment of such units to ensure equality in provision for IM pupils with special needs.

3.14 The advice of specialists (speech therapists; psychologists) employed by the ELBS to parents of pupils in IM schools is varied in relation to whether or not a bilingual education is appropriate for children with particular learning needs. It is the view of CnaG that there needs to be consistency in relation to the advice being administered by the ELBS to parents of pupils in IM schools and that this advice should be based on research and best practice.

3.15 The working Group on Literacy and Numeracy in Irish-medium Education (para1.18) also reported that its work had stimulated a debate on issues of immersion pedagogy in terms of literacy and numeracy within the sector. CnaG through its Education Sub-Committee, Principals' Forum and annual conference has facilitated this debate and in regard to ETI recommends that:

- Inspectors conducting inspections in IM settings should have expertise in IM pedagogy and should be fluent in Irish;
- Inspectors should have specific quality indicators for IM schools. Judgements should be based on these indicators and not on a model of best practice in English-medium schools which is not relevant to Irish-medium settings;
- Inspectors should rely on quality assessment tests for Irish when making judgements on Irish language literacy and numeracy. Tests which are not designed for bi-lingual immersion education are not a reliable indicator of achievement and are not supportive of the Irish-medium ethos of the school. Assessment tests for IM should be commissioned by DE with input from the sector and the ETI;
- All inspectors should have a general awareness of immersion education pedagogy;
- Inspectors should have the opportunity to develop expertise in Irish language and immersion pedagogy.

3.16 CnaG would welcome the opportunity to give oral evidence to the Committee for Education.