



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND ACTION PLAN

“Fair? Shared? Supported?  
Examining expectations and realities for  
Irish-medium practitioners”

By the Centre for Language Education Research, Queen’s University Belfast



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## Executive Summary and Recommendations

In Northern Ireland, teacher shortages and the lack of dedicated opportunities for Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) in the Irish Medium Education (IME) sector are recognised as some of the issues which have the potential to contribute to sustained educational underachievement for pupils in Northern Ireland (Fair Start Policy 2021). In order to better understand and evidence challenges for teachers and educational practitioners in the IME sector in Northern Ireland this research project undertook:

- 1) a comprehensive systematic-style literature review in relation to the competencies of bilingual/Irish-medium education practitioners
- 2) interviews with student teachers, teachers, principals, and teacher educators on the additional competencies and challenges of working in IME in Northern Ireland
- 3) the design of an action plan aimed at aiding teacher retention and helping to alleviating attrition rates of Irish-medium practitioners in Northern Ireland

The systematic literature review international research conducted in immersion education contexts sought to capture a clear and comprehensive picture of (i) the challenges associated with immersion education models, (ii) responses to those challenges, and (iii) teacher competencies involved in delivering instruction. 'Immersion' was broadly conceived as education that aims to develop bilingualism in pupils through language of instruction.

**Key challenges** to immersion teaching in peer-reviewed research:

- Immersion teaching requires more time than teaching in a shared dominant language
- Inappropriate assessment practices
- Lack of quality, relevant training in language and bilingual pedagogies
- Challenges associated with identifying and using appropriate materials and technology
- Wide variation in teacher and student abilities regarding language and academic skills
- Social pressures, inequity, and discrimination for teachers, students, and communities
- Inadequate financial resources to fund professional development and educational infrastructure.

**Key responses** to immersion teaching challenges in peer-reviewed research:

- Increased and specialised teacher training to improve linguistic and pedagogical skills
- Classroom practices that built upon students' linguistic and cultural assets (e.g., translanguaging, assets-based pedagogies, integration of home culture in class),
- Bespoke, teacher-developed additional practices in response to classroom and local conditions
- Redistribution of labour across more human resources (i.e., cooperation with colleagues, collaborative relationships, addition of teaching assistants)

**Key competencies** held by immersion teachers according to peer-reviewed research:

- Linguistic expertise
- Familiarity with minoritized cultural knowledge
- Expertise with plurilingual pedagogies
- Skill with materials development & technology
- Ability to integrate diverse subject matter and cultural content into instruction
- Understanding of political complexities relevant to specific immersion context
- Ability to liaise with parents and advocate for minoritized language students
- Reflexivity and awareness of power inequities inside and outside the classroom

To create a multi-perspectival and context sensitive view of IME competencies and challenges in NI, the research team conducted interviews with student teachers, teacher educators, teachers, and principals. The primary dataset of interviews evidences the experiences and perspectives of IME stakeholders working in the Northern Ireland context in 2023. The analysis of the interviews provides insight into the complexity of challenges for IME practitioners.

The substantial international research base identified in our review points to the additional challenges for bilingual/immersion educators (e.g., Poon and Lau, 2016). These worldwide challenges are echoed in the evidence from interviews conducted with IME stakeholders in a NI context which include:

- Immersion teaching requires more time than teaching in a shared dominant language.
- Inappropriate assessment practices
- Lack of relevant training in language and bilingual pedagogies
- Challenges associated with availability of appropriate materials and technology
- Variation in support for development of teacher and student language and academic skills
- Inadequate financial resources to fund professional development and educational infrastructure

In Northern Ireland teaching council documentation, there is only one reference to an additional professional competence for Irish medium/bilingual teachers. This is subsumed under item 3 (GTCNI, Professional Competence 3 (ii)), with generic reference to “sufficient linguistic and pedagogical knowledge” of immersion education. From the systematic review of international immersion contexts and the interview data in which participants report on the realities of being a teacher in Irish Medium Education in Northern Ireland, our analysis suggests that there are a number of additional competencies which are essential for IME practitioners, and their current workload is compounded by the lack of substantive support and recognition thereof.

