

**‘AONBHEALACH NÓ
COMHTHREOMHARACH?’
TODHCHAÍ NA GAEILGE MAR ÁBHAR
SCOILE Ó THUaidH**

Gaeilge



Óráid tugtha ag Ciaran Mac Giolla Bhéin, Fís an Phobail, ag Imeacht Ardaithe Feasachta de chuid Gael Linn faoin scéim ‘Scoil Spreagtha’

English



**‘ONE-WAY OR PARALLEL?’
The Future of Irish as a School
Subject in the North**

A speech given by Ciaran Mac Giolla Bhéin, of Fís an Phobail, at a Gael Linn Awareness-Raising Event about the ‘Scoil Spreagtha’ scheme



Scoil Spreagtha

CIARÁN MAC GIOLLA BHÉIN

Gael-Linn

23ú Eanáir 2025

Go raibh maith agaibh agus mo bhuíochas ó chroí le foireann Ghael Linn, agus go háirithe le Séamas Mac Eochaidh, as an chuireadh fhlaithiúil le bheith libh inniu. Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh gach duine atá ag freastal, ach go háirithe na polaiteoirí atá sa tseomra linn ar maidin. Tá géarchéim ag titim amach sna scoileanna Béarla maidir le teagasc na Gaeilge de, agus in ainneoin iarrachtaí macánta dul i ngleic leis tríd scéimeanna éagsúla agus na rabhaidh atá múinteoirí Gaeilge ag glao le blianta fada anois, tá an cás ag iarraidh níos measa seachas níos fearr.

Is mise Ciarán Mac Giolla Bhéin agus is as an chathair seo dom. Fuair mise oideachas go huile is go hiomlán trí mheán na Gaeilge, ón náiscoil go dtí an mheánscoil agus bhí mé i measc na chéad ghlúine ó thuaidh a raibh an t-eispéireas luachmhar sin acu. D'fhág an tréimhse a chaith mé ar scoil rian láidir orm atá liom go fóill, agus is cinnte gur spreag sé sin agus na múinteoirí iontacha a bhí agam mé féin agus go leor daoine eile ón ghlúin sin i dtaobh cúrsaí Gaeilge.

Agus mé ag machnamh faoin tréimhse sin áfach, cuimhním go minic: gach múinteoir a bhí agam ón náiscoil agus mé ag súgradh le gaineamh, go dtí an mheánscoil agus mé ag foghlaim faoi réabhlóid na Rúise, fuair siad a gcuid oideachais trí mheán an Bhéarla. Go deimhin, murach na scoileanna Béarla atá ag deanamh éachtaí ar son na Gaeilge le blianta fada, i gcúinsí thar a bheith dúshlánacha, ní bheadh ann d'earnáil an Ghaeloideachais.

Measaim go bhfuil sé tábhachtach, agus muid cruinnithe le chéile ag tús na comhdhála seo, cuid den chomhthéacs stairiúil maidir le teagasc na Gaeilge sna scoileanna Béarla a leagan amach daoibh. Tuigeann muid ar fad an tionchar millteanach a bhí ag an choilíneachas sa tír seo, go háirithe mar a bhaineann le cúrsaí Gaeilge. **Dhá chéad bliain ó shin, bhí an Ghaeilge ag mórchuid na tíre, ach faoi dheireadh an 19ú aois déag, teanga mhionlaithe a bhí inti.** Bunaíodh na Scoileanna Náisiúnta sa bhliain 1831 agus díbríodh an Ghaeilge ó bhéal na bpáistí le huirlisí garbha ar nós an bhata scoir

Thuig na húdaráis choilíneacha go rímhaith an tábhacht a bhain le cúrsaí oideachais i gcomhthéacs an tsealbhaithe teanga, nó sa chás seo, an díshealbhú. Ní nach ionadh mar sin, nuair a bunaíodh Conradh na Gaeilge in 1893 le dul i ngleic leis an tubaiste a bhrostaigh le linn an 19ú aois déag, gur ar chúrsaí oideachais a raibh bunús a gcuid feachtas dírithe.

Mar thoradh ar na feachtais sin, ar tugadh ‘Cath an Oideachais’ orthu, baineadh buanna suntasacha amach, agus ag tús an 20ú haois, bhí an Ghaeilge á teagasc arís i scoileanna na tíre don chéad uair ó bhí na scoileanna cois chlaí ann. Faoin bhliain 1902, bhí an Ghaeilge á teagasc i 1,300 scoil náisiúnta – cé go raibh sé mar ábhar breise i gcuid mhór acu agus taobh amuigh de ghnáthuaireanta na scolaíochta. Thuig na luathchonraitheoirí sin go raibh múinteoirí oilte líofa de dhíth le tabhairt faoi seo mar ba chóir, agus dá thairbhe sin, bhunaigh siad coláistí oiliúna fud fad na tíre ó 1904 ar aghaidh. Mar a tharlaíonn sé, bhronn Ruairí Mac Easmainn, de bhunadh an chontae seo, suim mhór airgid ar an Chonradh do na coláistí seo. Tháinig an smaoineamh ón Bhreatain Bheag, áit ar osclaíodh an chéad scoil Bhreatnaise den chineál seo sa bhliain 1903.

Chuir an éacht a bhain an Conradh amach maidir leis an Ghaeilge sa chóras oideachais lasóg sa bharrach agus is ón dúshraith seo a spreagadh athbheochan cuimsitheach cultúrtha sa tír a d'fhág rian láidir ar an ghluaiseacht teanga, an Ghaeilge féin agus stair na tíre trí chéile.

I ndiaidh na críochdheighilte áfach, baineadh den obair seo ar fad ó thuaidh. Cuireadh deireadh leis na liúntais a cuireadh ar fáil do mhúinteoirí freastal ar na coláistí oiliúna mar shampla, agus **faoi 1933, baineadh an Ghaeilge den churaclam ar fad.**

Ba léir go raibh an rialtas nua sna Sé Chontae ag leagan amach polasaithe leis an Ghaeilge a dhíchumhachtú – sa chás seo í a laghdú chomh mór sin sa chóras oideachais nach bhfeicfí aon ghá léi. Idir na blianta 1923 agus 1926, thit líon na ndaltaí a bhí ag déanamh staidéar ar an Ghaeilge mar ábhar breise ó 5,531 go 1,290, agus sa bhliain 1934, baineadh siar an fóirdheontas a bhí ann don Ghaeilge mar ábhar breise.

