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Language and Literacy

The first official language of Ireland is Irish, and English is recognized as a second official language.[1] Approximately 41 percent of the population can speak Irish, yet relatively few do so outside the context of the education system.[2] Most people speak English on a daily basis, apart from those living in small pockets of Irish speaking (*Gaeltacht*) areas. Various government policies try to ensure that as many citizens as possible are bilingual in Irish and English, while also recognizing the uniqueness of the *Gaeltacht* as an area of significant linguistic and cultural importance and as an irreplaceable resource for speakers and learners of Irish.[3,4] Thus, national efforts are being taken to increase the number of homes in which Irish is the primary language of communication, and to create opportunities to use Irish in public discourse and when using public services. These are complemented by targeted interventions in *Gaeltacht* areas that are designed to ensure that all children can access high quality Irish-medium instruction in school and early years' settings.

Instruction in state funded schools can be in English or in Irish, with the vast majority of schools being English medium. However, there is not a simple match between location and language of instruction. Many Irish medium schools are located in English speaking areas, while not all educational provision within *Gaeltacht* areas is Irish medium. Further, because not all children in *Gaeltacht* areas are fluent in Irish, partial Irish language immersion is offered in Irish-medium schools in which a minority of students speaks Irish.

The 17 percent of the population born outside Ireland speaks a variety of languages, with Polish, French, and Lithuanian being the most popular.[5] Government policy calls for integrating all language speakers into mainstream schools with additional support provided as needed. Competition for placement within schools and parental employment patterns mean that children whose mother tongue is neither English nor Irish tend to be clustered in schools in urban areas in which the socioeconomic intake is below average and the medium of instruction is English.[6]

Overview of the Education System

The administration of education in Ireland is centralized, and overall responsibility lies with the Minister for Education and Skills. The Department of Education and Skills, together with a number of bodies under its aegis, is responsible for running the education system. Almost all primary and post-primary schools are state funded, and consequently are required to operate under the Education Act

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of 1998 and the curriculum, assessment, and evaluation framework established by the Department of Education and Skills, which was based on advice from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.[7] Similarly, although early childhood programs typically are delivered outside the formal education system by a range of private, community, and voluntary interests, most receive state funding and therefore must follow a common curriculum framework. The Inspectorate division of the Department of Education and Skills has the responsibility to evaluate and report on educational provision in all schools and centers of education that are supported by the department.

The education system comprises primary, post-primary, third level, and further education. As of September 2016, families are eligible for free early childhood care and education for children ages 3 to 5½, or until entry into primary school. Approximately 95 percent of eligible children participate in early childhood programs. Primary schools operate an eight year program that includes two preprimary years (junior infants and senior infants) and Grades 1 to 6. The primary education sector comprises state funded primary schools, special schools, and a few private primary schools. Although they are state funded, schools are owned by patron bodies that define the ethos of the school and appoint the Board of Management to run it in accordance with centrally agreed-upon procedures. Currently, 90 percent of primary schools are Roman Catholic, 6 percent follow other Christian faiths, and most of the remainder are based on multidenominational principles. All state funded schools must follow the primary school curriculum, which was implemented in 1999.[8] Private schools offer a similar education.

Although there is some variation in types of post-primary schools (e.g., vocational, community or comprehensive, privately owned and managed secondary schools), the curriculum is substantially the same in all. Post-primary education consists of a three year junior cycle program followed by a two year senior cycle program. About two-thirds of students opt to extend the senior cycle to three years, by completing a "transition year" after the junior cycle.[9] This optional year promotes students' personal, vocational, and educational development. Senior cycle students follow one of three programs leading to a terminal state examination, through which students may earn a Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Vocational, or Leaving Certificate Applied.

Language/Reading Curriculum in the Fourth Grade

Reading Policy

Literacy is considered central to learning in all areas of the curriculum and to children's lives outside of school. Reading in English medium schools is taught under the English curriculum. Two principles inform reading instruction. First, language learning is an integrated process; thus, the three strands that structure the English curriculum—Oral Language, Reading, and Writing—are seen as intertwined. Second, language learning and learning through language are considered equally important. As such, the curriculum is concerned with the cultivation of students' language skills and ability to use language. Language and reading skills are developed gradually. Initially, children's phonemic and phonological awareness is developed, followed by an introduction to sound-letter relationships, and the eventual development of higher-order skills through reading and responding to a variety of texts in a print-rich environment.