In summary, while there are several important themes arising from the analysis of the interview data, they are encompassed by two overarching themes: i) the resource gap and ii) the disparity/incongruity of systemic assessment. First, in relation to the resources gap, we use this phrase in our analysis to reference both material and human resources. Teaching and learning resources include classroom-based materials, subject-specific textbooks, exam preparation materials, language testing materials. Reference to material resources also includes the physicality of school buildings and facilities, which are becoming

overstretched as enrolment numbers increase. Regarding human resources, teachers in an immersion context hold a double role. Not only are they the 'human' resources employed to teach and prepare children and young people for their futures, as all teachers are, but immersion teachers are also the most significant 'language resource' through which pupils can develop their Irish language oracy and literacy. What is evidenced in the interview data is a consistent concern that these human resources are being overstretched in a number of ways and under resourced in others which includes subject specialist teachers for post-primary contexts. The matter of significant additional work to undertake as an immersion teacher is compounded by in the context of relatively new and growing sector of education for which IME tailored statutory support and recognition is yet to be fully woven into the current education system. This points to a significant risk, rather than a challenge to the IME sector.

From the interviews it is evident that stakeholders view assessment in the IME sector as a particularly underdeveloped high-stakes area. The impact of this underdevelopment is that it adds a considerable burden to teachers, not just in having to attempt to create their own assessments, or work with non-standardized tests, but also a challenge to their sense of professional identity where they find themselves having to, in the face of no alternative, use potentially invalid measures of assessment. Threats to their professional identity also emerge as they may undertake tasks for which they have received no specialist bilingual test-construction training or as they present candidates for examination knowing that their pupil's performance will be immediately devalued by having to await translation into English before being marked.

The extent to which parity of assessment in general and testing in particular is/has been achieved for IME sector in NI remains, from stakeholders' perspectives, uncertain. They report limited availability of suitable diagnostic assessment tools and standardized tests which are (or are evidenced to be) fair, valid, and reliable for use in an IME population in NI. The area of SEN assessment of IME pupils remains a significant area of concern for stakeholders, with teachers impacted by lack of tools for support in this regard. Interviewees report concerns about the relevance and appropriateness of IME students taking content-subject examinations designed for English speakers, disregarding the impact of translation on performance in examinations and failure to reward pupils' demonstration of additional cognitive skills therein.

These additional burdens and challenges over time may be said to be culminating, to some extent, in a fear for student teachers, teachers, principals and teacher educators that IME pupils may be being disadvantaged; pupils' potential for academic and employment success is not being fulfilled and/or those who require additional educational support are not receiving it or receiving it too late in compulsory schooling. Not only does this impact on pupils and teachers, but the ripple effects of underachievement will impact on school, parents, local communities, and society in NI as a result.

Based on the findings from this research, an inclusive eight-point action plan was developed and refined with feedback from key stakeholders to create a comprehensive process to enact more critical and sustainable practices that meet the needs of students, community, parents' and other stakeholders in IME in Northern Ireland over the mid to long-term.

In the short-term, and as a matter of urgency, based on our review of international research and the primary research conducted with practitioners we also make the following recommendations:

- 1) Conduct an evaluation of the measures which can offset the recognised and additional workload of IME teachers in Northern Ireland
- 2) Review current summative assessments for IME pupils in Northern Ireland
- 3) Investigate the impact of current examination procedures and assessments on IME pupils taking formal qualifications in Northern Ireland

## Action plan

The purpose of this action plan is to provide a comprehensive and detailed set of strategies to develop competencies through TPLs and help retain and support Irish-medium teachers in Northern Ireland. This plan addresses several key issues evidenced in the systematic review and identified in the stakeholder interviews. It was developed and refined with feedback from key stakeholders to create a comprehensive process to enact more critical and sustainable practices that meet the needs of students, community, parents' and other stakeholders in IME in Northern Ireland. This plan also recognizes the need to foster greater collaboration and understanding between immersion educators, curriculum developers, and assessment and examination bodies as well as other identified stake holders. Government, departments other national and local authorities in Northern Ireland might want to take these suggested actions and supplement the current Identity and Language Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, echoing the work of their peers in Scotland and Wales to promote, revitalize and sustain languages.

