

# Irish-Medium Education: The Benefits - Supported by Research

An Chomhairle um Oideachas  
Gaeltachta & Gaelscolaíochta



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## **Preface**

I warmly welcome the publication of this Guide on the many advantages of immersion education. The advantages associated with immersion education are set out here in an easily accessible way. I hope that principals, teachers and all education practitioners will use this Guide as a means to communicate the advantages of immersion education to parents.

It is difficult to summarise the amount of research that has been carried out on various aspects of immersion education in Ireland in over twenty years, a significant percentage of which was funded by COGG. All research funded by COGG is published on the organisation's website. It would be difficult, however, to easily access the findings and key messages in that significant corpus of research.

Towards the end of 2023 expressions of interest were sought from educational institutions and researchers to undertake a comprehensive critical examination and scrutiny of all of the research on immersion education carried out in Ireland. Dr. Claire Dunne on behalf of Marino Institute of Education was the successful recipient of the contract. Her final and complete analysis *Immersion Education at Primary Level in Ireland: Insights from National Research*, is available on COGG's website for those who may wish to examine the research in greater depth.

The analysis of the research is extremely important in that it highlights the evidence that there are significant advantages associated with immersion education. It is essential that those research-based advantages are shared in an accessible way with schools and with the education sector in general, so that they can highlight this information for parents making choices in relation to their children's education. This resource was developed for that purpose.

My heartfelt thanks to Dr. Claire Dunne for her hard work and dedication to this important work and to all of those who engaged in research for over the past twenty years to significantly increase the corpus of research on immersion education in Ireland.

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## Advantages of Immersion Education

In immersion education, children study all subject areas through the target language. In Ireland, there are Gaeltacht schools and Irish-medium schools outside of the Gaeltacht. Irish-medium education is available in early years' settings, in primary schools, and in post-primary schools. There are some Irish-medium courses available at third level too. The aim of Irish-medium education is to provide a high standard of education, as well as fostering a high standard of communication skills. This strong foundation helps children to become members of Irish-language communities and networks, and supports new speakers of Irish (Ó Duibhir, 2018). Irish-medium education supports children in Gaeltacht areas, and areas outside of the Gaeltacht, whose home language is Irish, or who use Irish and another language in the home.

When children start in Irish-medium education (or immersion education), they begin a language journey bringing with it a number of benefits, that support their holistic development. International research shows that bilingual and plurilingual people have a range of advantages, for example, academic, social, linguistic and economic advantages (Ó Ceallaigh, 2013).

Research into immersion education at primary level in Ireland, shows that children gain advantages in the following areas of development:

<p><b>Academic Advantages</b></p> 	<p>Children in Irish-medium schools perform as well or better than children in English-medium schools (Gilleece et al., 2012; McCoy, Quail and Smyth, 2012a; Parsons and Lyddy, 2016).</p> <p>As with their peers, children with special and additional needs who attend Irish-medium education gain advantages in many of the same academic and developmental areas: bilingualism, ability in Irish, academic advantages in post-primary school, self-confidence and a positive school culture (Nic Aindriú, 2019).</p>
<p><b>Linguistic Advantages</b></p> 	<p>Children in immersion education generally achieve high proficiency in English (Educational Research Centre, 2024; Ó hAiniféin, 2008; Parsons and Lyddy, 2016). Irish-medium education helps children achieve a higher proficiency in Irish, than when Irish is studied as a subject only (Harris et al., 2006; Ó Duibhir, 2018).</p> <p>Immersion education helps children to develop positive attitudes towards learning Irish (Kiely et al., 2022; Kiely et al., 2024; Ó Duibhir et al., 2017).</p>
<p><b>Plurilingual Advantages</b></p> 	<p>In learning Irish, children become part of the contemporary plurilingual community. Children in immersion education also show an interest in learning other languages (Dillon, 2009; Kiely et al., 2024).</p> <p>Children in immersion education show an advantage in learning a third language (Prats Porcar, 2013).</p> <p>Parents of children who speak languages other than Irish or English at home see the benefits of immersion education in contributing to an increase in their children's plurilingual ability (Ní Dhiorbháin, Connaughton-Crean and Ó Duibhir, 2023).</p>
<p><b>Social Advantages</b></p> 	<p>Children in Irish-medium schools show some social advantages in terms of making and maintaining friendships (McCoy, Quail and Smyth, 2012a).</p>
<p><b>Cultural and Intercultural Advantages</b></p> 	<p>Children in immersion education have increased opportunities to experience the arts and cultural events (Kiely et al., 2022; Kiely et al., 2024; McCoy, Quail and Smyth, 2012b).</p> <p>Children in Irish-medium schools read for pleasure more frequently (McCoy, Quail and Smyth, 2012a).</p> <p>Children in immersion education deepen their understanding of Irish culture, allowing them to share in a unique and rich strand of the cultural heritage of Irish society (CNCM, 2019). They demonstrate an awareness of historical events and folklore, as well as symbols of European identity (Lennon Malbasha, Dautel and Taylor, 2022), and also show an interest in developing intercultural awareness (Kiely et al., 2024).</p>
<p><b>Cognitive Advantages</b></p> 	<p>Children in immersion education show some cognitive advantages, especially in engaging in complex executive function tasks e.g. sorting and classifying items (Stephens, 2013).</p> <p>They also show advantages in metalinguistic skills, namely, being able to think about and discuss different aspects of language, e.g. grammar and syntax (Dillon, 2009; Harris and O'Leary, 2012; Kiely et al., 2024; Prats Porcar, 2013).</p>

## Irish-Medium Education and the Child's Holistic Development

Immersion education at primary level, in Gaeltacht schools and Irish-medium schools outside of the Gaeltacht, supports children's development, contributing to many academic, linguistic, plurilingual, social, cultural, intercultural, and cognitive advantages. However many of the advantages outlined in this handbook also apply to children attending Irish-medium post-primary schools. COGG hopes to make a separate publication available for the post-primary sector.

### Academic Advantages

Overall, children in Irish-medium schools do as well or better than children in English-medium schools (Gilleece et al., 2012; McCoy, Quail and Smyth, 2012a; Ó hAiniféin, 2008; Parsons and Lyddy, 2016), and there is generally a high standard of education in Irish-medium schools (ETI Northern Ireland, 2018).

Children in immersion education bring with them a variety of talents, needs, interests and personalities (Dunne and Ní Aogáin, 2025; Nic Aindriú, 2019) and no two learners are alike (Ní Chlochasaigh, 2020). They require some of the same supports as children in English-medium schools, as well as some specific supports for language and literacy in Irish. As with their peers, children with special and additional needs who attend Irish-medium education gain advantages in many of the same academic and developmental areas: bilingualism, ability in Irish, academic advantages in post-primary school, self-confidence and a positive school culture (Nic Aindriú, 2019).

### Linguistic Advantages

Immersion education gives children the opportunity to develop literacy in the two formal languages of the school: Irish and English. Linguistic development in one language supports development in other languages (August and Shanahan, 2006; Baker and Wright, 2017; Ó Duibhir and Cummins, 2012). It has been observed that the second language / additional language is acquired through immersion education without adversely affecting first language acquisition (Harris et al., 2006; Shiel et al., 2011).

Children in immersion education generally achieve proficiency in the majority language (McVeigh, Wylie and Mulhern, 2019; Ó hAiniféin, 2008; Parsons and Lyddy, 2016). As is clear in the case of Welsh, the contact that children have with English outside of school helps to overcome any gap related to the formal teaching of the majority language in the early years of immersion education (Rhys and Thomas, 2013).

Children in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland performed very well overall in English reading in the most recent *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study* (PIRLS), with a significant increase in average achievement in the Republic of Ireland (although it should be noted that participating children were slightly older than usual, due to delays caused by COVID-19) (Delaney et al., 2023). Children in Irish-medium schools were included in these samples. In the Republic of Ireland, an additional analysis supplied by the Educational Research Centre<sup>1</sup> indicates that children in Irish-medium schools performed at least as well as peers in English-medium schools, on average. This means that children in Irish-medium schools performed very strongly relative to peers internationally.