Dá bharr sin ar fad, bhí titim shuntasach i líon na scoileanna a bhí ag soláthar ranganna Gaeilge. Ní mór a rá áfach agus muid ag caint ar 'scoileanna' go bhfuil muid ag caint ar bhunscoileanna go príomha. Ag an am sin, ní raibh bunús an daonra ag fáil oideachas ag an dara leibhéal, cé go raibh corrscoil Ghramadaí a bhí ag soláthar ranganna. Rinne Comhaltas Uladh, a bunaíodh i ndiaidh na críochdheighilte, iarrachtaí móra an bhearna seo a líonadh agus d'eagraigh siad feiseanna, scoláireachtaí Gaeltachta, agus chruthaigh siad áiseanna le tacú le teagasc na Gaeilge in earnáil an oideachais.

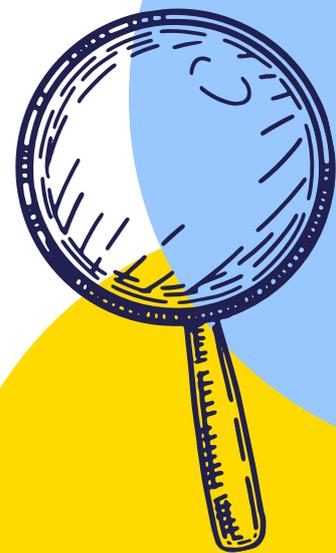
Murach na n-iarrachtaí sin, cá bhfios cén riocht a bheadh ar an Ghaeilge sna scoileanna inniu. Ina ainneoin sin, ba léir go raibh, mar a deir Ó Riagáin, an 'dynamic of decline' faoi lánseol.

Leag an chéad Phríomh-Aire ar an stát nua ó thuaidh, James Craig, in 1933, meon na n-údarás i leith theagasc na Gaeilge amach nuair a dúirt sé: **'What use is it here in this busy part of the Empire to teach our children the Irish language?'** Nó mar a dúirt Feisire Aontachtach agus iar-Aire in Stormont, William Grant, sa bhliain céanna: **'The only people interested in this language are the people who are the avowed enemies of Northern Ireland.'**

Tá tionchar na tréimhse sin go fóill linn agus b'fhéidir go dtuigfeadh muid an tionchar a d'imir na dearcaí antoisceacha seo agus na polasaithe a d'éascair uathu nuair a thuigeann muid go raibh níos mó Gaeilge á teagasc sna scoileanna Béarla in 1920 ná mar atá anois in 2025. Toradh eile ar na polasaithe thuasluaite fosta ná gur mhó Gaeilge a bhí á teagasc sna meánscoileanna na sna bunscoileanna, cé go raibh titim ann trasna an bhoird. Ach mhair an Ghaeilge sna meánscoileanna seo go príomha, mar a bheadh oileáin a choinnigh an tine lasta. Nuair a tháinig ann don Acht Oideachais in 1947, bhí rochtain ag sciaranna níos leithne den phobal ar an oideachas dara leibhéal, agus bhí tábhacht níos mó le teagasc na Gaeilge sna meánscoileanna ón phointe sin ar aghaidh.

D'fhéadfaí a rá, ar feadh 40 bliain ina dhiaidh seo, go raibh status quo ann sa Ghaeilge agus gur mhair an Ghaeilge, ar bhonn teoranta, i scoileanna Béarla an Tuaiscirt, idir bhunscoileanna agus mheánscoileanna, ar dhea-thoil príomhoidí agus múinteoirí agus ar iarrachtaí Chomhaltas Uladh, na cléire, na mban rialta agus na mBráithre Críostaí le scéim scoláireachtaí Gaeilge agus eile a reáchtáil.

Le linn na tréimhse sin, bhí bagairtí go fóill ann agus iarrachtaí leanúnacha stádas na Gaeilge sa chóras oideachais a ísliú, a mhaolú nó a dhíbirt ar fad. In 1985, rinne Brian Mawinney **iarracht an stádas mar theanga chomhaimseartha a bhaint den Ghaeilge ach, de bharr feachtas ag múinteoirí Gaeilge, níor éirigh leis.** Tá níos mó stáidéir le déanamh ar an fheachtas seo agus is cinnte go bhfuil ceachtanna ann dúinn sa lá atá inniu ann. In ainneoin na n-ionsaithe seo, an easpa tacaíochta ón rialtas agus an comhthéacs dúshlánach i leith na Gaeilge sa tsochaí trí chéile, **choinnigh na scoileanna an Ghaeilge beo,** agus murach iad, ní bheadh ann don athbheochan chomhaimseartha a thit amach ó bhunú Ghaeltacht Bhóthar Seoighe ar aghaidh.



COMHTHÉACS REATHA

Cén áit a bhfuil muid anois mar sin? Leag mé amach an comhthéacs staire ansin agus an chúis pholaitiúil taobh thiar den chúlú maidir le stádas na Gaeilge sna scoileanna Béarla ón chríochdheighilt ar aghaidh. In 1998 áfach, síníodh **Comhaontú Aoine an Chéasta** a gheall ré úr chomhionannais dúinn go léir agus a thug, ar pháipéar ar a laghad, **coimítmintí láidre i dtaobh na Gaeilge**. Cén fáth mar sin a bhfuil titim thubaisteach ó 1998 ar aghaidh ar líon na ndaltaí atá déanamh scrúduithe ag GCSE agus A-Leibhéal sa Ghaeilge agus ar líon na scoileanna atá ag soláthar na gcúrsaí seo?

Bunaithe ar an fhorbairt atá déanta ag pobal na Gaeilge agus stádas na Gaeilge sa tsochaí sa tréimhse sin, bheifeá ag súil lena mhalairt de scéal. Insíonn na figiúirí scéal eile dúinn áfach...



In 2004, bhí 2,456 dalta i scoileanna Béarla ag déanamh GCSE Irish nó Gaeilge.



Deich mbliana níos moille in 2014, bhí titim os cionn beagnach 50% ar an fhiigiúr seo agus 1,557 dalta ag déanamh na scrúdaithe seo.



Lean an treocht seo, agus in 2024, bhí an fhiigiúr sin íslithe arís go 1,090.

