

REFRAMING LEADERSHIP AND POLICY IN IMMERSION EDUCATION: GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS FOR IRISH-MEDIUM POST-PRIMARY PROVISION

T. J. Ó Ceallaigh¹, Muiris Ó Laoire², & Máire Uí Chonghaile¹

¹*School of Education, University College, Cork (Ireland)*

²*Munster Technological University, Tralee, Co. Kerry (Ireland)*

Abstract

Immersion education has become a significant feature of contemporary language-in-education policy, with Irish-medium education in Ireland representing a distinctive bilingual enrichment model that seeks to achieve summative bilingualism, biliteracy, and cultural revitalisation. While the sector has expanded substantially since the 1970s, recent growth has exposed structural and leadership challenges, particularly within Irish-medium units operating under the management of English-medium post-primary schools. This paper examines immersion education provision in these units through the lens of educational leadership and policy. Investigating current provision in Irish-medium units through a mixed-methods research design, data were gathered using a large-scale online questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and online discussion fora with key stakeholders. Quantitative and qualitative analyses were triangulated to validate findings and ensure robustness. Results indicate that while Irish-medium units positively influence language maintenance and school culture, significant leadership and policy gaps persist. These include the absence of a shared vision for immersion education, inconsistent leadership roles, limited professional development, and weak systemic support. The study concludes that these challenges reflect inadequate strategic leadership at policy level. It recommends a reconceptualised, leadership-driven model of provision, specifically stand-alone Irish-medium units under Irish-medium governance, to enhance coherence, accountability, and educational quality in immersion education.

Keywords: *Immersion, bilingual education, educational leadership, policy.*

1. Introduction

Immersion education has become a central feature of contemporary language-in-education policy internationally, reflecting a growing recognition of the educational, cultural, and societal benefits of bilingualism. In Ireland, Irish-medium education represents a distinctive bilingual enrichment model designed to achieve summative bilingualism and biliteracy while contributing to the revitalisation of the Irish language and culture (Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2024). Since the 1970s, the sector has experienced significant expansion, driven by parental demand and increased awareness of the cognitive and cultural advantages associated with immersion education (Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2024). Within this broader landscape, Irish-medium units (*aonaid lán-Ghaeilge*) have emerged as an important mechanism for extending access to immersion education at post-primary level. These units typically operate within English-medium host schools, sharing governance structures, resources, and institutional environments (Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2024). While this model has facilitated the growth of Irish-medium provision in areas where demand is insufficient to justify stand-alone schools, it has also introduced a range of structural, pedagogical, and leadership challenges. A defining feature of the current system is the absence of a clear and coherent policy framework governing Irish-medium units. The Department of Education has not established explicit criteria for their establishment, management, or evaluation, resulting in significant variability in practice and outcomes across the sector (Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2024). This lack of strategic direction has implications for leadership capacity, organisational coherence, and the quality of immersion provision. At a time when national policy for Irish-medium education is under development, it is essential to critically examine the effectiveness of existing models. This paper addresses that need by analysing Irish-medium units through the lens of educational leadership and policy.

The central research question guiding this paper is:

What are the leadership and policy challenges shaping Irish-medium educational provision in units within English-medium post-primary schools, and how can these challenges be addressed through strategic reform?

2. Literature review

2.1. Immersion education: Concept and global context

Immersion education is defined as a model in which curricular content is delivered through the medium of a second or additional language, integrating language learning with academic instruction (Tedick & Lyster, 2020; Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2024). Originating in Canada in the 1960s (Lambert & Tucker, 1972), immersion education has since become a global phenomenon. Research consistently demonstrates that immersion education supports high levels of second-language proficiency without negatively impacting first-language development or academic achievement (Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2013). However, successful implementation requires specialised pedagogical knowledge, particularly in integrating language and content instruction (Cammarata & Ó Ceallaigh, 2020). Despite its effectiveness, immersion education presents challenges, including difficulties in achieving linguistic accuracy and complexity, over-reliance on the first language, and the need for highly skilled teachers (Ó Duibhir, 2018). These challenges highlight the importance of teacher preparation, professional development, and leadership.

