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RESEARCH BRIEFING

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THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS AND PRINCIPALS IN IRISH-MEDIUM EDUCATION

Key Findings

- ◆ 7% of the teachers surveyed did not have a qualification giving them “eligible to teach” status; however, all but two of these were substitute teachers. Four out of ten teachers and seven out of ten principals did not have a specific Irish-medium element to their qualifications.
- ◆ Just under 600 attendances at INSET courses were made by teachers during the previous two years, resulting in an average of approximately 6 per teacher, with just under 100 attendances at INSET courses being made by principals, an average of 5 per principal. The vast majority of attendances at INSET courses by teachers and principals were at those delivered in the English language, with 10% at courses delivered in the Irish language.
- ◆ Approximately half the number of teachers rated the INSET courses they attended high or very high in terms of relevance to teaching and learning in the classroom; benefits in relation to their professional development; and quality of delivery, content and resources.

- ◆ More than three-quarters of the principals rated the INSET courses they attended high or very high in terms of relevance to their current role, with two-thirds rating them as such in terms of benefits relating to their professional development. Just over half the principals rated the quality of delivery, content and resources as high or very high.

- ◆ Some INSET providers stated that offering materials and resources in the Irish language would cut down on teachers' workload of having to translate for use with pupils in class. However, in order for this to happen, providers would require extra resources, direction and guidance for the translation of training material. Although there were some resources and materials provided in Irish, the general consensus was that the majority of INSET resources and materials were provided in the English language.

INTRODUCTION

1. Teachers and principals are a school's most important resource and continual investment in their professional development through INSET contributes to raising the quality and standards of pupils' learning and achievement. Andrews (1995) provided a historical account of the provision of INSET for developing the Irish language in schools throughout Northern Ireland. He made reference to INSET provision for Irish in Irish-medium primary schools with a particular emphasis on the need for INSET to help with devising textbooks and teaching materials. The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) (1999) supported this need having conducted a survey of provision for special educational needs (SEN) in Irish-medium primary schools. Their survey found there to be "a shortage of appropriate specialist teaching and learning resources for Irish-medium education such as graded reading schemes, Reading Recovery materials and information and communication technology (ICT) software". The ETI went on to stress the need for this to be addressed.
2. Mac Póilin (1992) recommended that there should be funding made available for specialised INSET and advice for Irish-medium teachers regarding their professional development needs. This idea of specialised INSET was still necessary years later, according to the ETI (1999), who found that, although nearly all the SEN co-ordinators in the Irish-medium schools they surveyed had made use of some INSET on special educational needs, the opportunities for specific Irish-medium special educational needs INSET had been limited. They did go on, however, to stress that "the schools have not availed of all INSET targeted at the Irish-medium sector" and that "there is a need for staff in Irish-medium schools to access a wider range of INSET opportunities and support from external agencies".
3. Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (2003) compiled a report entitled *Three Year Training Plan 2003-2006*. The report identified key training issues associated with teachers in Irish-medium education. For example, only four INSET courses had been provided specifically for the Irish-medium sector during exceptional closure days, in addition to one half-day course focusing on curriculum review in 2002. The report called for "proper training provision" with specific training in Irish-medium education related to, for example, literacy and numeracy strategies, immersion education, assessment, induction and early professional development, special educational needs, and composite classes. Suggestions were made for INSET material to be offered in the Irish language, and for consideration to

be given to INSET from the point of view of Irish-medium education, alongside collaboration with Irish-medium advisers. The report acknowledged the problem of availability of suitable substitute teachers to release teachers to attend INSET courses during school hours, and therefore suggested that specific INSET for Irish-medium education take place outside school hours, providing the opportunity for Irish-medium teachers to meet on a regular basis to discuss issues on the curriculum and exchange ideas on teaching. The report also pointed out that even though a small number of Irish-medium teachers may apply to an Irish-medium course, consideration should be given to the fact that the number applying may represent a reasonable proportion of the entire Irish-medium school sector.

Aims and Objectives of the Research

4. The two main aims of the research conducted for this report were:
 - ◆ to investigate the current provision for initial teacher education and for the professional development of teachers and principals in Irish-medium education in Northern Ireland; and
 - ◆ to inform policy-making in relation to future arrangements for such teachers' and principals' professional development.

5. These two aims gave rise to three objectives:
 - ◆ to investigate the ITE provision for, and qualifications gained specifically by, teachers in Irish-medium schools in Northern Ireland. These are set alongside available information on ITE provision for, and teacher qualifications in, Northern Ireland generally;
 - ◆ to collect information on the provision for, and uptake of, general and specific professional INSET and support opportunities in relation to teachers and principals in Irish-medium schools;
 - ◆ to collect and analyse attitudinal information from staff in Irish-medium schools on the range and quality of the professional INSET and support opportunities they have experienced.