### 1. *Provide professional development opportunities*

Teacher professional development is a constant process of reflection, learning, and action that leads to improved teaching practices that have a beneficial impact on students' learning. In one of our interviews, a teacher educator with more than 30 years of experience, mentioned that it would be advantageous to include more professional development initiatives in the future of Irish Medium Instruction. To this, they say "*actions around teacher professional development ... improve access to support ... providers to be able to deliver [their] (emphasis added) courses*" Similarly, a school leader, responded that professional development initiatives such as those which re-invigorate and improve language learning and support teachers to develop their careers. As such, stakeholders seeking to create an action plan involving professional development, should consider some of the following three aspects:

- Develop a professional development program specifically for Irish-medium teachers, focused on language immersion techniques, content language integrated learning (CLIL), and other approaches to language education such as plurilingualism and translanguaging. This will ensure that the Irish immersion practitioners have up-to-date knowledge and practice on immersion education and language acquisition. It will also offer teacher development for language education skills transferable to new languages and newcomer communities in Northern Ireland.



- Provide ongoing opportunities for professional development, such as workshops, conferences, and webinars, that support the development of language teaching skills and provide opportunities for continued learning during the whole academic year. For example, with a programme of events, in-service and pre-service teachers can learn or update new techniques, methodologies or classroom practices to better support their students' need to practice the Irish language meaningfully. Through teacher training colleges and university across Northern Ireland programs could offered to teachers alongside professional development opportunities to travel and visit other bilingual education contexts.
- Support relevant agents and bodies to co-develop and advance assessment strategies and assessment practices for immersion contexts with IME practitioners. Partnership and participation of teachers and school leaders need to be facilitated to advance assessment strategies and assessment practices in immersion contexts by teacher release schemes so that this does not become yet another additional burden.
- Facilitate teachers' participation in existing professional development opportunities, such as those offered by national organizations, higher education institutions, and area community schools to foster inclusive networks of support and collaboration. Examples of attempts to set up an Irish-medium Learning Community (IMLC) in conjunction with the Education Authority (EA) to create Irish-medium Leaders Group with 4 Area Learning Communities across the North are evident. For such initiatives to be successful requires dedicated and recognized time and resources for coordination. With similar initiatives funded for the English medium sector in Northern Ireland, redressing this disparity is a key priority for such initiatives to become well-established and sustained for the future , considerable resource commitment is necessary.

## *2. Retention and support for career progression*

What happens when a teacher considers shifting roles to further their career is referred to as teacher career progression. This usually entails looking at different roles within their institutions or looking for a new job with different duties and a different remuneration plan. Some of those who were interviewed in this research project were highly concerned that some teachers in training and experienced teachers were leaving Northern Ireland to work in the Republic of Ireland, elsewhere in the UK, or internationally because of the lack of career progression opportunities in IME in NI Those interviewed considered that the current 35 year old legislation ( Education – Northern Ireland – Order 1988, Article 89 which states, "It shall be the duty of the Department to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-medium education" requires considerable updating to take account of what has and has not been achieved over the last three decades for IME career progression opportunities.

Therefore, an action plan tackling this challenge should consider some of the following:

- Develop a career progression plan for Irish-medium teachers, including leadership roles within schools, opportunities for further education and training, and clear pathways for career advancement. For example, this entails providing teachers with learning opportunities, both inside and outside of the school system; by providing

mentoring and leadership training and support to teachers from underrepresented groups and teachers in rural and marginalized areas in Northern Ireland.

