**The Impact of Covid-19 on Irish-medium Education**

The Covid-19 crisis has had a catastrophic impact on education across the world. Pupils living in areas of social deprivation and those with Special Educational Needs have been identified as those groups that will be most detrimentally affected by the pandemic, and those who should be targeted most urgently to mitigate the negative impact that this crisis has had on their social and emotional wellbeing and their academic development.

Ten of the thirty-two Irish-medium schools are located in the top 100 most deprived Super Output Areas meaning IM schools have had to contend with greater digital exclusion during the initial period of lockdown with a higher number of pupils disengaged from education. IM pupils presenting with Special Educational Needs already faced the challenges of inadequate assessment tools and inappropriate intervention before Covid-19 and the crisis has exacerbated these challenges further.

The continued disruption to education has been difficult for all pupils but IM pupils face the added burden of being removed from the immersion environment for prolonged periods. The immersion approach relies on sustained, incremental language development with pupils immersed in the language throughout the school environment. This was halted with the onset of Covid-19 in March 2020 and exacerbated by subsequent periods of home learning which continues at the time of writing in Jan 2021.

Coupled with the fact that the majority of parents of IM pupils do not speak Irish in the home, the school environment for most pupils is the sole provision for language acquisition and linguistic development. The lack of exposure to the Irish language can be mitigated, however, and recovery can take place with significant investment in mechanisms to promote immersion pedagogy and ensure IM pupils are supported socially, emotionally and academically during the extended periods of home learning when IM pupils are living and learning outside of an immersive environment and upon returning to school.

Language Acquisition

The IM sector is extremely concerned about how these prolonged periods of school closures will have affected pupils’ level of Irish and measures are needed to mitigate the negative impact that is anticipated. Schools have been working and continue to work in crisis-mode to deliver the curriculum in a combination of in-school and remote learning. It is now anticipated that the remainder of the school year will involve a combination of both.

Although research has yet to be undertaken regarding immersion education in a remote learning context, UNESCO reports on remote learning in general consistently cite synchronous methods of teaching as most effective to maintain connections with pupils pastorally and to provide an immersion environment online.[[1]](#footnote-1) All DE/EA guidance issued to schools to date has failed to encourage synchronous learning as an effective pedagogy or to acknowledge the specific needs of learnings in an immersive context. In the most recent circular published January 5th 2021 in relation to remote learning DE stated, “The Department notes that there is no compelling evidence to indicate that such synchronous learning is more effective at improving pupil outcomes than asynchronous approaches through for example pre-recorded lessons.”[[2]](#footnote-2) This is a broad statement, not supported by any evidence and not cognisant of the immersion context. Although CnaG notes concerns from teaching unions and understands technological constraints, it is imperative in the short term, as pupils continue to learn from home, that the educational authorities recognise the needs of pupils in immersion education and encourage, enable and equip schools to employ the most effective pedagogies.

A language intensive approach to curriculum planning is needed in what will be a period of recovery in the new 2021/22 school year and schools should be appropriately resourced to support pupils holistically and academically. The utilization of support staff for additional language classes has been noted by ETI as having a positive impact both academically and pastorally amongst newcomer pupils and this approach should be replicated to alleviate concerns around sustained language acquisition[[3]](#footnote-3).

Initiatives such as the Engage Programme can go a long way in terms of intervention for those pupils most acutely affected by school disruption but these initiatives must be IM proofed to ensure that the sector can avail of them in their entirety. From the outset, CnaG raised concerns regarding the implementation of Engage in schools due to a shortage of qualified IM teachers and this led to delays in the programme’s initiation in IM schools. CnaG sought flexibility for those schools who were unable to identify a suitably qualified teacher to allow those schools to instead employ additional classroom assistants Although flexibility was finally granted, a considerable amount of invaluable time lapsed when intervention could have been taking place to the benefit of those IM pupils most affected by the pandemic.

**CnaG recommends;**

* DE consults with all phases and stages of the IM sector in order to ensure all guidance/initiatives/policies are suitable or adapted for immersion settings;
* Schools are encouraged and enabled to provide effective, synchronous online teaching that seeks to replicate the immersion context online. ETI should be commissioned to identify best practice in this area, to be shared with the sector as a matter of urgency;
* Tailored TPL be provided to support remote learning, in the immersion context. Initial training has been provided in conjunction with the IM Principals’ Forum and through a series of online seminars. St. Mary’s University College should be commissioned to provide further TPL opportunities that focus on the current situation and align with the immersion context;
* The deployment of additional classroom assistants upon return to school or in the remote learning context, to specifically target linguistic development and mitigate language loss incurred;
* Programmes commissioned such as ‘Engage’, should include IM specific support to support literacy and numeracy in the immersion context;
* Exploratory work commences to consider how the new 2021/22 school year will look for pupils at all key stages with a focus on language recovery and acquisition. In conjunction with CCEA, DE urgently issue guidance detailing the content of a recovery curriculum which will be sensitive to the particular needs of immersion education across all Key Stages. Cognisance must be given to those pupils who will sit formal examinations through the medium of Irish in 2022 and IM pupils who will be graded internally in 2021 after extended periods outside of the immersive learning environment.