MAIN FINDINGS

6. INSET courses have been offered in the past specifically for Irish-medium schools; however, on two occasions a lack of uptake on the part of teachers in the sector prevented them from taking place, for example, at a Summer School and a University College.
7. Half the teachers in Irish-medium schools are 30 years of age or less. Three-quarters have been teaching in their current school for six years or less, with a fifth having only started during the past year. In general, half the teachers have teaching experience of six years or less.
8. A third of principals in Irish-medium schools are below the age of 35. The vast majority (90%) have occupied their role in the school for six years or less, with nearly a fifth having only done so during the past year. A third of principals have less than 15 years teaching experience. Four out of ten principals occupy the dual role of teaching principal.
9. A variety of INSET courses were highly rated by teachers in relation to relevance, benefits and quality, for example, literacy, numeracy, information and communication technology (ICT), assessment training, teaching and learning, and behaviour management. This was also true for principals regarding courses on management and school leadership, ICT, behaviour management and child protection. A range of diverse reasons for these high ratings was identified. For INSET courses on literacy, numeracy and ICT, these reasons were the provision of informative and practical ideas, activities, strategies and advice for developing teachers' skills and constructively improving teaching and learning in the classroom. This was particularly so when backed up with the provision of good quality resources. The teachers also welcomed information that kept them abreast of new developments within education, as well as new ideas and resources that enhanced and updated their teaching skills. Raising teachers' awareness of new teaching strategies and techniques relevant to implementing the literacy and numeracy strategies were also advantageous, as was improving teachers' ICT skills in order to effectively use ICT as a learning tool in the classroom. When INSET was well presented, resourced appropriately, and sustained the interest of the teachers, then it was found to be of high quality. This was also true when the providers were well organised, had a sound knowledge of the subject area, and were aware of potential difficulties involved in classroom teaching. However, there was still concern with the lack of specific Irish-medium material and resources provided, ultimately resulting in the additional workload of teachers having to translate before use in the classroom.

10. INSET courses on management and school leadership, ICT, behaviour management and child protection were rated highly by principals due to the enhancement of skills and strategies related to managing, motivating and training staff, developing school policies and leading the school in an effective manner. Principals also saw exploring the theory and practice of successful management, and discussing issues of common interest with other principals as being beneficial to their professional development. Quality was deemed to be of a high standard when providers held the attention of the principals, demonstrated excellent knowledge of the subject areas, and when interaction and discussion became part of the course. This was also true when information was supplemented by excellent, up-to-date resources.
11. It was felt by a number of teachers that many INSET courses on literacy, at present, do not meet the particular needs of Irish-medium schools, due to resources and guidelines that are geared towards English-medium schools and are difficult to transfer to the Irish-medium sector. Guidance and support on how to teach English in an Irish-medium setting were called for, as well as INSET courses and resources in Irish for spelling strategies, teaching phonics and phonographix. INSET provision on creative reading, writing and structured play were areas which teachers felt were necessary to address specifically for the Irish-medium classroom. Teachers also reported a lack of training and resources in the areas of music, drama and physical education for Irish-medium education.
12. In the context of mathematics, science and geography, teachers expressed a need for INSET with a focus on specific language and terminology requirements in these areas of the curriculum. This was accompanied by a call for INSET courses on specific resources for ICT to suit Irish-medium needs.
13. There was a sense from some teachers and principals that INSET courses should be offered through the Irish language because it is the language through which the children in school are taught; the strategies used in English-medium cannot always be applied to Irish-medium; it could help provide terminology and make resources available for literacy, numeracy, ICT, etc in Irish; it could develop teachers' literacy skills and provide strategies that teachers could use in classroom; it could address teaching in the context of Irish-medium education; it could encourage teachers to use and develop more the material given at INSET courses; it could promote language development; and it could reduce the workload and time teachers in Irish-medium education spend translating resources.

14. Very positive support and encouragement was apparent from the teachers in relation to attending INSET courses, especially if the course was relevant to a teacher's post/responsibility or was beneficial to the needs of the school. Information on INSET courses was generally made available in the staffroom. However, attendance at INSET courses was occasionally dictated by the availability and funding of suitable substitute cover, and this was sometimes referred to as a problem.
15. There were incidences, however, of teachers receiving little or no support or information from the school regarding INSET, while others showed a reluctance to ask for permission to attend due to possibly putting the principal under pressure.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

16. The report makes the following recommendations:
 - ◆ INSET providers should become more pro-active in determining the specific training needs of Irish-medium schools and individual teachers by consulting directly with staff on issues pertaining to their professional development.
 - ◆ INSET providers should conduct an audit of the necessity and costs associated with the supply of INSET materials in Irish for Irish-medium schools in order to meet teachers' professional development needs. Considering there are Irish-medium schools throughout all of the ELBs, there should be equality of provision for INSET materials to Irish-medium teachers in the Irish language in the same way it is provided to teachers in English-medium schools.
 - ◆ Irish-medium teachers and principals should draw on the full provision of INSET courses which are appropriate. However, providers should be sensitive, in an informed way, to the cultural and linguistic needs of Irish-medium education, so an assessment can be made regarding the appropriateness of offering an INSET course through the medium of Irish.
 - ◆ The minimum viability threshold for an INSET course specific to Irish-medium education should be given careful consideration by INSET providers due to the much smaller number of teachers in the sector.
 - ◆ INSET providers should be mindful of the relatively young age range and possible lack of experience of teachers and principals in Irish-

medium schools, which would indicate the need for professional development training relating specifically to teaching in and managing an Irish-medium school. For example, those teachers who are interested in the Professional Qualification for Headship (PQH) may not as yet fit the criteria for entry onto the course, due to their lack of leadership and management experience.