Aithním agus molaim na hiarrachtaí ag na meithleacha éagsúla de mhúinteoirí a thóg an cheist seo go paiseanta le blianta beaga anuas agus grúpaí ar nós Ghael Linn, an Conradh féin, NICILT agus eile, a rinne iarracht feasacht a ardú go rialta faoin cheist seo, ach laistigh de phobal na Gaeilge, gan trácht ar an mhórphobal, ní dóigh liom go bhfuil tuiscint fhorleathan ann faoin ghéarchéim seo agus na himpleachtaí dúinn mar phobal.

Cúis ollmhór den titim seo ná an t-athrú stádais a tháinig ar theagasc teangacha comhaimseartha. **A fhad le 2007, bhí sé riachtanach ag gach dalta teanga amháin a roghnú mar ábhar GCSE.** Ó 2008 ar aghaidh áfach, **níl sé riachtanach a thuilleadh,** agus is ón phointe sin ar aghaidh a fhéachann muid an titim thubaisteach bliain i ndiaidh bliana. Cuireadh béim ar chúrsaí STEM agus fágadh teangacha ar an trá fholamh. Is cinnte gur chuala go leor againn na scéalta uafáis ó mhúinteoirí Gaeilge thar na blianta faoin dóigh a ndearna údaráis scoile imeallú ar an Ghaeilge – go minic i scoileanna a raibh stair shaibhir acu i leith theagasc na Gaeilge. Ach le bheith ionraic faoi, níl an locht ar na scoileanna as an titim – is ceist chórasach é.

GAELOIDEACHAS VS GAEILGE I SCOILEANNA BÉARLA

Seans go bhfuil mearbhall ar chuid agaibh sa lucht féachána – agus sibh á rá libh féin 'is cinnte go bhfuil an córas oideachais mar chnámh droma na hathbheochana comhaimseartha'. Agus dár ndóigh, tá an ceart agaibh. **Is é an Gaeloideachas cuisle na hathbheochana, agus ar bhealach, bhí an ghéarchéim sna scoileanna Béarla ceilte ag borradh sa Ghaeloideachas.** Tá sin fíor sna figiúirí atá againn ar líon na ndaltaí atá ag déanamh GCSE agus A-Leibhéal trí Ghaeilge. Nuair a bhaintear na páistí ó Ghaelscoileanna as an áireamh, féachann muid an titim shuntasach ansin.

Is féidir agus is mithid dúinn a bheith ar son an Ghaeloideachais agus ag iarraidh figiúirí iontrála sna Ghaelscoileanna a mhéadú go mór AGUS a bheith buartha faoi stádas na Gaeilge sna scoileanna Béarla. Níl aon chodarsnacht ann dar liom.

Is toradh de chuid earnáil an Ghaeloideachais mé. Tá mo pháistí féin ag freastal ar Ghaelscoileanna, ag leibhéal na bunscoile agus na meánscoile. Is mé an cathaoirleach ar Ghaelscoil áitiúil fosta. Tá buntáistí an Ghaeloideachais le sonrú go smior i bpobail ar nós Iarthar Bhéal Feirste, ach ní gá dom sin a mhíniú don tslua seo.

ACH, is féidir linn a bheith, agus ní mór dúinn a bheith, ar son an dá rud.

Cé go bhfuil Gaelscoileanna ag méadú i rith an ama agus go bhfuil sé le fada ar an earnáil oideachais is mó fáis ó thuaidh, go fóill féin, **níl ach timpeall 3% den daonra scoile ag freastal ar Ghaelscoileanna ó thuaidh** – cad é faoin 97% eile? Cad é a dhéanann muid leo? Go háirithe sa dara leibhéal, tá sciaranna móra de pháistí ó thuaidh nach bhfuil aon soláthar meánscolaíochta ar fáil trí Ghaeilge daofa, rud a fhágann nach bhfuil de rogha ach meánscoil Bhéarla fiú do na páistí sin a fuair oideachas trí Ghaeilge ag an bhunleibhéal. An bhfuil muid sásta go bhfuil ár gcóras oideachais ag séanadh an deise orthu leanúint lenár dteanga dhúchais a fhoghlaim?

Tá géarghá le tuilleadh spásanna a chur ar fáil sna Gaelscoileanna. **Léiríonn taighde atá déanta ag Conradh na Gaeilge go mbeadh spéis ag beirt as gach cúigear sa Ghaeloideachas dá bpáistí dá mbeadh sé ar fáil.** Ach fiú dá mbeadh athruithe córasacha ar an chur chuige san oideachas anseo maidin amárach (agus tá seo de dhíth!), bheadh cúpla glúin imithe sula mbeadh méadú os cionn 25% againn – san idirlinn ní mór dúinn stádas na Gaeilge a neartú sna scoileanna Béarla

Cén fáth?

Tá claochlú ag teacht ar an tsochaí seo agus ar an dearcadh atá ag sciaranna leathana den phobal i leith na Gaeilge. Tá níos mó daoine fásta ná riamh ag foghlaim na Gaeilge i ranganna oíche, tá fás as cuimse tagtha ar an Ghaeloideachas, tá borradh ar an infrastruchtúr pobail atá ag freastal ar dhaonra leathan éagsúil dátheangach. Tá feachtas leanúnach ar son cearta teanga i ndiaidh éachtaí a bhaint amach, agus de thoradh air sin ar fad, tá Acht Gaeilge reachtaithe don chéad uair – cé go bhfuil muid go fóill ag fanacht le ceapachán an choimisinéara agus eile – ach sin scéal eile.

Bheadh na forbairtí seo feabhsaithe go suntasach dá mbeadh teagasc na Gaeilge sna scoileanna Béarla neartaithe. Chuirfeadh sé go mór lenár n-iarrachtaí sochaí atá i ndairíre dátheangach a chothú, go háirithe agus earnáil an Ghaeloideachais go fóill i mbéal forbartha.

Luaigh mé ag tús na cainte seo go bhfuair gach múinteoir a bhí agam sna Gaelscoileanna oideachas i scoileanna Béarla. **Go dtí an lá atá inniu ann, ceann de na dúshláin is mó atá ag cur bac ar fhás an Ghaeloideachais ná soláthar múinteoirí.** Muna bhfuil daoine óga le Gaeilge ag teacht amach ó na scoileanna Béarla a thuilleadh, déanfar an fhadhb seo a iolrú arís.

