

Languages in Europe: Theory, Policy Practice

**“We don’t do policy here”
The case of Ireland**

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Ireland and language education

- Ireland has policies regarding the Irish language, but it does not have a general languages policy, far less a language education policy
- There is no national curriculum
- Only three school subjects are compulsory: Irish, English, Mathematics
- Foreign languages survive in post-primary schools because the National University of Ireland requires a foreign language for matriculation
- There is no national policy forum at which issues of language and social cohesion/language and intercultural communication are under continuing review

The Irish context

- Traditionally Ireland has been
 - a country of emigration
 - a bilingual/bicultural society in which the majority culture is monolingual/monocultural
- Then the Celtic Tiger was born and with it came
 - significant immigration
 - new linguistic communities
 - new educational challenges
- Now the Celtic Tiger is dead but
 - the new communities remain
 - the educational challenges remain only partially answered

The view of language education professionals

- *Report of the Board of Studies for Languages* (Curriculum and Examinations Board, 1987) argued for an integrated languages curriculum that would embrace
 - pupils'/students' home language (English or Irish)
 - their second community language (Irish or English)
 - foreign languages
- This argument has been repeated more recently:
 - 2003, *Languages in the Post-primary Curriculum: a discussion paper* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment) used to launch a consultation process that produced an internal NCCA report; no action followed
 - 2007, *Language Education Policy Profile: Ireland* (Council of Europe) includes a detailed exposition of the concept of an integrated languages curriculum; signed by the Minister of Education, but no action has followed

The case of immigrants

- Policy as funding allocation: two years of “English language support” per immigrant pupil/student, to be delivered on a withdrawal basis
- Schools also needed professional support:
 - The work of Integrate Ireland Language and Training (1999–2008); materials available at www.ncca.ie/iilt
 - Collaboration between IILT and SELB
 - Intercultural guidelines developed and published by the NCCA (2005, 2006)
- Policy vacuum
 - No mainstream developments to meet and accommodate large scale provision of English language support
 - In 2008 and 2009, savage funding cuts: after ten years of significant expenditure, there has been some long-term gain at primary level but little if any at post-primary level (Lyons & Little 2009)

The future of the Irish language

- Recent census returns suggest that around 100,000 people use Irish regularly in their daily lives; independent research puts the figure closer to 50,000
- Government-funded research (Harris et al. 2006) has identified an unmistakable decline in the standards of proficiency achieved in primary schools
- A new draft strategy for the Irish language has just been launched: 250,000 “habitual Irish speakers” by 2028 (Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, 2009)
- The strategy says little *in detail* about how this will be achieved

Four concluding thoughts

- No country that is serious about social cohesion internally and the ability to engage with other countries externally can afford not to have a carefully considered and integrated language education policy
- Policy development needs to be informed by expert opinion: governments that disregard or dismiss expert opinion betray a serious democratic deficit
- Policy goals need to be evidence-based and realizable
- Policy implementation needs to be supported by empirical monitoring and evaluation