- Create a mentorship program for early career teachers to provide support and guidance as they navigate the profession and explore opportunities for career advancement. A recognised mentor would be a skilled and experienced IME teacher who is willing to share their knowledge and expertise with the new teacher. The new teacher would be someone who is eager to learn and who is looking for support and guidance. For example, dedicated opportunities could be provided for the new teacher to observe the mentor's teaching to give them a chance to see how the experienced teacher approaches the classroom and to learn from their techniques on engaging students in language learning and practice.
- Establish IME advocacy positions at departmental and government level and within qualifications and curriculum agencies which draw on working knowledge of the IME sector in NI to inform the necessary policy changes to ensure that teachers/educators have opportunities for professional progression; to ensure that funding is provided for Irish medium schools and programs to enable routes for career progression in the sector which corresponds to increased demand for Irish medium education, and to ensure that statutory responsibilities on resourcing are provided for quality education.

### 3. Address resources gap

Teaching workload refers to the amount of teaching and support for teaching that a practitioner is expected to complete within a specific academic year as part of their employment. As demonstrated in the systematic review of international evidence, bilingual educators face additional workloads in comparison to monolingual teaching peers. Some of those who were interviewed responded that because of the lack of resources and support, their additional workload is overwhelming. One principal, with over 15 years experience in IME, mentioned that *“there’s a lack of resources, there’s a lack of... support. So, then all that falls back, then the class teacher [needs to be] maybe be more imaginative, more inventive, create their own resources and stuff like that.”* Therefore, in order to reduce additional workloads or to provide additional support for IME educators some of these key points might be necessary.

- Conduct a detailed needs assessment to identify specific areas and scale of high workload impact. Although the current research highlights the areas of materials development and language assessment as key areas where additional workload is undertaken by teachers, further detailed analysis of work allocations could be undertaken in addition to measuring the impact of measures such as access to classroom language assistants or reduced administrative duties.
- Provide additional resources and support to address workload issues, such as funding for teaching assistants, technology support, and bilingual administrative assistance. It is essential to have a shared awareness and understanding of the roles played by additional support such as assistants, to be as beneficial as possible.
- Consider due recognition of remuneration, time in lieu, other financial incentives such as loan waivers, as is evidenced in other bilingual education contexts.
- Support work-life balance practices, such as flexible schedules and family-friendly policies. To help facilitate the well-being of Irish-medium teachers and sustain

teachers' connections with language and culture, which can be a source of strength and inspiration, funds could be made available for community development initiatives such as a community choir, or environmental projects.

#### *4. Foster a sense of community*

A sense of community is the belief among group members that their needs will be addressed by their commitment to being together, a sense of belonging, and a sense that they matter to one another and the group. Many communities in Northern Ireland formed by teachers, principals, families, and language advocates have worked together for stronger education and reclamation of the Irish language. However, this sentiment needs to be facilitated to become action and supported so it becomes central as part of any action plan. To sustain strong sense of leadership and a leaderful community among the Irish speaking peoples and educators some of the following ideas might help accomplish this goal.

- Develop a network of support for Irish-medium teachers which is resourced by a coordinator, including opportunities for collaboration and peer support with other teachers across Northern Ireland. Attention needs to be given to practitioners working in rural areas and/or smaller schools, where there can be less opportunities to attend events, network, and share resources. By developing a network of support for Irish-medium teachers, we can help to ensure that they have the resources and support they need to be successful. This will benefit both the teachers and the students, and it will help to ensure that the Irish language continues to thrive.
- Establish funding resources to create opportunities for more social engagement, such as regular meetings or social events, to foster a sense of community and support among Irish-medium teachers in connection with parents and other community members.
- Encourage participation in existing professional organizations, such as language teacher associations or cultural groups, to build broader networks of support and collaboration during the academic year and beyond and also create more opportunities to discuss what is happening in the communities in relation to the cultural and linguistic aspects of learning Irish in Northern Ireland. A detailed list of organizations is provided at the end of this action plan.
- Encourage participation in professional networks for teachers of minoritized languages in other parts of the world (e.g., Wales, Canada, New Zealand).