2.2. Irish-medium immersion education

In Ireland, immersion education operates within a sociolinguistic context shaped by the status of Irish as a minority language. Irish-medium education aims to develop bilingual competence while also supporting language revitalisation and cultural identity (Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2024). Research indicates that students in Irish-medium settings achieve high academic outcomes and significantly higher proficiency in Irish compared to their peers in English-medium education (Harris et al., 2006; Ó Duibhir, 2018). However, challenges persist in relation to students' productive language skills, including grammatical accuracy and sociolinguistic competence (Ó Duibhir, 2018). The literature consistently highlights the importance of teacher expertise and ongoing professional learning in addressing these challenges (Cammarata & Ó Ceallaigh, 2020; Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2024).

2.3. The Irish-medium unit model

The Irish-medium unit represents a hybrid model combining immersion education with the structural realities of an English-medium host school (Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2024). While this model has expanded access, it has also introduced significant complexities. Key challenges include internal management tensions, limited subject provision through Irish, ambiguity in leadership roles, reduced use of Irish due to the dominance of English, and insufficient policy support (Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2024). These challenges are compounded by the lack of recognition of the specific needs of Irish-medium units within national policy frameworks. International comparisons with similar models in Scotland, Canada, and Hawaii highlight comparable issues, particularly in relation to teacher recruitment, resource allocation, and immersion fidelity (Brown & Bennett, 2017; Hill, 2022).

2.4. Research gap

While immersion education has been widely researched, there is limited focus on Irish-medium units, particularly in relation to leadership and policy. This gap underscores the importance of the present study (Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2024).

3. Methodology

The present study adopted a mixed-methods research design in order to examine the current provision of Irish-medium education in units located within English-medium post-primary schools (Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2024). This approach was selected to enable a comprehensive analysis of both the structural characteristics of provision and the experiences of stakeholders. Quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire distributed to 28 host schools identified as having Irish-medium units, of which 19 schools responded. While the response rate reflects the relatively small and specialised population of Irish-medium units nationally, it nevertheless represents a substantial proportion of the sector and is therefore considered sufficiently representative to identify key trends and patterns in provision (Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2024). The questionnaire gathered information relating to unit profile, identity,

leadership structures, and educational provision, thereby providing a broad overview of patterns across the sector. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of stakeholders, including 19 principals/deputy principals/former principals of host schools, 3 principals/former principals of Irish-medium primary schools, 1 founder of an Irish-medium unit, 2 representatives from Irish language organisations, and 2 representatives from school patron bodies. The selection of participants across these categories was designed to capture a diversity of perspectives from individuals directly involved in the establishment, management, and support of Irish-medium units. Given the relatively small number of Irish-medium units nationally, this sample is considered appropriate for qualitative inquiry, allowing for depth of insight while ensuring coverage of key stakeholder groups. Interviews continued until a point of thematic saturation was reached, whereby no new significant themes were emerging from the data (Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2024). In addition, 14 host schools across Ireland were visited to observe the functioning of Irish-medium units in context. These visits provided an opportunity to triangulate questionnaire and interview data with observational insights, thereby strengthening the overall validity of the findings. Data analysis involved both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Questionnaire data were analysed to identify trends, while qualitative data were coded thematically. Triangulation across data sources was used to ensure reliability and validity, resulting in the identification of key themes relating to establishment, management, provision, and sustainability (Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2024).

4. Key findings: Leadership and policy

4.1. Absence of a coherent policy framework

A central finding is the absence of a comprehensive national policy framework governing Irish-medium units. There are no clearly defined criteria for establishment, funding, or evaluation, leading to inconsistency across the sector (Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2024). This policy gap reflects broader issues of system-level leadership and strategic direction (Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2024).

4.2. Fragmented leadership structures

Leadership within Irish-medium units is characterised by ambiguity and inconsistency. The role of the unit coordinator lacks clarity, status, and formal recognition, with responsibilities varying widely across contexts (Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2024). Unit coordinators often experience role overload due to extensive responsibilities and limited support.