Leis an phointe seo a shoiléiriú daoibh – má amharcann muid ar an dara meánscoil neamhspleách a bunaíodh ó thuaidh, Gaelcholáiste Dhoire i nDún Geimhin. As an 32 múinteoir lán- agus páirt-aimseartha atá ag obair sa scoil, níl ach beirt a d'fhreastail ar bhunscoil agus ar mheánscoil lán-Ghaeilge. Tá ceathrar eile a fuair oideachas lán-Ghaeilge ag an bhunscoil amháin. Fágann sin 26 múinteoir eile a d'fhoghlaim Gaeilge ar scoileanna Béarla. Is ionann seo agus 83% den fhoireann teagaisc. Sa chás nach raibh na múinteoirí seo ar fáil, ní bheadh an scoil in ann feidhmiú agus ní bheadh deiseanna iontacha an Ghaeloideachais ar fáil don bhreis is 350 dalta atá ag freastal ar an scoil dochreidte sin anois. Tá seo amhlaidh trasna an bhord, agus fiú sa chás a mbeadh níos mó agus níos mó múinteoirí ag teacht tríd díreach ó earnáil an Ghaeloideachais, sa chomhthéacs seo ina bhfuil géarchéim aitheanta ann maidir le soláthar múinteoirí san earnáil, tá luach ollmhór le gach uile mhúinteoir agus le gach foinse a chruthaíonn iad.

Sa bhreis air sin, beidh sé níos fusa dul i bhfeidhm ar an mhórphobal maidir le húsáid agus tacaíocht don teanga i gcomhthéacs ina bhfuil na mílte páistí breise ag foghlaim na Gaeilge i scoileanna Béarla trasna an bhoird, bíodh siad san earnáil Chaitliceach, stáit nó imeasctha. Cothóidh seo sochaí ina bhfuil níos mó measa ann don teanga, níos mó deiseanna í a úsáid, níos mó deiseanna fostaíochta agus eile.

RÉITEACH AGUS SAMPLAÍ IDIRNÁISIÚNTA

Cad é an réiteach mar sin?

Ar an chéad dul síos, ní mór don Fheidhmeannas teangacha comhaimseartha a dhéanamh riachtanach arís ag leibhéal GCSE. Léiríonn na figiúirí an dochar a rinne an t-athrú stádais in 2007/08, le titim 43% ar líon na ndaltaí a rinne GCSE sa tréimhse sin agus is féidir le hathrú stádais eile seo a chneasú go pointe. Bhí éileamh ag Conradh na Gaeilge sa Toghchán Tionóil ó thuaidh mar chuid den fheachtas #Gaelvóta 2022 ar an cheist seo, agus thacaigh tromlach na gcomhaltaí a toghadh sa tionól leis an éileamh seo. Ní mór daofa beart de réir briathair a dhéanamh anois agus an reachtaíocht a chur tríd mar ábhar práinne.

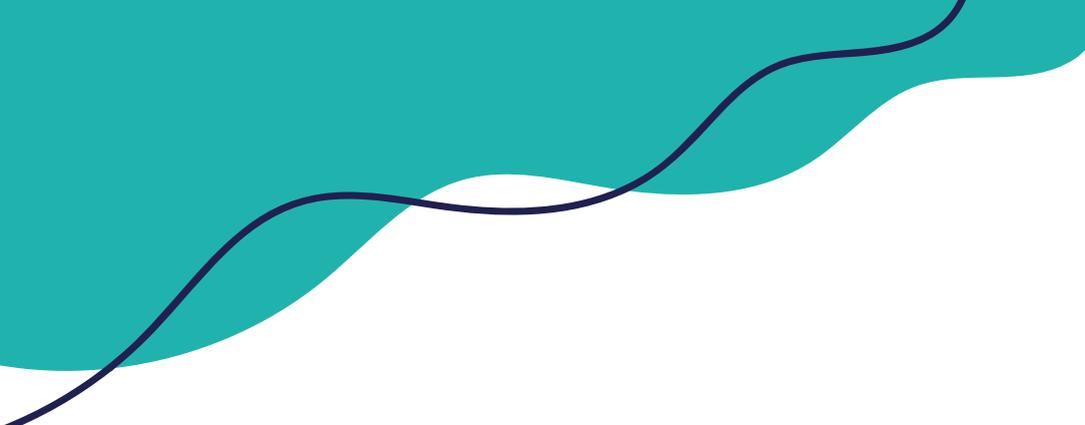
Tá baint agam féin ar bhonn pearsanta leis an ghrúpa comhdheartha a bhí ag plé le Straitéis 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge ó thuaidh. Tá dualgas reachtúil ar an Fheidhmeannas an straitéis seo a chur i bhfeidhm ó 2006, agus diaidh ar ndiaidh, i ndiaidh dhá bhua san ardchúirt, tá muid ag bogadh i dtreo réitigh, ach beidh le feiceáil. Tá beartais soiléire curtha isteach againn sa dréacht faoi láthair maidir le soláthar Gaeilge in earnáil an Béarla. Tá sé ráite go soiléir sa dréacht **gur mian linn go mbeadh deis ag gach uile pháiste, ba chuma cén scoil ná earnáil ina bhfuil siad, Gaeilge a fhoghlaim agus go mbeadh ardú suntasach ar líon na bpáistí atá ag déanamh GCSE nó A-Leibhéil trí Ghaeilge.** Ní mór an straitéis uaillmhianach seo a chur i bhfeidhm.

Ní mór dúinn fosta ceachtanna a fhoghlaim ón stair. Labhair mé ar na forbairtí a bhain Conradh na Gaeilge amach ag tús an 20ú haois maidir le teagasc na Gaeilge. San am sin, bhí bunús a n-iarrachtaí dírithe ar bhunscoileanna. Tá sé ríthábhachtach go dtosaíonn teagasc na Gaeilge sna scoileanna Béarla ag leibhéal na bunscolaíochta. **Tá seo aitheanta sna beartais ag an dréachtstraitéis Ghaeilge fosta.** Aithnítear go bhfuil sealbhú teanga níos fusa agus muid óg, mar sin, cén fáth a bhfanann muid go dtí gobhfuil páistí sna déaga sula dtosaíonn muid ag teagasc Gaeilge daofa. Bhí tionscadal thar a bheith tábhachtach á sholáthar ag an Roinn Oideachais anseo breis is 10 mbliana ó shin, **The Primary Modern Languages Programme.** Chuir an scéim seo múinteoirí taistil nó múinteoirí cuartaíochta ar fáil do bhunscoileanna le ranganna a dhéanamh a thacaigh le sealbhú teangacha. Bhí rogha acu idir an Ghaeilge, an Spáinnis agus an Pholainnis, agus bhí an-éileamh go deo ar an scéim.