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In 2011, the Department of Education and Skills launched a national strategy called Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life to improve literacy and numeracy standards among students.[10] The strategy set national targets for literacy to be achieved by 2020 through a coordinated approach that included curriculum reform, changes in teacher education, and improvements in early childhood education and use of assessment. Because the results of the 2014 National Assessments of English Reading and Mathematics indicated that all of the key targets for the primary level outlined in the strategy had been achieved, a revised strategy scheduled for release in 2017 is being developed.[11]

Summary of National Curriculum

The current primary school curriculum, enacted in 1999, covers all subjects and grade levels.[12] The English curriculum for all grade levels was restructured in 2005, and a new language curriculum covering English and Irish is being introduced in the two junior grades.[13] The new language curriculum uses broad learning outcomes to describe the concepts, dispositions, and skills for children's learning in oral language, reading, and writing at the end of a two year period. It supports skills transfer from the school's first language to its second language, whereas the 1999 curricula for English and Irish used different structures for each language and gave little support to the transfer of skills from one language to another. Although the development of a new language curriculum for Grades 3 to 6 is underway, reading instruction for students in fourth grade continues to be based on the 1999 English curriculum, which includes different approaches and methodologies that teachers may use in language instruction. In broad terms, the curriculum sets out the skills that students should acquire, but does not specify particular resources or strategies that must be used to help students acquire these skills. The English curriculum notes that "the ability to read effectively is an essential requirement if the child is to benefit fully from the educational process, to develop his/her potential, and to participate appropriately as a citizen in society."[14]

Learning content is grouped into four levels, each covering a two year grade band. Within each level, learning is structured around strands and strand units. The strands—Oral Language, Reading, and Writing—comprise overarching themes around which lesson planning is based. Each strand is divided into four strand units: Receptiveness to Language; Competence and Confidence in Using Language; Developing Cognitive Abilities Through Language; and Emotional and Imaginative Development Through Language. The strand units contain the detailed elements of the curriculum content, presented in the form of content objectives and may include suggested learning experiences and activities. The first two strand units have a stronger focus on language learning, while the last two focus on more general aspects of students' development.

The Receptiveness to Language strand unit focuses on the development of literacy, aiming to develop students' ability to use multiple strategies to interpret text and to communicate in writing. By fourth grade, students are developing skills to allow them to:

- Become an increasingly independent reader
- Identify unfamiliar words by using prefixes and suffixes

- Understand the relationship between text and illustration

- Use more than one strategy when reading unfamiliar words

The Competence and Confidence in Using Language strand unit aims to develop students' ability to use language as a speaker, a reader, and a writer. By fourth grade, students should be enabled to:

- Have an appreciation of the usefulness of reading

- Develop personal reading tastes and interests (supported by exposure to a range of texts)

- Develop basic information retrieval skills from within a text

- Use dictionaries and other reference materials

The Developing Cognitive Abilities Through Language strand unit focuses on using language to learn, drawing on the relationship between language and thought. The curriculum recognizes that reading is an increasingly important context for the development of the child's cognitive abilities at the third and fourth grades. By fourth grade, students are expected to:

- Read and respond to works of fiction and poetry, with the development of information retrieval skills becoming more central to reading

- Read short books in one sitting to experience success in reading

- Understand the structure of books and basic literary terminology

- Use knowledge of print conventions to aid expression and comprehension

The Emotional and Imaginative Development Through Language strand unit is concerned with developing students' ability to explore everyday experiences and feelings. The curriculum envisions fourth grade students being able to extend and develop their response to increasingly challenging reading material. By fourth grade, students are expected to:

- Talk about various aspects of books (e.g., plot, motive, author)

- Recognize and discuss differences in reading tastes

- Experience a shared response to fiction via a class novel

Approaches to Reading Instruction

The teacher guidelines that accompany the English curriculum note that reading instruction is underpinned by the basic principle that language competence should precede formal reading.[15] Teachers are expected to build a foundation of oral language skills and gradually introduce children to reading in a print-rich environment. As such, classroom libraries are an almost universal feature of Irish schools. These are complemented by charts, posters, and displays of student writing on classroom walls and throughout the school.