#### *5. Recognition and appreciation*

Appreciating a teacher's work refers to recognizing and acknowledging the value, dedication, and impact of a teacher's efforts in the field of education and more specifically in their efforts to promote, encourage others to revitalize, and speak Irish. It involves showing gratitude and respect for their role in shaping students' lives and contributing to their academic and personal development. In some of the interview conversations with the participants of the study, it was mentioned how grateful they are to work with communities, parents and students towards engaging in Irish language learning, however there is so much more that can be done, and an action plan centred on prizing, celebrating and highlighting the teachers' and students work can afford due attention to the following key items.



- Develop a recognition program to acknowledge the contributions of Irish-medium teachers to language revitalization efforts in Northern Ireland, such as awards or public recognition ceremonies funded by the government. For example, a national award for Irish immersion teaching. This could be a prestigious award given to a select number of teachers each year, in recognition of their outstanding work in teaching Irish in immersion contexts in Northern Ireland. The award could be accompanied by a cash prize, as well as other benefits, such as a public recognition ceremony or a scholarship for further professional development/study.
- Provide ongoing opportunities for professional development and training to demonstrate recognition and appreciation for the work of Irish-medium teachers through colleges and university across Northern Ireland. This program could offer teachers the chance to attend workshops, conferences, and other events to learn new teaching methods and techniques. It could also provide funding for teachers to travel to elsewhere in Ireland to develop knowledge of Irish language and culture.
- Work with community organizations and cultural groups to identify additional ways to recognize and appreciate the contributions of Irish-medium teachers to language revitalization and reclamation efforts and support language and cultural reclamation by creating a public awareness campaign to highlight the importance of Irish immersion education. This campaign could be used to educate the public about the benefits of learning Irish within Northern Ireland, as well as the challenges faced by Irish immersion teachers. It could also be used to encourage more people to become Irish immersion teachers.

#### 6. *Collaboration with language revitalization and reclamation efforts*

Collaboration in efforts to revitalize the Irish language in Northern Ireland refers to working together with all stakeholders, organizations, and communities to preserve, promote, and revive languages that are at risk of being lost or marginalized. It involves collective action and shared responsibility to ensure the sustainability and revitalization and reclamation of heritage languages. For example, one principal in our study, mentioned the importance of this collaboration especially in rural areas because to date, in the area, there are many native Irish speakers, and their language is embedded in the culture to various practices such as music and dancing. He says that it is important to tap into those funds of knowledges in order to foster more collaboration. Any action plan that seeks to promote more collaboration should be guaranteed to be conducted within school hours as much as possible to avoid a persistent cycle of innovation happening at the expense of and burden on the practitioner. In order for a collaboration to be successful it is necessary to provide resourcing in and out of the school time to make sure teachers are not being burden by 'extra work' and consideration should be given to resourcing community organizations as the drivers for these partnerships. Examples of support for school-community collaboration are:

- Provide support for partnerships with language revitalization and reclamation community organizations who can offer teachers access to resources and such as Irish language classes cultural programmes, family language events
- Provide support for of IME collaborative partnerships between networks of IME language experts and organisers of extra-curricular activities (e.g., sport clubs, music and arts lessons, cookery classes) which can support out of school language learning.

As part of these partnerships, it is suggested that public and private organizations create bilingual (English/Irish) sections of their public websites or at least create a section in Irish explaining the nature of their organization.

### *7. Recruitment and mentorship*

An IME practitioner with over 20 years of experience learning and teaching Irish since she was in secondary school, expresses a high level of concern as some teacher candidates who study in Northern Ireland leave the country immediately to the UK or elsewhere. In any action plan, it is important to understand that a teacher education program's methods and efforts for recruiting potential teachers should be paramount when and while choosing the best candidates by offering them advice and assistance on their path to becoming teachers at all times. Below, we have pointed some ideas to keep in mind to achieve this.