San iomlán, bhí tionchar ag an scéim seo ar bhreis is **30,000 dalta agus 90 scoil** ina measc a bhí ag dul do ranganna Gaeilge tríd an scéim idir 2008 agus 2015, idir scoileanna Caitliceacha, stáit agus imeasctha. Bhí sé dírithe ar Ranganna 1–4, díreach an aois le tionchar a imirt ar mheon páistí agus le cur le sealbhú teanga. Ach ar chúis éigin, in ainneoin **an éilimh mhóir a bhí ar an scéim agus an aischothaithe thar a bheith dearfach,** cuireadh deireadh leis an scéim **sa bhliain 2015.** Caithfear scéim den chineál seo a chur ar bun arís agus í a leathnú amach go suntasach.

San fholús a fágadh, chuir Gael Linn scéim iontach chreidiúnaithe ar fáil – **Scoil Spreagtha** – atá faoi chaibidil ag an chomhdháil inniu. Molaim go mór an tionscadal seo agus Gael Linn as é a chur ar fáil. Cuireann an scéim seo áiseanna luachmhara ar fáil do scoileanna a neartaíonn an fhoghlaim. Ní mór do na húdaráis tacú leis na hiarrachtaí seo trí mhaoiniú breise a chur ar fáil agus stádas reachtúil a bhronnadh ar theagasc teangacha breise sa chóras oideachais anseo – rud a thagann le dea-chleachtas idirnáisiúnta maidir le sealbhú teangacha

I measc na samplaí is oiriúnaigh idirnáisiúnta dúinn, tá an **Bhreatain Bheag**. Is na Breatnaigh a spreag muid i dtreo na gcoláistí oiliúna ag tús an 20ú haois, agus tá spreagadh ansin dúinn go fóill. Trí phlean uailmhianach an rialtais ansin, Cymraeg 2050, tá straitéis ag an rialtas le go mbeidh milliún cainteoir Breatnaise ann faoi 2050. Sa straitéis sin, tá beartais láidre ann maidir le teagasc na Breatnaise agus tuiscint ag na húdaráis ansin, mar a bhí ag ár ngníomhaithe féin ag tús an 20ú haois, go bhfuil ról lárnach láidir ag an chóras oideachais in aon phróiseas athréimnithe teanga. Deir siad go soiléir, **“we want all our learners to have the opportunity to be bilingual”**, agus aithníonn siad go mbeidh orthu: **“increase the number of learners in English-medium schools that succeed in acquiring the language.”**



I measc na mbeartas atá acu, cuirtear tumchláir ar fáil do na páistí a d'fhreastail ar bhunscoileanna Béarla ach ar mian leo aistriú chuig meánscoileanna Breatnaise, trí scéim a thugtar 'late language immersion centres' orthu, agus tá ionaid faoi leith i ngach aon cheantar comhairle sa Bhreatain Bheag ag freastal air seo. Mar thoradh air seo ar fad, meastar gur aistrigh os cionn 4,000 páiste chuig meánscoileanna Breatnaise. Samhláimis a leithéid anseo!

Fiú in **Albain**, nach bhfuil ar thus cadhnaíochta maidir le polasaithe forásacha teanga, tá polasaí 1 + 2 acu a chinntíonn go bhfuil **teacht ag gach páiste ar dhá theanga bhreise sula gcríochnaíonn siad an bhunscoil**. Deir an rialtas ansin go neamhbhalbh go bhfuil seo mar dhlúthchuid d'iarrachtaí níos leithne foghlaim teangacha a spreagadh trí chéile.

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Ní don chéad uair faraor, **is eisceacht muid** sna Sé Chontae **nuair a bhaineann sé le polasaithe teangacha**.

CONCLÚID

Mar fhocal scoir, **ní mór dúinn ar an chéad dul síos a aithint go bhfuil géarchéim ann.** Ní féidir ár gcloigne a chur sa ghaineamh a thuilleadh nó a bheith ag súil leis gur féidir leis an Ghaeloideachas an bhearna a líonadh i dtaobh na titime tubaistí ar theagasc na Gaeilge sna scoileanna Béarla. Tá toil pholaitiúil ann leis an fhadhb seo a réiteach, mar a léirigh an tacaíocht do Ghaelvóta, ach ní leor toil amháin – tá gníomh de dhíth. Tá samplaí idirnáisiúnta iontacha againn de thionscadail agus scéimeanna a imreoidh tionchar dearfach, agus tá beartais luaite sa dréachtstraitéis a rachadh i ngleic leis na dúshláin atá os ár gcomhair. Ní mór iad a chur i bhfeidhm agus creatlach polasaí láidir, uailmhianach a neartaíonn teagasc teangacha trí chéile, agus an Ghaeilge go háirithe, trasna an chóras oideachais anseo.

Molaim go mór an chomhdháil seo mar ócáid thar a bheith tábhachtach le haird a dhíriú ar an cheist seo – ní mór dúinn tógáil uirthi san am atá amach romhainn.

Go raibh maith agaibh.

CIARÁN MAC GIOLLA BHÉIN

Gael-Linn Conference

23rd January 2025

Thank you very much and my heartfelt thanks to the Gael-Linn staff, and to Séamas Mac Eochaidh in particular, for the generous invite to be here with you today. I would like to welcome everyone in attendance, in particular the politicians in the room with us this morning. There is an ongoing crisis in English-medium schools with regards to the teaching of Irish, and, despite honest efforts to tackle this with various schemes, as well as the warnings voiced by teachers for many years now, the situation is not improving but deteriorating.