4.3. Lack of shared vision

The research highlights a lack of a shared vision for immersion education within host schools. While individual leaders may demonstrate strong commitment, this vision is not consistently embedded at institutional level, limiting the development of Irish-medium provision (Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2024).

4.4. Weak immersion environment

The co-location of Irish-medium units within English-medium schools restricts opportunities for authentic language use. Students frequently revert to English outside the classroom, undermining immersion principles (Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2024).

4.5. Professional development deficits

There is a significant gap in professional development for teachers. Many lack expertise in immersion pedagogy and require support in both language proficiency and instructional strategies (Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2024).

4.6. Sustainability challenges

Sustainability is heavily dependent on individual leadership rather than systemic support. Units often rely on the commitment of a small number of individuals, making them vulnerable to staff turnover (Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2024).

5. Recommendations: Leadership and policy

The findings point to the need for a fundamental reconceptualisation of leadership and policy in Irish-medium education. A comprehensive national policy framework should be developed to provide clarity on governance, funding, and evaluation (Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2024). This would support consistency and strategic planning across the sector. Governance structures should be reconceptualised, with the development of stand-alone Irish-medium provision under Irish-medium leadership, thereby enhancing

coherence and accountability (Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2024). Leadership roles, particularly that of the unit coordinator, should be formalised with clear responsibilities, recognised status, and dedicated administrative time. Leadership development programmes should also be introduced. A shared vision for immersion education should be developed at school level, ensuring alignment between the unit and the host school. This requires strategic planning and stakeholder engagement. Investment in professional development is essential to support teachers in immersion pedagogy and language proficiency (Cammarata & Ó Ceallaigh, 2020). Finally, the language environment should be strengthened through policies and practices that promote Irish as the primary language of communication within the unit and beyond (Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2024).

6. Conclusions

Irish-medium units play a vital role in expanding access to immersion education in Ireland. However, their effectiveness is constrained by significant leadership and policy challenges. The absence of a coherent policy framework, combined with fragmented leadership structures and limited systemic support, has resulted in variability in quality and sustainability. Addressing these challenges requires strong system-level leadership, clear policy direction, and a commitment to supporting immersion education as a distinct and valuable model. By aligning leadership, policy, and practice, it is possible to enhance the quality and sustainability of Irish-medium education and to support the revitalisation of the Irish language.

References

- Brown, R. & Bennett, K. (2017). *Elementary French immersion program review*. Mississauga: Peel District School Board. Retrieved from: <https://www.peelschools.org/documents/ElementaryFI-Program-Review.pdf/Elementary-FI-Program-Review.pdf>
- Cammarata, L. & Ó Ceallaigh, T.J. (Eds.) (2020). *Teacher development for immersion and content-based instruction*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Genesee, F. and Lindholm-Leary, K (2013). Two cases of content-based education. *Journal of Immersion and Content-based Language Education*, 1(1), 3-33.
- Harris, J., Forde, P., Archer, P., Nic Fhearaile, S., & O' Gorman, M. (2006). *An Ghaeilge sna bunscoileanna. Treochtaí náisiúnta fadtéarmacha in inniúlacht*. Baile Átha Cliath: An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna.
- Hill, R. (2022). The pedagogical practices of Māori partial immersion bilingual programmes in Aotearoa/New Zealand, *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 25(3), 895-904. DOI: 10.1080/13670050.2020.1729693
- Lambert, W. E., & Tucker, G. R. (1972) *The bilingual education of children: The St. Lambert experiment*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Ó Ceallaigh, T.J., Ó Laoire, M., & Uí Chonghaile, M. (2024). *Current provision in Irish-medium units: Enduring questions regarding establishment, management and sustainability*. Dublin: An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta.
- Ó Duibhir, P., (2018). *Immersion education: Lessons from a minority language context*. Multilingual Matters.
- Tedick, D. J. & Lyster, R. (2020). *Scaffolding language development in immersion and dual language classrooms*. New York: Routledge.