

# RESEARCH BRIEFING

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## OUTCOMES FOR PUPILS WHO RECEIVED AN IRISH MEDIUM EDUCATION

### Key Points

- ◆ The academic attainment of former pupils of Irish Medium (IM) schools was higher than might be expected, when viewed in the context of patterns of achievement among the population of the same age group.
- ◆ The comments of former pupils of Irish Medium schools tended to be supportive of the IM sector and their experiences while at IM schools, but were more mixed in relation to their experiences of English Medium education.
- ◆ Amongst interviewees there was a strong sense of engagement with the idea of the Irish language and culture, and a strong 'pioneering' aspect - particularly from those who were involved in the IM sector during its early years.

- ◆ The relationships between the schools and the official education authorities were described in generally negative terms. Most of the tensions appeared to be in the past.
- ◆ The picture that emerges from the study is of a small yet strong educational sector that has undergone a long period of struggle to establish itself on a sustainable base.

## **Introduction**

1. In the late 1960s a group of Irish language enthusiasts established a small language community on the fringes of West Belfast. Their purpose was to develop a shared social, cultural and linguistic interest. A logical next step was to found an Irish-speaking primary school for their children, which occurred with the establishment of Bunscoil Feirste in 1969. As their children grew older, the next question to arise concerned their post-primary education.
2. One option was to send the children to one of the Irish-speaking schools in the Republic of Ireland, but for a variety of reasons their preference was to establish an Irish-speaking secondary school, or Meánscoil. The initial attempt to do this failed after two years, but a later attempt proved to be successful. Over time the number of schools and pupils has grown steadily and official recognition - and funding - has followed.
3. The position of the Irish Medium Education (IME) sector was acknowledged formally within the Good Friday Agreement. In 1998 there were 17 Irish-speaking primary schools and two Irish-speaking secondary schools, and, in the 1996/97 school year, over 1,000 pupils were attending these schools.

## **Main Findings**

4. The survey of former pupils suggested that the academic attainment achieved by the IME schools was higher than might be expected, when set against the wider population patterns over the same period. This was true for student performance at 16 years and at 18 years. The survey also allowed respondents an opportunity to offer qualitative comments. The comments that were offered tended to be very supportive to the IME sector, were generally positive of the experience the students had while at IME schools, and were somewhat more mixed in relation to their experience of English Medium second-level schools. Elements of these themes re-emerged in the interview data.
5. Interviews were held with three main categories of respondents. The first group comprised some of the original founders of the Irish-speaking community in West Belfast from which the first IME school was developed. The second, and overlapping, category of respondents comprised present and former teachers in the

IME schools. The third category comprised past pupils of the schools, most of whom had experienced IME primary, but English Medium second-level, schooling.

6. The themes which emerged across all the interviews were very common. Not surprisingly there had been, and for many still was, a strong sense of engagement with the idea of the Irish language and culture. For many, particularly those who were involved in the early years, there was a strong pioneering aspect to the involvement in the schools and they saw themselves as working actively to preserve a cultural heritage that was of value, but which also was in danger of fading away. For the respondents, however, the focus on Irishness did not betoken a narrow and insular parochialism, but rather, it was argued, provided the foundation for a greater appreciation of cultural diversity.

7. The sense of being pioneers was perhaps reinforced by the material and financial pressure faced by the schools in the years before official recognition, and funding, was available. The teachers told us how they had to construct not only a curriculum, but had to create most of their curricular materials. The past pupils described how their parents were actively involved in the schools, both for fund-raising and for the more mundane, but necessary, tasks of maintenance.

8. This sense of wider community involvement in the schools came through again and again as a key aspect of the IME experience and this, allied with the language-rich environment that appeared to operate in the IME classrooms, may go some way to explain the high levels of academic attainment reported in the survey.

9. All of the respondents described a variety of relationships with organisations and agencies external to the schools. In some cases these relationships were very mixed, as in, for example, the relationship between the schools and the Catholic authorities. While this relationship was not always positive, there were very strong and positive links between the schools and individual Church figures.

10. The relationships between the schools and the official education authorities were described in generally negative terms. Most of the tensions appeared to be in the past, but a lingering sense of suspicion was clearly evident in some accounts. Indeed, this may have contributed to some of the difficulties involved in recruiting participants for the present study.

11. The strongest overall theme to emerge from the study, however, is of a small, if strong, educational sector that has undergone a long period of struggle to establish itself on a sustainable base. The evidence of the respondents suggests that those who have participated in IME schools, most particularly the pupils, feel they have benefited from this experience. Insofar as it is possible to assess this claim, it appears to be borne out by the various sources of evidence which the researchers were able to gather for this study.

## **Methodology**

12. The purpose of the research was to collect some evidence on the genesis, development and consequences of the IME schools. Three sources of data were used:

- ◆ The compilation of a database of past pupils;
- ◆ A postal survey of past pupils who had completed compulsory education in order to obtain data on education attainment and post-school destinations; and
- ◆ A series of in-depth interviews with founders, teachers and past pupils from the IME schools.

13. There was a low response rate to the postal survey and it proved to be difficult to recruit past pupils for interviews. Due to this the data contained in the report must be viewed with some caution and should be taken to represent an indicative picture of the experience of IME schools rather than a definitive and representative assessment. With this caveat in mind, the main conclusions to emerge from this study are generally positive.

14. In order to survey past pupils of IME schools a database was compiled using school records and other networks. The final database comprised 240 pupils. Of this total, two former pupils had died and 22 were untraceable. This left a final target database for the postal survey of 216 former pupils. Survey forms were posted in August 1998, with a stamped addressed envelope. A follow-up questionnaire was sent in September 1998. A total of 85 (39%) usable questionnaires were returned and analysed.

## **The Project**

15. The research project on which this Research Briefing is based was carried out for the Department of Education by Tony Gallagher and Eamon Hanna. The cost of the project was £14,580.

## **Report**

16. The full report entitled "Outcomes for pupils who received an Irish Medium Education" is available from the Department of Education, price £5<sup>1</sup>.

*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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1. *Each educational establishment and library is entitled to one free copy.*

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