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ARTICLE



Revival or bilingualism? The impact of European nationalist thinking on Irish language curricular policy around the advent of political independence in Ireland

Thomas Walsh

Department of Education, Maynooth University, Maynooth, Co Kildare, Ireland

ABSTRACT

Following a period of close to a century when the Irish language was placed at the margins of the education system under British rule, there was a radical change in curriculum provision following political independence in Ireland in the 1920s. The importance of the Irish language in defining sovereignty, national identity, and nationhood in the Irish Free State was central to these curricular changes. Within months of the achievement of political independence, curriculum policy was revised to include provision for the teaching of the Irish language to all pupils in primary schools as well as the use of Irish as the medium of instruction in infant classes (the first two years of primary school). The education system became the linchpin in the political and cultural campaign to restore the Irish language as the vernacular. This paper critically examines how nationalist thinking in Ireland, which had its origins in nineteenth-century European discourses, impacted on curriculum decisions pertaining to the Irish language in the early 1900s. Focusing on the interrelationship between nationalism, language, and education, it traces the process and provisions of curriculum development in Ireland in the 1920s. Overall the paper argues that the influence of nationalism as understood in the wider European context of the time shifted emphasis in Ireland away from bilingualism (Irish and English languages) to the revival of the Irish language in the 1920s, primarily through the education system, to add political legitimacy to the new Irish Free State.

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Introduction

The European concept of nationalism that emerged in the 1800s, informed by the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, shaped and reshaped the nature of existing states and state structures. From the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth century, nation states became a new political and national construct within Europe and linguistic identity became central to the concept of nationalism. This paper focuses on the influence that linguistic identity, allied to wider national identity and nationalism, had on the shaping of primary school curricular provision in Ireland from the 1920s. It explores nationalism, linguistic identity, and education both as individual concepts and

CONTACT Thomas Walsh  thomas.walsh@mu.ie  Department of Education, Maynooth University, Maynooth, Co Kildare, Ireland

collectively as a nexus of interrelated concepts. The aim of the paper is to answer the following research question: In what ways did European concepts of nationalism and linguistic identity impact on pre-independence nationalist thinking and post-independence curriculum policy in Ireland?

Prior to independence, Ireland had been dominated – politically, culturally, and economically – by its nearest neighbour, England. Imperialist policy in Ireland, as in other contexts, went beyond control of the physical territory and extended to efforts to transform linguistic, religious, and cultural beliefs and practices from as early as the fourteenth century in an “effort to transform Ireland into a land much more akin to the values and practices of those in England”.¹ The policy of political and cultural assimilation accelerated with the Act of Union 1800, which formalised in law the relationship of Great Britain and Ireland as one united kingdom.² While there is some debate over Ireland’s status as a colony or sister Kingdom,³ undoubtedly Britain played an increasingly active and attentive role in Irish political, religious, social, and cultural affairs from 1800 onwards. A core element of the discord throughout the centuries was a struggle for supremacy between the Irish and English languages. In this regard, the complicated relationship of language, culture, and self-determination long pre-date more contemporary constructions of nationalism. Language, long at the heart of identity representation in Ireland, came to the fore in the decades prior to and following political independence. Undoubtedly the partition of Ireland in 1921 into the 26-county Irish Free State and a six-county Northern Ireland accentuated the focus on religious, cultural, and linguistic differences.

A significant decline in the use of the Irish language occurred in the early nineteenth century, when the period of the Great Famine (1845–1850) alone witnessed a reduction of over two million speakers.⁴ The Famine, and subsequent efforts by the British authorities to weaken the position of Irish both practically and attitudinally, catalysed and accentuated a decline in the status of the language among Irish speakers themselves. Irish became associated with poverty while English was linked to the practical lure of economic advancement and emigration. In the words of the Irish poet, Michael Hartnett, the English language became “a necessary sin/the perfect language to sell pigs in”.⁵ While 29.1% of the five million population was recorded as being able to speak Irish in 1851, this had reduced to 18.3% of the Free State (26-county South of Ireland) population of three million by 1926.⁶ The role of education was important in this decline as schooling was

¹Timothy White, “The Impact of British Colonialism on Irish Catholicism and National Identity: Repression, Reemergence, and Divergence,” *Études Irlandaises* 35, no. 1 (2010): 1–18, 4. See also: Norman Atkinson, “Educational Construction in Malta,” *The Irish Journal of Education* 3, no. 1 (1969): 29–40; Victor Durkacz, *The Decline of the Celtic Languages: A Study of Linguistic and Cultural Conflict in Scotland, Wales and Ireland from the Reformation to the Twentieth Century* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1983); and Anneleagh Margey, “Plantations, 1550–1641,” in *The Cambridge History of Ireland: Volume II 1550–1730*, ed. Jane Ohlmeyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 555–83.

