

Parents' attitudes to the gaelscoil as a school for the élite

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Introduction:

Gaelscoileanna have often been perceived as being elitist on both socio-economic and educational grounds. This perception is generally anecdotal; it has also been written about by David McWilliams in *The Pope's children*, for example and by Sarah Carey and Kathryn Holmquist in the *Irish Times* in December 2008.

Although international research on the Canadian, Welsh and Basque situations, for example has shown that families involved in bilingual education in an additive context tend to be from educated middle-class backgrounds, access to an Irish-medium school is available to everyone, regardless of their social background. Indeed, gaelscoileanna are public non-fee paying schools and are located around the country. All parents are therefore free to apply to an Irish-medium school for their child.

These schools are also recognised for the high standard of education they provide, which is, according to some, the deciding factor for parents to enrol their child in a gaelscoil as opposed to the parents' love for the Irish language.

When conducting research on parents' attitudes to Irish and Irish-medium education I gave parents an opportunity to express their opinions on this perception of elitism. This paper will present parents' views as insiders and participants in the Irish-medium school system in reaction to outsiders' comments.

But before we start I'm going to situate the research study I conducted. The first part of the study focused on a questionnaire on attitudes to Irish and Irish-medium education that was distributed in September 2009 in ten gaelscoileannaí located in the Dublin area. Participants included parents of senior infants and parents of sixth class. Their participation was voluntary. The overall response rate was a third of the targeted cohort, which represents 223 questionnaires that were completed and returned to their school. The second part of the study took place in June 2010 and consisted of follow-up interviews with forty parents.

When looking at participants' profile it is rather consistent with what has been found in international research as the majority of parents belong to an educated middle class group.

GRAPH (powerpoint)

The first chart here shows questionnaire participants and interview participants as classified by social class. The social class categories are based on the Central Statistics Office classification.

Questionnaire participants include both parents when applicable. When we look at the chart we can see that over half the participants are members of the two higher social groups whereas only 13% of parents belong to the skilled manual and semi skilled categories.

The classification of the forty interviewees by social class matches the results obtained in the questionnaire although the “skilled manual” category is slightly under-represented among the interviewees.

GRAPH (powerpoint)

The second chart here represents questionnaire participants and interview participants classified by educational qualifications. Again, where applicable spouses were taken into account in the questionnaire participants group. We can see that a great majority of parents have a college degree. The representation of parents with third-level qualifications is even higher among interviewees. Fewer parents with the Leaving Certificate as their highest educational qualification participated in the interviews.

As shown in the graphs, parents who volunteered to take part in this study are mostly from a middle class milieu and have third-level qualifications. This is in line with other studies on bilingual education in an additive context, that is where children learn a second language in school as an additional language without replacing their first language by the second language.

It must be pointed out that the gaelscoileannaí involved in the study were located in different areas of Dublin which included middle and upper-middle class areas as well as designated disadvantaged areas. Although working class families are represented here the majority of those who volunteered to take part in the study appear to be from a middle class milieu.

The association of the gaelscoil and the middle classes have been made in different fora. The perception of Gaelscoileanna as being elitist can be found in various discussion forums on the Internet (boards.ie, politics.ie, dailti.com etc.), in newspaper articles or in writings about Irish society. It should be pointed out, however, that most of these contributions date from 2006, 2007 and late 2008.

(quotes powerpoint)

This perception is usually an external one, that is held by people who have no association with Gaelscoileanna. Supporters of the Irish-medium schools have responded to this negative

criticism by referring to the fact that Gaelscoileanna are non-fee paying state schools, for instance, or by pointing out that these schools are well established not just in affluent areas but also in designated disadvantaged areas. These points were mostly made by representatives of Gaelscoileanna, school principals and teachers. (quotes powerpoint)

It is also important to hear parents' views on this matter because as users of Gaelscoileanna they are directly concerned by these allegations and may not agree with them.

Parents participating in the study were asked two questions in relation to the notion of elitism in the Gaelscoil context. One question appeared on the questionnaire while the other one was asked during the follow-up interviews.

Parents who completed the questionnaire were presented with the following statement: “Irish-medium education is for the middle classes” and were asked to tick a box according to whether they agreed or disagreed. The results show that 87% of parents who answered the question disagreed with this statement while 6% agreed and 7% had no opinion.(question+figures powerpoint) Due to the nature of the question parents could not elaborate on their answer by leaving an explanatory comment. In order to understand parents' rejection of the middle class aspect of Gaelscoileanna a question about the perception of Gaelscoileanna as being elitist was consequently included in the follow-up interviews.

The 40 interview participants were asked to give their view on the following statement: “Some people say that Gaelscoileanna are elitist”. Eighty-five percent of parents disagreed while 15% agreed. Analysis of their reaction shows that most parents understood the notion of elitism in terms of socio-economic factors.

Here is a list of the reasons why parents believe their gaelscoil is not elitist (on powerpoint)

Reasons why Gaelscoileanna are not elitist

Reasons	Total (%)* (N=40)
Good social mix	45
Open door policy	10
Underfunded and accommodated in prefabs	10
Gaelscoil located in a working-class area	10
Non-fee paying	7.5
Choice based on the provision of a good education not on social grounds	5

Gaelscoil located in a middle-class area therefore no more elitist than other local schools	2.5
A large number of parents are former gaelscoil pupils	2.5
No fewer foreign nationals attending than in other local schools	2.5

* These are exclusive and do not total 100% as a few parents gave several reasons.