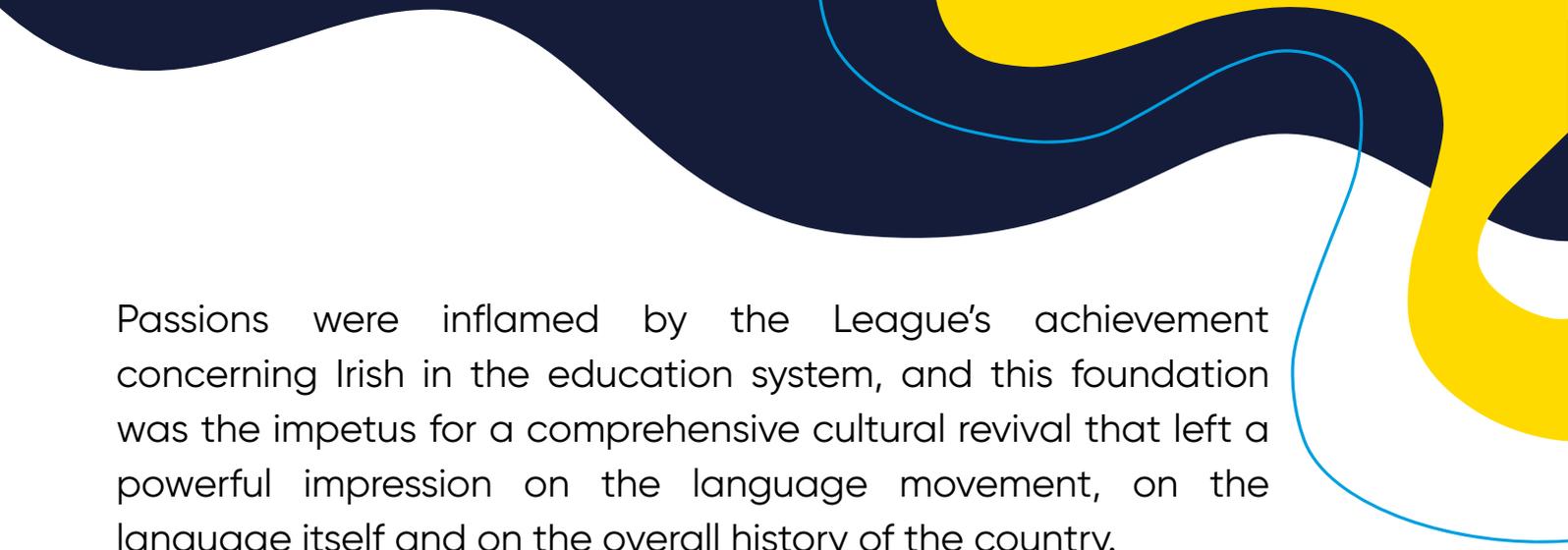
My name is Ciarán Mac Giolla Bhéin and I am from this city. I received my education entirely through the medium of Irish, from nursery through secondary, and I was among the first generation to have that valuable experience. My time at school has left a strong impression on me, and there is no doubt that that experience, as well as the fantastic teachers I and many others of that generation had, has motivated me where Irish-language matters are concerned.

Reflecting on that period however, I often consider that every teacher I had, from nursery school playing in the sand to secondary school learning about the Russian Revolution, they received their education through the medium of English. Indeed, if not for the great achievements English-medium schools in support of Irish for many years, in very trying circumstances, there would be no Irish-medium sector.

I believe it is important, while we are gathered at the beginning of this conference, to take stock of some of the historical context of the teaching of Irish in English-medium schools. We all understand the awful impact that colonialism has had in this country, particularly as pertains to the Irish language. **The majority of the country spoke Irish two hundred years ago, but it had become a minoritised language by the end of the 19th century.** The National Schools were established in 1831, and Irish was driven out of the mouths of children with crude weapons like the tally stick.

Colonial authorities knew very well the importance of education in the context of acquisition, or in this case, the dispossession of the language. It is little wonder then, when Conradh na Gaeilge [The Gaelic League] was founded in 1893 to tackle this disaster that had been gaining pace during the 19th century, that educational affairs were the focus of most of their campaigns.

As a result of those campaigns, it became known as 'The Battle of Education'; remarkable victories were to be had at the beginning of the 20th century, with Irish being once again taught in the country's schools since the time of hedge schools. By 1902, Irish was being taught in 1300 national schools – even though it was an additional subject in many of them and outside of normal school hours. Those early Leaguers understood that trained, fluent teachers were needed to properly tackle the issue, and because of that, training colleges were established throughout the country from 1904 onwards. As it happens, Roger Casement of this county gifted a large sum of money to the League for these colleges. The idea came from Wales, where the first Welsh-medium schools of this type were opened in 1903.



Passions were inflamed by the League's achievement concerning Irish in the education system, and this foundation was the impetus for a comprehensive cultural revival that left a powerful impression on the language movement, on the language itself and on the overall history of the country.

After partition however, all this work was eroded in the north. For example, allowances available to teachers to attend the training colleges were quashed, **and by 1933, Irish was entirely removed from the curriculum.**

It was clear that the new government in the Six Counties were designing policies that disempower the Irish language – in this case by reducing it so much in the education system that people would see no need for it. Between 1923 and 1926, the numbers of students studying Irish as an additional subject fell from 5,531 to 1,290, and in 1924, grants for Irish as an additional subject were withdrawn.

All of that resulted in a steep fall in the number of schools providing Irish classes. It must be said however, that we are talking mainly of primary schools when we mention 'schools' here. At that time, most of the population were not receiving a secondary education, even though some grammar schools were providing Irish classes. Comhaltas Uladh [the Ulster membership of the Gaelic league], who were established post-partition, made great efforts to fill this void; they organised competition-based cultural festivals and Gaeltacht scholarships, as well as creating resources to support the teaching of Irish in the education sector.

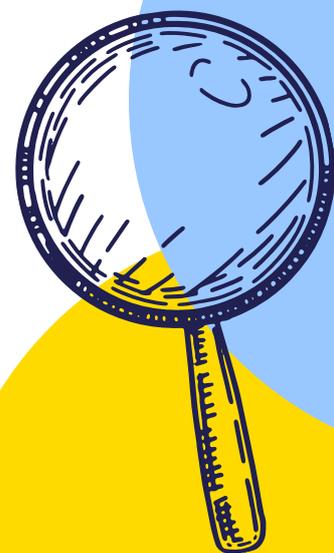
Were it not for these efforts, who knows what state Irish would be in in schools today. Despite that, it was clear that a 'dynamic of decline', as stated by Ó Riagáin, was in full flow.

James Craig, the first Prime Minister of the new northern state laid out the attitude of the authorities regarding Irish in 1933 when he said, **'What use is it here in this busy part of the Empire to teach our children the Irish language?'** Or as a Unionist MP and ex-minister of Stormont, William Grant, said in the same year, **'The only people interested in this language are the people who are the avowed enemies of Northern Ireland.'**

The effect of that period is still with us, and maybe we would better understand these extremist attitudes and the policies they brought about when we realise that there was more Irish being taught in English-medium schools in 1920 than there is now in 2025. Another result of the above-mentioned policies was that more Irish was being taught in secondary schools than primary schools, despite there being a fall across the board. Irish survived in these secondary schools however, like islands that kept the torch alight. When the 1947 Education Act came into effect, a larger portion of the public had access to secondary-level education, and the teaching of Irish had greater significance in secondary schools from that point on.