Children who attend Irish-medium schools achieve a higher level of proficiency in Irish compared to children who study Irish as a subject only (Harris et al., 2006; Ó Duibhir, 2018). They generally demonstrate positive attitudes towards learning Irish too (Kiely et al., 2022; Kiely et al., 2024; Ó Duibhir et al., 2017). There is a continuum of bilingualism / plurilingualism, and people can use their language repertoire in different ways and in different contexts. More creative technologies are now available in Irish. Alternative and Augmentative Communication technologies that are being developed in Trinity College Dublin, will enable children to communicate through choosing a series of words or images, allowing Irish speakers to communicate in more flexible ways (Barnes et al., 2022).



<sup>1</sup> Personal communication with the Educational Research Centre, 18 July 2024.

## Plurilingual Advantages

Gaeltacht schools and Irish-medium schools outside of the Gaeltacht, contribute to linguistic diversity in Ireland by creating a space in which children can have regular contact with Irish. Over 200 languages are currently used in Ireland, including three indigenous minoritised languages: Irish, Irish Sign Language and Traveller Cant. Immersion education gives children the opportunity to acquire the Irish language and to enrich their language proficiency, as well as to develop an appreciation of themselves as plurilingual speakers.

Children in Irish-medium schools show an advantage in learning a third language (Prats Porcar, 2013). Parents of children who speak languages other than Irish or English at home see the benefits of immersion education in contributing to an increase in their children's plurilingual ability (Ní Dhiorbháin, Connaughton-Crean and Ó Duibhir, 2023).

## Social Advantages

Children in Irish-medium schools outside of the Gaeltacht show a number of social advantages. Research shows they keep in touch with their friends by meeting them face to face or connecting with them on social media. Sometimes children from different areas travel to Irish-medium schools and this helps encourage them to keep in touch with their friends outside of school (McCoy, Quail, and Smyth, 2012a).



## Cultural and Intercultural Advantages

Immersion education not only supports linguistic advantages, but it has a positive effect on other areas of children's development. Children in Irish-medium schools read for pleasure more frequently (McCoy, Quail and Smyth, 2012a). Reading for pleasure helps foster a positive attitude towards the Irish language (Devitt et al., 2018).

Children in Irish-medium schools have increased opportunities to engage in Drama, Music, and Physical Education (McCoy, Quail and Smyth, 2012b). Engagement with cultural aspects during schooling especially supports their academic achievement (McCoy, Quail, and Smyth, 2012a). Children also report that they really enjoy these curricular areas (Kiely et al., 2024).

Children in immersion education deepen their understanding of Irish culture, allowing them to share in a unique and rich strand of the cultural heritage of Irish society (CNCM, 2019). They demonstrate an awareness of historical events and folklore, as well as symbols of European identity (Lennon Malbasha, Dautel and Taylor, 2022). They also show an interest in developing intercultural awareness (Kiely et al., 2024).

## Cognitive Advantages

Research into the impact of school-based bilingualism in Ireland demonstrates that it has no negative impact on executive function, namely, the ability to recall, classify and sort objects etc. (Kennedy, 2012). Children in Irish-medium schools show advantages in engaging in complex executive function tasks (Stephens, 2013), consistent with international research (Bialystok, 2009). They also show advantages in metalinguistic skills, namely, being able to think about and discuss different aspects of language e.g. grammar and syntax (Dillon, 2009; Harris and O'Leary, 2012; Kiely et al., 2024; Prats Porcar, 2013).

## Summary

Irish-medium education supports children's holistic development. On the whole, children in immersion education do as well or better, compared to children in English-medium schools, and they gain a range of advantages in different areas. Children come to school with different talents, interests, and needs. Every child can benefit from Irish-medium education provided there are inclusive pedagogies, and whole-school planning, as well as appropriate resources available.