A significant majority of parents emphasised the fact that children in their gaelscoil came from various social backgrounds. Others pointed out that Gaelscoileanna had an open door policy, that is parents with little or no Irish can send their child to the gaelscoil and children with disabilities can also attend, and that they were non-fee paying schools. Some parents referred to a lack of funding and accommodation issues. A few parents thought that the availability of a gaelscoil in a working class area was proof that it was not elitist as it catered for the local working class community. Similarly, a parent living in a wealthy area said that the local gaelscoil was no more elitist than the other schools of the area as they catered for middle to upper class families. I quote: “[*Our Gaelscoil*] is in a very middle class area. It's in an area where you know people are well off. So it's no more elitist than [*other local schools*] are.”

Overall, parents' views reflect the discourse used by representatives of Gaelscoileanna in terms of social mix, free and open access to Irish-medium education, as well as the availability of Gaelscoileanna in different socio-economic areas.

However, it has to be noted that some parents expressed a different view. Three of the six interviewees who agreed that Gaelscoileanna were elitist believed that parents who had considered such an education for their child were well educated and more likely to come from a middle class background. As one parent put it: “*It is a self-selecting group. People who are interested in Irish are more interested in education. They are usually middle class people. **The gaelscoil is a private school without being fee-paying***” end of quote.

One participant thought that other parents were sending their child to the local gaelscoil because it allowed them to mix with people from a certain social class.

Two parents however, understood the notion of elitism in a different way. They associated it with the selection that is made at the time of enrolment. They both thought it was positive in this context as it allowed families with a genuine interest in the Irish language to get a place in the school as opposed to parents who would be interested in the gaelscoil for the wrong reasons. I quote: “*I think sometimes they have to be [elitist] because they don't want people just coming in who aren't serious about learning and are just going to probably drop out after primary and not carry it on because then what's the point if there's no people out there actually speaking it.*”

Despite an overwhelming majority disagreeing that Gaelscoileanna are schools for the élite, a significant number of parents acknowledged that this perception existed. Thirteen participants out of 40, that is 32.5% made an attempt to explain where this perception is coming from. This table lists reasons parents volunteered in the interviews.

(on powerpoint)

Parents' view on the reasons for the perception that Gaelscoileanna are elitist

Reasons	Total (%)* (N=13)
Gaelscoileanna may be elitist in some parts of Dublin due to their location in middle-class areas	31
Parents need to be committed and educated to be able to help their child through his/her education in Irish, which is sometimes associated with being from a certain social class	23
Gaelscoileanna are viewed as schools with smaller classes and/or with no foreign nationals attending the school	23
Gaelscoileanna are viewed as very good schools	15
Some schools teach “pure” Irish and are opposed to letting the language evolve	7.5

* These are exclusive and do not total 100% as a few parents gave several reasons.

According to some parents, the presence of gaelscoileannaí in middle-class areas tends to be associated with some sort of elitism. The general perception of elitism may therefore come from the extrapolation of this socio-economic association to other gaelscoileannaí.

Other parents said it is commonly believed that having a child attending a gaelscoil requires commitment together with a good educational background to support a child through his/her education. Being both committed and well educated is often associated with being from a certain social class.

Another perception of elitism involves the standard of education and the privileges that Gaelscoileanna are believed to have. This was mentioned on various occasions in newspaper articles or on discussion forums on line. Criticisms pointed at the smaller classes Gaelscoileanna have compared with the national average which results in a better teacher-pupil ratio. They also referred to better material resources. (quotes on powerpoint)

Very few parents acknowledged the notion of elitism based on standard of education. Those who commented on it all rejected this idea. As shown in the table, parents said that the argument based on smaller classes was not relevant in their respective schools. If we go back to the reasons given in the first table some parents emphasised the lack of funding in their gaelscoil. Finally two parents who expressed their disagreement said that Gaelscoileanna were viewed as very good

schools, which sometimes led to their association with schools for the élite.

By and large, parents who acknowledged that the perception of elitism existed believed it was founded on a misrepresentation of the families involved and an extrapolation of some schools' characteristics to all Gaelscoileanna. Although a majority of participants fall into the well educated middle class group they did not think that gaelscoil parents exclusively matched this description. Furthermore, they rejected the idea that all Gaelscoileanna benefited from material privileges such as smaller classes or better funding.

Conclusion:

As commonly found in international research on bilingual education in an additive context, parents involved in this study mostly come from a middle-class milieu and have third-level qualifications. One important point to underline in relation to these results is the fact that the parents who agreed to participate were self selected. It must also be pointed out that the response rate in designated disadvantaged areas was very low, which consequently may have under represented families from the lower classes.

Although the majority of participants fall into the well educated middle-class group, most parents disagreed with the perception that Gaelscoileanna are elitist. The main argument presented was that Gaelscoileanna are socially mixed. Other comments shared by representatives of Gaelscoileanna referred to the free and open access to Irish-medium education as well as the availability of gaelscoileannaí in different socio-economic areas. Most parents were aware that the perception of elitism existed and believed it was a misconception of the gaelscoil milieu. According to them, outsiders' understanding of the socio-economic backgrounds of the families involved was limited and focused on certain areas. So was their view on the privileges these schools have.