It could be said that, for the subsequent forty years, Irish experienced the status quo and that the language survived in a limited manner in the English-medium schools of the North, in both primary and secondary, due to the good will of principles and teachers and the efforts of Comhaltas Uladh and the clergy, nuns and the Christian Brothers, to organise Gaeltacht scholarship schemes etc.

During that period, there were still continual threats and efforts to lower or lessen the language's status in the education system, or to banish it entirely. In 1985, Brian Mawinney **attempted to remove 'modern' status from the language, but he was unsuccessful due to a campaign by Irish teachers.** There is more study to be done on this campaign, and there is certain to be more lessons for us today in it. Despite these attacks, lack of support from government and the challenging context for Irish in society overall, **the schools kept Irish alive**, and were it not for them, the modern revival since the establishment of the Shaw's Road Gaeltacht would not have happened.



CURRENT CONTEXT

Where are we now then? I have presented the historical context, and the political causes behind the regression of the status of Irish in English-medium schools since partition. In 1998 however, the **Good Friday Agreement** was signed that promised us all a new era of equality, and that gave us, on paper at least, a **strong commitment in terms of Irish**. Why then has there been a disastrous decline since 1998 in the number of students taking GCSE and A-Level Irish, and in the number of schools providing these courses?

Based on the progress that has been made by the Irish-language community, and on the status of Irish in society in that period, you would expect the opposite to be the case. The figures tell another story however...



In 2004, there were 2,546 students taking GCSE Irish or Gaeilge.



Ten years later, there was an almost 50% fall in this figure with 1,557 students taking these exams.



Following this decline, that number had lowered again to 1,090 by 2024.

I recognise and praise the efforts of various working groups of teachers who have raised the issue passionately in recent years, groups like Gael-Linn, Conradh na Gaeilge, NICILT and others who have regularly tried to raise awareness of the issue, but within the Irish language community, and much less the wider community, I do not believe that there is a wide understanding of this crisis and the implications for us as a community.

A major reason for this decline is the change in status of the teaching of modern languages. **Up until 2007, it was compulsory for every student to chose one language for GCSE.** Since 2008 however, it is **no longer compulsory,** and we have been witnessing the disastrous decline year on year. STEM courses were heavily emphasised and languages left high and dry. I am sure that many of us have heard the horror stories from Irish teachers over the years about how Irish has been marginalised by school authorities – often in schools that had no rich history of teaching Irish. To be honest though, the fault does not lie with schools – it is a systemic issue.

IRISH MEDIUM VS IRISH IN ENGLISH-MEDIUM SCHOOLS

Some of you in the audience might be confused – saying to yourselves “of course the education system is the backbone of the modern revival”. And of course you are correct. **Irish-medium education is the beating heart of the revival, and in a way, the crisis in English-medium schools was hidden by the surge in Irish-medium education.** That much is true of the figure we have for the number of students sitting GCSE and A-Level through Irish. When IME children are taken out of the equation, we then seen the remarkable fall.

We can both support IME by trying to raise the enrolment numbers AND worry about the status of Irish in English-Medium schools, and it is high time for us to do so. To my mind, there is no comparison.

I am a product of IME. My own children attend IME schools, at both primary and secondary. I am also the Chairperson of a local IME school. The benefits of IME can be seen convincingly in communities such as West Belfast, but I don't need to convince a crowd like yourselves of that.

BUT, we can and must be in support of both approaches.

Although IME schools continue to grow, and it has long been the fastest growth sector in the north, **there is still only 3% of the school population in IME schools in the north** – what about the other 97%? What to we do about them? Especially at secondary level, there are large swathes of children in the north who have no secondary provision available through Irish, which means that there is no option but English-medium secondary schools even for children who were educated through Irish at primary. Are we content for our education system to deny them any opportunity to continue to learn our native language.

It is imperative that more places are made available in IME schools. **Research by Conradh na Gaeilge shows that 2 out of every 5 would be interested in IME for their children were it to be available.** But even if there were systemic changes in the approach to education here tomorrow morning (which is needed!), a few generations would pass before we would have a 25% rise – in the meantime, we must strengthen the status of the Irish language in English-medium schools.

WHY?

A transformation has been occurring in society and in the opinion that vast parts of the community hold towards Irish. More adults than ever are learning Irish in night classes, there has been astounding growth in IME, there has been a surge in community infrastructure serving the needs of a wide, varied and bilingual population. There is an ongoing campaign for language rights after great achievements, and as a result of all of that, there is an Irish Language Act legislated for the first time – even though we are still waiting for the appointment of a commissioner amongst other things, but that is another story.

These developments would be markedly improved by the strengthening of Irish teaching in English-medium schools. It would greatly compliment our efforts to cultivate a truly bilingual society, especially with IME still being in an early stage of development.

I mentioned at the beginning of this talk that every one of my teachers in IME received their own education in English-medium schools. **Up until today, one of the greatest challenges that is impeding the growth of IME has been teacher provision.** If there are no longer young people with Irish coming out of English-medium schools, this problem will be further compounded.



To clarify this point for you, let's look at the second independent IME secondary school established in the north, Gaelcholáiste Dhoire in Dungiven. Of the 32 full- and part-time teachers on the school's staff, only two of them attended an IME primary and secondary school. There are four more who had IME at primary only. That leaves 26 other teachers who learned Irish at English-medium schools. This equates to 83% of the teaching staff. Were these teachers to not be available, the school could no longer operate, and the fantastic opportunities of IME would be unavailable to the more than 350 students now attending this incredible school. This is the case across the board, and even though there are increasing numbers of teachers emerging from IME, in the context of a known crisis in teacher provision in the sector, every single teacher is of great value, as is every source from which they come.

In addition to this, it will be easier to influence the wider public on the use and importance of the language in a context where there are thousands of extra children learning Irish in English-medium schools across the board, whether that be in the Catholic, state or integrated sector. This will cultivate a society that has more respect for the language, more opportunities for its use, greater employment opportunities and more.

SOLUTION AND INTERNATIONAL EXAMPLES

What is the solution then?

