

Title of Research Project: The Challenges and Opportunities in Setting up an Aonad Lán-Ghaeilge in a DEIS Inner City School

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Summary:

This research tells the story of a school staff in a working-class community determined to give their pupils a first-class Irish medium education through the creation of an Aonad Lán-Ghaeilge. The purpose of our work was to identify a road map that could be adopted by other schools in achieving this goal.

Research activities included surveying families and engaging in face-to-face interviews with a cross section of parents and pupils. In addition, principals from Gaelcholáistí and from schools with an Aonad Lán-Ghaeilge incorporated into their organisation were surveyed. The information gathered there allowed the community college to successfully anticipate and resolve staff recruitment and retention issues.

The challenges identified in our report are significant for those who wish to follow in our footsteps. One must deal with issues such as securing cooperation from the key players, identifying a stand-alone physical space in the school building, offering support to teachers, parents and pupils, and continuous linguistic upskilling of staff.

The opportunities initially identified were equally numerous. Success would raise the profile of a DEIS school working in a challenging environment and would give a significant bounce to the morale of staff. It would share the importance of the Irish language with a working-class community that had hitherto been neglected in this regard and would inevitably attract an increasing number of academically ambitious children and families to attend a school in their own community.

Difficulties were encountered along the way. Cork ETB had to be convinced that the project was viable. The Department of Education had to be encouraged to give recognition to the Aonad Lán-Ghaeilge, and this eventually came in year three of the project. Recruitment and retention of pupils was always going to be an issue and still is. A six-year cycle is likely to be necessary to get a wider spectrum of support for the concept. Covid 19 proved to be a difficult challenge that was only overcome by interacting with some families on their own doorstep.

A tangible impact is that there are now students speaking Irish everyday outside of their Irish class. The change is impacting on their sense of identity and on the image of the school. Irish as a spoken language has now been normalised and has both a physical and psychological presence in the school.

Our findings are quite interesting and show that there is an appetite for education through Irish at Post-Primary level but that such a programme must be minutely and pragmatically planned at the highest level. Recruitment of effective allies is crucial to mitigating the challenge and cannot be overestimated. Our findings also show that Irish is seen as language that gives status to both pupil and school and is appreciated in communities, be they privileged or otherwise.

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