## Growth and Development of Irish-Medium Education

Bilingual education dates back to Roman and Greek times, and today, immersion and bilingual programmes are available in the majority of countries around the world (Hornberger, 2008; Ó Brolcháin, 2015). Ireland is no exception, and has a rich and interesting history when it comes to immersion education. Irish-medium education is important, not just in terms of language revitalisation, but also in terms of providing choice in education types, and supporting parental involvement. Irish-medium education has grown and developed over the years. Some of the key developments are outlined below.

**1908** – Pádraig Mac Piarais founded Scoil Éanna where subjects were taught bilingually.

**1917** – Luíse Ghabhánach Ní Dhufaigh and Áine Nic Aodha co-founded the first Irish-medium school.

**1922** – Immersion education was introduced in infant classes in the Free State.

**1952** – Scoil Lorcáin, the first Irish-medium primary school in the Republic of Ireland, was founded in Dublin. Other Irish-medium primary schools began to emerge later, including Scoil Neasáin (1969), Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch (1973) and Scoil Naithí (1973).

**1960s** – Native speakers gathered to form an urban Gaeltacht on the Shaw's Road in West Belfast.

**1969** – Coláiste Eoin was founded, followed by Coláiste Íosagáin (1971), in order to provide an option for Irish-medium post-primary education.

**1970s** – Parents, families and educators came together to establish more Irish-medium schools.

**1971** – Bunscoil Phobal Feirste was founded, the first Irish-medium school in Northern Ireland.

**1972** – Comhdháil na Scoileanna Gaelacha (Congress of Irish-Medium Schools) was founded in Galway.

**1973** – Comhchoiste Náisiúnta na Scoileanna Gaeilge (Joint National Committee of Irish-Medium Schools), was founded in Dublin.

**1974-1976** – The two organisations subsequently branded as Gaelscoileanna Teo. now operating as Gaeloideachas, came together to support the growth in Irish-medium education.

**1981** – Coláiste Chilliaín was founded in Clondalkin, the first Irish-medium post-primary school outside of the Gaeltacht under the auspices of Na Coistí Gairmoideachais (Committees for Vocational Education).

**1983** – The first all-Irish centre in Northern Ireland was established in Derry City.

**1987** – Eagraíocht na Scoileanna Gaeltachta (Organisation for Gaeltacht schools) was founded.

**1990s** – More support is available for immersion education in Northern Ireland due to the Good Friday Agreement (1998), The Education Order (1998) and the establishment of Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (2000), and Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta (2001).

**1991** – The first post-primary school, Coláiste Feirste (Meánscoil Feirste) was established in Northern Ireland. Gaeloilíúint was also founded, the first umbrella organisation for Irish-medium schools in Northern Ireland.

**1993** – An Foras Pátrúnachta was established in order to provide a further option for new Irish-medium schools in terms of patronage and is now the biggest patron of Irish-medium schools.

**1993** – Gaelscoil an Ghoirt Álainn was founded in Cork, the first Irish-medium multid denominational school.

**1995** – An Irish-medium Postgraduate Certificate in Education was started in Coláiste Ollscoile Naomh Muire (St. Mary's University College), Belfast. The following year, the first cohort of Irish-medium BEd students commenced their degree through the medium of Irish.

**1996** – Gaelscoil Chill Mhantáin was founded in Wicklow, the first Irish-medium interdenominational school.

**1998** – The Higher Diploma in Education, a post-primary qualification, was launched at the University of Galway. Since 2014 this is known as the Professional Master of Education.

**2002** – An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta. (COGG) was established.

**2011** – A Masters in Irish-Medium Education commenced in Coláiste Ollscoile Naomh Muire (St. Mary's University College), Belfast.

**2013** – A Masters in Irish-Medium and Gaeltacht Education commenced in Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. From 2023, this Masters is delivered by Trinity College Dublin.

**2016** – The Policy for Gaeltacht Education was published and the Gaeltacht Education Unit was established in the Department of Education.

**2019** – The first cohort started the Bachelor of Education through the medium of Irish in Marino Institute of Education.