Firstly, the Executive must make modern languages compulsory at GCSE level. The figures show the damage done to the change of status in 2007/08, with a drop of 43% in the number of students sitting GCSE in that period, and a change in status can remedy this to a degree. Conradh na Gaeilge demanded this in the northern Assembly Elections, as part of #Gaelvóta 2022 which addressed this issue, and a majority of the MLAs elected supported the demand. They must now act on their word and put the legislation through as a matter of urgency.

I have a personal affiliation with the co-design group that dealt with the Twenty-Year Strategy for the Irish Language in the north. Since 2006, there has been a statutory duty for the Executive to implement this strategy, and little by little, after two wins in the high court, we are moving towards a resolution, but it remains to be seen. We have included clear policies in the current draft regarding Irish-language provision in the English-medium sector. It is clearly stated in the draft that **we wish for every child, regardless of the school or sector they are in, to learn Irish and for there be a marked increase in the numbers of children doing GCSE or A-Level through Irish.** This ambitious strategy must be implemented.

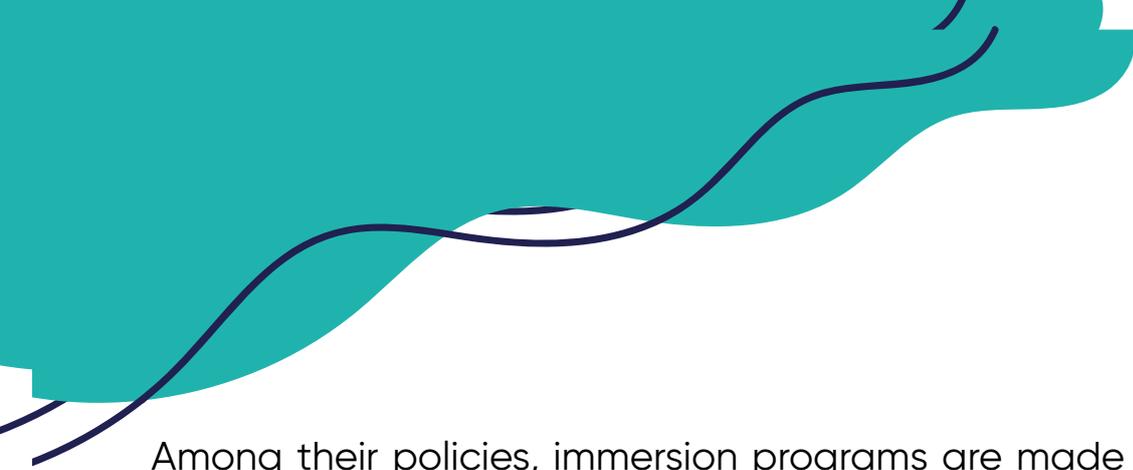


We must also learn lessons from history. I discussed the developments achieved by Conradh na Gaeilge at the beginning of the 20th century with regards to the teaching of Irish. At that time, most efforts were focussed on primary schools. **It is of vital importance that the teaching of Irish in English-medium schools begins at primary level.** This is also recognised in the policies of the draft strategy for Irish. It is recognised that language acquisition is easier when we are young, so why then wait until children are teenagers before we begin to teach them Irish. The Department of Education provided an extremely important project here over ten years ago, **The Primary Languages Programme**. This scheme made travelling/visiting teachers available to primary schools to provide classes that supported language acquisition. They had a choice between Irish, Spanish and Polish, and the scheme was in high demand.

Overall, this programme involved more than **30,000 students, with 90 schools** choosing Irish classes on the scheme between 2008 and 2015, in Catholic, state and integrated schools alike. It focussed on P.1–4, the exact age to influence children's attitude and improve language acquisition. But for some reason, despite **high demand for the scheme** and **extremely positive feedback**, the scheme was **ended in 2015**. A similar scheme must be implemented again and significantly expanded.

In the vacuum that remained, Gael-Linn have provided a brilliant, accredited scheme, **Scoil Spreagtha**, which is the subject of today's conference. I highly praise this project and Gael-Linn for providing it. This scheme provides valuable resources for schools and strengthens learning. The authorities must support these efforts by providing further funding and by giving the teaching of extra languages statutory status in the education system here, in line with international best practice on language acquisition.

Among the most fitting international examples for us is **Wales**. It is the Welsh who inspired us to establish the training colleges in the 20th century, and there is still inspiration to be had. Through their government's ambitious plan, Cymraeg 2050, there is an aim to have one million speakers of Welsh by 2050. There are strong policies in that strategy on the teaching of Welsh, and the authorities there understand, as did our own activists in the 20th century, that the education system has a strong, central role in any process of re-advancing [DN] language. They say clearly, **"we want all our learners to have the opportunity to be bilingual"**, and they recognise that they will have to **"increase the number of learners in English-medium schools that succeed in acquiring the language"**.



Among their policies, immersion programs are made available to children who attended English-medium primary schools but who wish to transfer to a Welsh-medium secondary, through a scheme called 'late language immersion centres', with dedicated centres in every council area of Wales addressing this issue. As a result of all of this, it is estimated that over 4,000 children have transferred to Welsh secondary schools. Let's imagine something similar here!

Even in **Scotland**, which doesn't lead the way in terms of progressive language policy, they have the 1+2 policy which ensures that every child has had **access to two extra languages by the time they leave primary school**. The government there say plainly that this is an integral part of wider efforts to encourage language learning overall.

There are similar policies in place in the south also, and of course every child does Irish from primary up as far as the end of secondary when they take the Leaving Cert exams; although that is not without fault, especially regarding the issue of exemptions.

Sadly not for the first time, **we are an exception** in the six counties **as far as language policy is concerned**.

CONCLUSION

As a last word, **we must firstly recognise that a crisis exists**. We can no longer put our head in the sand or hope that IME can stop the gap in terms of the disastrous decline in teaching of Irish in English-medium schools. The political will to solve this problem is there, as was revealed by the support for Gaelvóta, but will alone will not suffice – action is needed. We have fantastic international examples of projects and schemes that will have a positive effect, and there are policies mentioned in the draft strategy that will tackle the challenges we face. They must be implemented and a strong ambitious policy framework developed [ND: Gaeilge beagán easnamhach anseo] that strengthens language teaching overall throughout the education system here.

I highly praise this conference as an extremely important occasion to bring attention to the issue – we must build upon it in the coming period.

Thank you.