Resources

The lack of parity in English-medium and Irish-medium resources is not an issue specific to this current crisis, yet it is exacerbated in this context as IM settings facilitate distance learning. A wealth of resources and apps are available online for EM pupils, leaving IM pupils at a severe disadvantage when accessing materials from home. In all recent consultations with the IM sector, principals have consistently requested additional online resources and apps, appropriate for online learning across all Key Stages in the immersion context as well as exploration of a recovery curriculum for the 2021/22 school year.

The disparity in resourcing is typified in the provision for C2K *Newsdesk* in comparison with its IM counterpart, *Seomra Nuachta*. Currently *Seomra Nuachta* only has the capacity to cater for KS2 pupils primarily but the sector has identified a need for KS1/KS3/KS4 provision also. Through the Irish-medium Continuity of Learning Workstream, a workstream commissioned at the beginning of the pandemic to support learning in the current context, funding was made available and it was determined that a portion of this funding should go towards an uplift in capacity for *Seomra Nuachta*. It is greatly disappointing, therefore, that this funding has yet to be allocated almost a year later and urgent steps must be taken to ensure this money is available to support the IM sector immediately.

Mental Health and Wellbeing will undoubtedly be a huge focus in the return to normal life and significant investment is required to ensure Irish-medium pupils have access to resources that support their health and wellbeing in the language through which they receive their education. It is extremely frustrating that resources are continually commissioned by DE/EA and shared with schools in English only and is a direct infringement on the statutory duty to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-medium Education. CnaG has repeatedly requested that all pupil-facing resources commissioned by the authorities be made available in Irish concurrently to ensure that IM pupils have equal access to support and interventions and appropriate mechanisms should be implemented as a matter of urgency to ensure this takes place.

**CnaG recommends;**

* An urgent uplift in budget to allow for the provision of additional IM resources and apps that can be used in the remote learning context;
* The immediate allocation of funding to enhance the scope and capacity of *Seomra Nuachta*;
* Significant investment in Irish-medium resources that support Mental Health and Wellbeing.

Support for Parents

In accordance with the statutory duty, it is essential that Irish-medium Education continues to be encouraged during this period. A parent who chooses to send their child to an Irish-medium educational setting does so in the confidence that they will avail of all the advantages that immersion education offers and it is vital that this confidence is maintained.

The majority of IM parents do not speak Irish themselves and therefore additional resources are needed to support parents who are supporting remote learning in an immersion context. This issue is further compounded by the fact that a large proportion of IM children come from disadvantaged backgrounds where additional support is required. This is especially pertinent in regards to language maintenance and enhancement. Support for parents of Irish-medium pupils lags well behind the support available in other jurisdictions and examples of best practice should be identified and replicated.

**CnaG recommends;**

* The support materials that have been produced for parents in EM settings should be adapted and provided for IM parents, specifically targeting support for language maintenance and enhancement;
* Funding is sought to establish a forum that provides support and guidance to IM parents, similar to *Comann nam Parant* and [www.gaelic4parents.com](http://www.gaelic4parents.com) in Scotland.

Teacher Supply

Not unlike the IM resource issue, the issue of teacher supply is not a new one. The IM sector is primed to be more acutely affected by teacher shortages as a dearth of teachers already existed before the current crisis. This was highlighted during the implementation of the Engage programme where one fifth of IM schools were unable to employ a suitably qualified teacher. Teacher shortages are particularly felt at post-primary level with a lack of subject-specific teachers. This issue needs to be addressed and planned for in the long term but also considered in any short term initiatives such as Engage to ensure the Irish-medium sector is adequately resourced.

**CnaG recommends;**

* A strategic plan is developed in conjunction with DE to increase teacher supply.

The majority of issues presented in this paper are not new to the Irish-medium sector and exist due to a significant lack of investment in the sector and a distinct disregard for the needs of pupils learning in an immersion setting. CnaG recommends the formation of a working group to determine key actions going forward, with sufficient support and investment from the educational authorities. It is imperative, in the short term, that schools are enabled to provide the highest quality of teaching and learning in a remote context and that the relevant authorities, in consultation with stakeholders, begin looking to the longer term and plan effectively for the return to a normal school experience.

1. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373764?posInSet=64&queryId=N-4198b5c9-2d42-4ffc-9fbe-4ff5748afd93> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Updated%20Circular%20Remote%20Learning%20-%20January%202021%20%28002%29.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.etini.gov.uk/sites/etini.gov.uk/files/publications/an-assessment-of-the-impact-of-newcomer-pupil-premium-in-primary-and-post-primary-schools.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)