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The guidelines also provide examples of reading approaches and methodologies, grouped under three main categories:

- Learning to read—Students are expected to have developed competence in word recognition skills by fourth grade. To maintain students' interest in reading, teachers are advised to give students access to structured reading schemes, class readers, and a range of other reading materials (e.g., narrative, expository, and representational texts). Classroom libraries are expected to contain materials covering various levels of interest and reading ability, so every child can experience success and enjoyment in reading.

- Comprehension—Although the curriculum advocates developing student comprehension skills mainly through oral language activities, students are expected to be able to write responses to texts by fourth grade. The curriculum highlights the need for students at this level to have a consistent and structured experience of questioning, discussing, and probing the text when developing higher order comprehension skills. Teachers are expected to model comprehension skills (e.g., thinking aloud) and teach students how to use questions to extract information from texts. Developing students' comprehension skills through integration with other areas of the curriculum also is highlighted at this level.

- Responding to text—While emphasizing the importance of access to a variety of texts, the use of a class novel is an important means by which students can have a shared response to fiction. The guidelines indicate that responses should be in a variety of formats (e.g., oral response, journals, drama, visual arts, movement, dance).

No approach or methodology included in the teacher guidelines is compulsory; rather, teachers are free to choose how they organize reading lessons.

Teachers, Teacher Education, and Professional Development

Teaching in Ireland is an all-graduate profession. Since 2012, initial primary teacher education is completed through a four year, full time Bachelor of Education degree or a two year, postgraduate diploma in education. The Teaching Council is the professional standards body for the teaching profession with which all teachers in state funded schools are required to register. This involves completing a national induction program comprising a minimum of 20 hours and a probation period that includes at least 100 days of teaching service followed by an evaluation by an inspector with the Department of Education and Skills. All qualified primary teachers must be able to teach the full curriculum through English or Irish.

For post-primary teachers, a concurrent route to a teaching qualification is offered for a broad range of programs, typically having practical, workshop, and laboratory elements. A consecutive route for a post-primary teaching qualification is a two year, postgraduate professional diploma in education.

Teacher Education Specific to Reading

At the primary level, all mainstream teachers provide reading instruction, and the teaching of reading is a key element of initial teacher education programs. Many teachers of students with special education

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needs hold postgraduate certificates or diplomas in learning support or special needs education. Primary teachers at socioeconomically disadvantaged schools may receive targeted training through programs such as Reading Recovery and First Steps.

Requirements for Ongoing Professional Development in Reading for Teachers

Although teachers are not required to participate in professional development, they are encouraged to do so. A national professional development program to support the implementation of the new language curriculum for the early years of primary school is underway during 2015–2018. Over this period, teachers in all primary schools are expected to take advantage of approximately three days of professional development related to the new curriculum.

Data from PIRLS 2011 indicated that teachers in Ireland were below average in terms of participation in professional development related to literacy. More recent reports suggest that while participation remains relatively limited, the number of teachers who do not participate in any form of professional development has declined.[16,17]

Reading Instruction in the Primary Grades

Instructional Materials

The English curriculum and the accompanying guidelines identify types of instructional materials to support reading development in primary schools. These include reading schemes, class novels, and a variety of reading materials and text types (e.g., expository, narrative, diagrammatic, representational). However, no specific materials are mandated, recommended, or approved; rather, each school chooses which materials and resources it will use to support the implementation of the English curriculum. Schools in which the main language of instruction is Irish use a similar approach to the selection of instructional materials.