- Develop a recruitment program to attract new Irish-medium teachers to the profession, including support for language proficiency and cultural integration to mitigate migrating new teachers to other parts of the UK/Europe. The program could reach out to potential students through a variety of channels, such as social media, email, and word-of-mouth. They could create a social media campaign that highlights the benefits of becoming an Irish immersion teacher and also partner with community organizations and schools to promote the program through their own listservs.
- Create a mentorship program for early career teachers to provide support and guidance as they navigate the profession and become part of the broader community of Irish-medium teachers. Partnering senior and junior teachers, alumni and families might help create a sense of belonging. The program could pair each student with a mentor who is an experienced Irish immersion teacher. This one would provide the student with support and guidance throughout their studies. The mentor could be a current teacher, a retired teacher, or a language instructor who might meet with the student regularly to provide feedback and support in all aspects related to language education, methodology and practices.
- Work with community organizations and cultural groups to identify additional ways to support recruitment and mentorship of new Irish-medium teachers providing not only economic incentives for retention, but also cultural and social incentives to engage teachers in their communities. For example, such a program could require students to complete fieldwork in an Irish immersion school within various communities. This could be done for a semester, or a full year and students would be responsible for teaching Irish to students of all ages and have the opportunity to observe experienced teachers and to learn from them.

### *8. Policy engagement strategy*

There may be an assumption that ground-level support is sufficient to create momentum for a growing sector of education. However, systemic support is also required to ensure an environment is in place which sustains long-term growth of the sector. The report highlights several challenges in relation to gaps in resources and current assessment practices, in particular, which without attention will escalate to very

significant risks. In addition, evidence of the individual and social impact of these current challenges on pupils and parents remain underexamined. Therefore, the development of a policy engagement strategy would be one measure of ensuring that IME voices are heard and represented in decision-making processes. Such a strategy could:

- Advocate for policy changes at the national level that build on recent successes of grassroots organising with a special attention to implications for Irish medium schools, teachers, teacher education programmes, and bilingual families.
- Advocate for participation in any review processes regarding assessment, marking and awarding of qualifications.
- Coordinate across minoritised language advocacy groups in Northern Ireland to organise for greater awareness of and support for bilingualism in education and society.
- Create an advisory group for engagement with local and national political representatives that gives voice to Irish medium education stakeholders, with equal representation of primary and post-primary interests.

### Community links

- An Carn, County Derry <https://ancarn.org/>
- Glór na Móna, Belfast <https://www.glornamona.com/gael-ionad-mhic-goill/>
- Gaelphobal Ard Mhacha Theas, Armagh <https://ardmhachatheas.com/>
- Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin, Derry City <https://www.culturlann.org/>
- Pobal ar a' Iúil, Omagh <http://pobalaraniul.com/>
- Gaeláras Mhic Ardghail, Newry

### Local Irish language bodies

- Foras na Gaeilge <https://www.forasnagaeilge.ie/?lang=en>

All island body responsible for the promotion of Irish language north and south.

- Conradh na Gaeilge <https://cnag.ie/en/>

A democratic forum for the Irish language community, advocates for language rights of Irish-speakers and raises awareness about the language.

- Gael Linn <https://www.gael-linn.ie/>

Responsible for the teaching of Irish as a school subject and in adult education, and the creation of opportunities for school pupils to use Irish. (Mostly English-medium schools)

- Glór na nGael <https://www.glornangael.ie/>

Promote Irish language in the community, business and family.

### Full research report and citation:

O'Boyle, A., Engman, M., Ortega, Y., & Turkan, S. (2023). *"Fair? Shared? Supported? Examining expectation and realities for Irish-medium practitioners"* A research report on the additional competences and associated workloads of the Irish-medium practitioner. Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta. <https://www.comhairle.org/english/about/publications/>