- ◆ Due to the added pressures associated with being a teaching principal in an Irish-medium school, it is more difficult for such a principal to gain release for attendance at INSET courses, compared to a non-teaching principal. This fact should be acknowledged accordingly, with due consideration given to their circumstances, perhaps resulting in provision being made specifically for them outside of school hours.
- ◆ Provision for part-time ITE qualifications should be made for those teachers who are long-term substitutes in Irish-medium schools, so they have the opportunity to gain “eligible to teach” status.
- ◆ Encouragement and support should be offered to teachers and principals in the Irish-medium sector who do not have a specific Irish-medium element to their qualifications in order for them to gain the necessary knowledge, skills and techniques particular to Irish-medium education.
- ◆ INSET provision on literacy in Irish-medium education was highlighted as an area needing further development. Courses are necessary offering guidance to teachers on developing spelling strategies, the teaching of phonics, and creative reading/writing, as well as achieving a healthy balance in teaching Irish and English to pupils so they become equally competent in both languages.
- ◆ There is a call for Irish language INSET courses concentrating specifically on conveying subject specific terminology used in the classroom.
- ◆ The creation of a regional forum or cluster group meetings for Irish-medium principals and teachers was suggested. This could be organised in collaboration with schools and INSET providers, offering the opportunity for staff within the sector to raise issues of common interest regarding professional development in Irish-medium schools.
- ◆ It was suggested by principals of Irish-medium units that training in relation to the foundations and guiding principles of Irish-

medium/bilingual education would be useful to assist them in talking to parents and promoting the sector. INSET needs to be directed at these principals to help raise their confidence and competence.

- ◆ In order to facilitate teachers and principals to attend relevant INSET courses, there is a real need to increase the number of suitably qualified teachers in Irish-medium education who can act as substitute teachers when required. The number of places available in higher education for initial teacher education specific to the Irish-medium sector may need to be increased.
- ◆ Irish-medium schools need to become more pro-active in raising their awareness of INSET provision. Principals should ensure that teachers know what professional development support is on offer in the INSET prospectus/booklets and encourage them to attend.

METHODOLOGY

17. During the autumn of 2002 a questionnaire survey on teachers' and principals' current professional development needs and experiences was conducted in all Irish-medium primary and post-primary schools and units in Northern Ireland. At that time there were a total of 25 Irish-medium primary schools/units, and three post-primary schools/units. In total the schools contained approximately 165 teachers and principals. Visits were made to each school, resulting for primary schools in a 74% return rate from teachers and a 72% return rate from principals, and for post-primary schools in a 77% return rate from teachers and a 67% return rate from principals. The questionnaires for teachers and principals were very similar and covered areas which included: gender; age; year of class; years teaching/in role of principal; responsibilities held; qualifications; in-service courses attended and their relevance, benefits and quality; in-service courses which should be offered; in-service courses to be delivered in Irish language; support offered for attending in-service courses; and problems experienced when wishing to attend in-service courses. Teachers and principals were also offered the opportunity to make any further comments regarding their professional development needs, if they so wished.
18. The questionnaire was designed and drafted by members of the research team, and after consultation at a meeting with the steering group organised by DE for this project, a final version was agreed upon for distribution to the schools.

19. As well as conducting the survey with teachers and principals in Irish-medium schools, semi-structured interviews were held with representatives from the five ELBs, the Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), the Regional Training Unit (RTU), representatives from Northern Ireland Universities and Universities Colleges, and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta. These semi-structured interviews investigated the current provision of INSET available for teachers and principals in Irish-medium schools. Questions focused on the following areas: type of INSET courses offered; uptake of courses by teachers and principals in Irish-medium schools; dissemination of course details; financial assistance; and factors which may impede attendance.
20. As well as the questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews, an examination was made of the ITE provision for, and “eligible to teach” qualifications gained by, teachers in Irish-medium education, as well as ITE provision for and “eligible to teach” qualifications gained by teachers generally in Northern Ireland. This was carried out by reviewing the literature available from the Universities and University Colleges in Northern Ireland on the structures, aims, contents and types of qualifications on offer in ITE courses from a general and from an Irish-medium perspective.

THE PROJECT

21. The research project was carried out for the Department of Education by St Mary’s University College, Belfast. The cost of the project was £19,551.

FULL REPORT

22. The full report, entitled “The Professional Development of Teachers and Principals in Irish-Medium Education” by Damian Knipe, Grace Bunting, Joe Ó Labhraí, Gabrielle Nig Uidhir and Eibhlín Mhic Aoidh is available on the Department of Education website at www.deni.gov.uk/facts_figures/

This paper is a summary of the research report and as such any views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Department of Education.

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