Use of Technology

Data from PIRLS 2011 show that Irish teachers of fourth grade students used Information Communications Technology (ICT) tools in developing and delivering reading lessons with a frequency that was average to above average. Reading instruction often is carried out in the traditional manner, with technology being reserved for procedural activities rather than to foster higher order skills including reading skills and strategies. For example, PIRLS 2011 data showed that while Irish students in fourth grade used computers on a somewhat regular basis to write stories and texts, use of instructional software to develop reading skills and strategies is less common. Use of digital learning tools has been hampered by a shortage of resources and infrastructure, both of which are targeted for improvement in the Digital Strategy for Schools (2015–2020).[18]

Role of Reading Specialists

Normally, reading instruction is provided by the class teacher as part of the English curriculum. Within a school, a teacher may be assigned the responsibility of coordinating literacy instruction and resources

and sharing tips for good practice. While specialist teachers also may have a role in coordinating literacy instruction within schools, they mainly deal with small groups of students with identified difficulties. Regional networks of professional development organizations provide additional specialized support with a strong emphasis on the core areas of literacy and numeracy.

Second Language Instruction

In English medium schools, students for whom English is an additional language (AL) and who are in need of extra English language support are identified with the collaboration of their parents and teachers. This support may be provided within the classroom by the class teacher—typically with the assistance of resources available from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's website—or by specialist teachers who work with students individually or in small groups. Support for AL students falls under a general allocation of additional support that schools can deploy depending on their needs. Schools in which at least 20 percent of enrolled students require AL support can seek an additional teaching post with the specific responsibility of assisting these students.

In Irish medium schools, a significant minority of students begin school with limited proficiency in Irish, and very few of these students are not proficient in English.[19,20] Therefore, the focus often is on developing students' capacity to learn through Irish. In schools located in *Gaeltacht* areas, such capacity building can sometimes be at the expense of native Irish speakers, who are not achieving native speaker norms or full acquisition of and enrichment in the Irish language. To counteract this, local native Irish language speakers are employed to support students with minimal Irish proficiency as well as the more complex language needs of native speakers of Irish. *Gaeltacht* schools also have access to AL support teachers who can assist students with specific Irish language learning needs.

Accommodation Policies for Instruction and Testing

Under the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004), children with special education needs (SEN) should be educated in an inclusive environment unless it is inconsistent with their best interests or obstructs the provision of education to other students. More generally, differentiation of teaching and learning to accommodate the range of learning needs in classrooms is promoted as good practice. Individualized support for students with SEN within mainstream schools is provided by learning support and resource teachers. When necessary, a special needs assistant may support one or more students with special needs within a school.

Students do not take high stakes tests at primary level, but standardized tests typically are administered toward the end of each school year to inform teaching practice and provide parents with information on students' progress. Teachers can decide what, if any, accommodations are necessary for students with SEN or refer them to a specialist teacher. At post-primary level, students with SEN can apply for accommodations during state examinations to limit possible effects of a disability on their performance, allowing them to demonstrate their level of achievement.

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Students with Reading Difficulties

Diagnostic Testing

The identification of students with potential reading difficulties begins with informal observation by the class teacher, which is supplemented by screening measures until the middle of first grade and by standardized, norm-referenced tests from first grade onward. Specialist teachers may choose from a variety of diagnostic tests, depending on the student's stage of reading development. Occasionally, an educational psychologist may be asked to assist with diagnosing reading difficulties.

Instruction for Children with Reading Difficulties

Class teachers have the main responsibility for students' progress in reading. Support teachers provide supplementary teaching to students with reading difficulties, as needed. After initial diagnostic testing, the support teacher—in conjunction with the class teacher and usually the parents—produces a tailored program with specific learning targets to support these students. The program may be delivered to individual students or small groups in a withdrawal setting, or less frequently, via in-class support.[21] Typical activities in reading support sessions include reading familiar texts, practicing modified reading strategies, learning new reading strategies, and, finally, reading a new text.

Some primary schools have specialist reading units for students with specific reading difficulties. Four special reading schools cater to students with severe dyslexia and average or above average intelligence as determined by external assessments. These schools offer intensive support in small class settings for up to two years, at which point students return to their original school. The National Council for Special Education offers a visiting teacher service for students with visual or hearing impairments. Teachers in this program liaise with parents, teachers, and other professionals to advise on the use of assistive technology and model appropriate teaching methods.

Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

The Education Act requires schools to "regularly evaluate students and periodically report the results of the evaluation to the students and their parents."[22] More recent guidelines advise schools to report feedback to parents at least twice annually, including at least one written report.[23] Primary school assessment includes teacher questioning and observation, conferencing, and student self-assessment. As of 2012, all primary schools are required to administer standardized tests of English reading and mathematics toward the end of second, fourth and sixth grades and to report individual outcomes to students' parents. Irish medium schools additionally are required to administer standardized tests of Irish reading at the same grade levels. The annual administration of standardized reading tests to all students from first to sixth grade is almost universal in Irish schools, as is the reporting of achievement data to parents.[24,25]

All primary schools must provide the Board of Management and the Department of Education and Skills with the standardized test results in aggregated form of students in second, fourth and sixth grades. These data are from commercially available tests, and are used to monitor longitudinal

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standards in literacy and numeracy. Ireland also monitors standards through the regular assessment of reading and mathematics performance of students in a representative sample of schools, using secure tests that are not otherwise available to schools. National Assessments of English Reading and Mathematics are conducted every five years by the Educational Research Centre on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills to monitor the achievement of national standards, identify factors related to test performance, and inform educational policy.

Special Reading Initiatives

Three major national policy initiatives promote literacy in Ireland. Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life is a comprehensive national program aiming to improve literacy and numeracy standards in preprimary, primary, and post-primary schools.[26] Supplemental "learning support" teaching also is available for children experiencing reading difficulties.[27] Finally, the Department of Education and Skills' Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools program addresses educational disadvantage by providing grants, extra support for students, and reduced student-teacher ratios in participating schools.[28]

Other popular annual initiatives to promote reading and literacy include the Write a Book project, the Children's Books Festival, and Book Week, during which schools celebrate literature and further promote a love of reading among children. Schools also may participate in community-based literacy projects such as the One City, One Book program at public libraries.

Use and Impact of PIRLS

The 2011 cycle marked the first time Ireland participated in PIRLS, and the first time since 1995 that the country participated in TIMSS. The 2011 results, therefore, were of interest as it was the first time in years that Irish primary schools had taken part in a large international study of achievement. Additionally, PIRLS and TIMSS 2011 were the first international studies of achievement in which Ireland participated since the 2009 cycle of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which indicated a major decline in the country's performance—especially in reading—relative to performance in previous PISA cycles.

The strong performance on PIRLS 2011 relative to that of other countries and to Ireland's performance on TIMSS in mathematics and science was positively received by educationalists. The results were seen as reaffirming that Irish students can demonstrate high levels of reading achievement, despite the PISA 2009 results. Follow-up analyses of the PIRLS contextual data generated public attention, particularly in relation to the relative balance of curriculum content areas, and to students' attitudes toward school and reading.[29] All primary schools have received PIRLS summary information, selected released items, and an item by item description of how Irish students performed in comparison to the international average.

The impact of PIRLS 2011 is difficult to separate from that of the national literacy and numeracy strategy, the implementation of which closely coincided with the release of the PIRLS results. As part

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of this strategy, participation in PIRLS and TIMSS is now required. Since 2012, primary schools have begun to develop a stronger focus on student evaluation, school self-evaluation, and the use of formal assessment data. This is in addition to a greater emphasis on the development of literacy skills, particularly in the first language of the school, and the allocation of more time to the teaching of reading and mathematics. In 2014, data from the National Assessments of English Reading and Mathematics revealed a major improvement in reading and mathematics achievement among primary school students, to the extent that the national strategy targets for 2020 have already been met. (Notably, the reading element of the National Assessments is strongly influenced by PIRLS, particularly the framework, style of test items, and range of questionnaires.[30,31]). Because the results of the National Assessments were widely covered, they may have contributed to a raised profile of studies of achievement. Anecdotal evidence suggests that, compared to 2011, teachers who took part in PIRLS 2016 were more likely to have some idea of what PIRLS entails and to be slightly more aware of general issues related to assessment.

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