**2024** – The national consultation on Irish-medium education outside of the Gaeltacht was published and a new policy on Irish-medium education outside of the Gaeltacht is currently being developed by the Department of Education.

## Supporting your Child in Irish-Medium Education

The involvement of parents, family and other important people in the child's life, is central to the vision for immersion education in Ireland. Parents, families and educators work together to found and continually support Irish-medium schools. Parents and families have different levels of confidence in using Irish, but a positive attitude to and interest in the language can make a big difference (Harris et al., 2006). No two parents or families are the same, and everyone brings with them their own experiences and talents. These experiences and talents can be drawn upon to support your child's educational journey in a number of different ways.

- Support your child's literacy skills in your native language. Enjoy reading stories together at home.
- Praise your child for their efforts in speaking and using Irish.
- Ask your child to teach you something they have learned in Irish e.g. a poem or a song.
- Familiarise yourself with different areas of the curriculum that your child will be learning in order to support their homework. Information and support are available on the [www.gaeloideachas.ie](http://www.gaeloideachas.ie) page, under the Tuismitheoirí / Parents section.
- Familiarise yourself with the learning resources for children available at [www.cogg.ie](http://www.cogg.ie), under the section An Tairseach.
- Use the resources available at [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie), in the Gaeilge sa Bhaile / Irish at Home section, to use the Irish you have in a fun way with your child.
- Find out more about the supports for parents and families, who wish to increase their use of Irish at home, available at [www.glornangael.ie/teangati/comhairle/](http://www.glornangael.ie/teangati/comhairle/).
- Participate in bilingual / plurilingual events at school.
- Find out whether there are Irish / plurilingual events taking place in your community, e.g. the Mother Tongues festival.



## Conclusion

Immersion education in Ireland has a rich and interesting history, and there continues to be an interest in and demand for Irish-medium schools. Some parents even have personal experience of the immersion education system themselves. Children in Irish-medium schools have the opportunity to engage in all areas of the curriculum, as well as acquiring Irish and enriching their language skills. Irish-medium schools support the development of language and literacy skills in English, and in Irish in particular. On the whole, children in immersion education perform as well or better in terms of English, than children in English-medium schools. In addition to this, children acquire the Irish language and develop positive attitudes towards the language.

Irish-medium schools contribute to linguistic diversity in Ireland by creating a space in which children can have regular contact with the Irish language. This experience helps children to become part of the contemporary international bilingual / plurilingual community. It is acknowledged in the research and in the Primary Language Curriculum (2019) that there is a continuum of bilingualism / plurilingualism and that people use their language repertoire in different ways and in different contexts.

To get the most out of Irish-medium education, it is necessary to foster strong links between the school, the home, and the community, and to work together to promote a whole-school approach. At each stage of the educational journey, language support and other types of support are required, both inside the classroom and outside of it, in order for children to reach their full potential.

Children in Irish-medium schools, like all children, have a variety of talents, needs, interests and personalities. They need some of the same supports as children in English-medium schools, but they also need special supports in terms of the Irish language. Irish-medium education can support all children on their educational journey, provided there are inclusive pedagogies, whole-school planning, as well as resources available.

The full research report, *An Tumoideachas ag an mBunleibhéal in Éirinn: Léargais ón Taighde Náisiúnta / Immersion Education at Primary Level in Ireland: Insights from National Research*, which examines in closer detail the studies that underpin this handbook, can be found at [www.cogg.ie](http://www.cogg.ie). It is hoped that the report will be of help to anyone undertaking research on Irish-medium education.

Over the coming years, we can learn from the experiences of Irish-medium schools in different settings and contexts, in order to provide sustainable support so that parents and families can continue to choose immersion education. The Department of Education is currently developing a policy for Irish-medium education outside of the Gaeltacht, following the publication of the Policy on Gaeltacht Education (DES, 2016). COGG and Institiúid Oideachais Marino would like to express their thanks to Claire M. Dunne for preparing this handbook and the full research report.





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