²For a fuller account of this history, see Mike Cronin, *A History of Ireland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003).

³See for example, Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975). Hechter called Ireland an “internal colony” of Britain; Stephen Howe, “Questioning the (Bad) Question: ‘Was Ireland a Colony?’” *Irish Historical Studies* 36, no. 142 (2008): 138–52. Howe argues that the governance and administration in Ireland could be seen to exhibit “colonial features”.

⁴Maureen Wall, “The Decline of the Irish Language,” in *A View on the Irish Language*, ed. Brian Ó Cuív (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1969), 81–90.

⁵Michael Hartnett, *A Farewell to English* (Ireland: Gallery Books, 1991), 84.

⁶Central Statistics Office, *Census 1926, Volume 8: Irish Language* (Dublin: CSO, 1926). https://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/census/census1926results/volume8/C_1926_VOL_8_T1,2.pdf.

one of the main instruments of power and control used to accelerate its demise as a national, native, and home language.

Before proceeding to outline the structure of the paper, a note on terminology is merited. The precise definition and conceptualisation of terms such as “nation” and “nationalism” have changed over time, contexts, and disciplines.⁷ The focus in this paper is on the European understanding of nationalism and nationhood as it evolved from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century. Throughout this paper, the terminology used aligns to that of Giudici and Grizelj⁸ and Anderson.⁹ “Nation” refers to a population sharing a particular geographical territory and feeling bound by a selection of common features, real or imaginary, such as history, language, and religion. “State” is used to refer to the political entity that governs a particular geographical territory. In basic terms, “nationalism” is the belief that nation and state should coincide to form a nation state. “Nation building” is used to denote the process by which the state endeavours to homogenise citizens’ identity. The sum of the defining characteristics of the population of a nation is referred to as “national identity”. These definitions and understandings are further explored in the main body of the paper.

The paper now proceeds to explore the concept of nationalism in a European context, with a particular focus on language and education. This is followed by an analysis of the impact of European thinking on nationalism in Ireland, again focusing on the key areas of language and education. The paper then moves to a critical analysis of the curricular revisions relating to the Irish language in the Free State following political independence in 1921, anchored mainly within the primary school programmes of 1922 and 1926. The paper concludes with a discussion on the curricular decisions made regarding the Irish language and how understandings of nationalism shaped educational decisions of the 1920s. Ultimately the paper argues that allegiance to the key characteristics of European nationalism as understood in the 1920s resulted in a shift from a pre-independence ambition for bilingualism towards a post-independence quest for revival of the Irish language, a revival that would be based almost solely within the education system.

Nationalism, language, and education in a European context

The basic premise underpinning nationalism in a European context was that humanity should be divided into nations, characterised by certain features, as the natural unit of political organisation.¹⁰ Two concepts of the nation, a political nation and a cultural nation, emerged by the end of the nineteenth century. The political nation, advanced by Rousseau, advocated that political power was possessed by all the people of a political community and people had the right to self-determination and to choose their own government. The second concept, the cultural nation, was propagated by German nationalists such as Herder, Fichte, Jahn, and Arndt. This was not particularly underscored by political overtones and instead advocated that the nation was defined by

⁷Andrew Matthews, *Nationalism 1789–1945* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2000).

⁸Anja Giudici and Sandra Grizelj, “National Unity in Cultural Diversity: How National and Linguistic Identities affected Swiss Language Curricula (1914–1961),” *Paedagogica Historica* 53, nos 1–2 (2017): 137–54.

⁹Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Books, 1991).

¹⁰Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 1.

criteria such as a common history and culture, a shared language or religion, or blood ties from community settlement in an area.¹¹ In many instances, this led to a need for the nation state to create and impose a more singular identity and new national identities were operationalised and reinforced through the promotion of shared values, a common language and shared cultural backgrounds, and indeed the weakening of traditional, heterogeneous identities.¹² While initially a consideration of the elite classes, Smith notes the importance of the shift from 1900 onwards in the ownership of nationalist symbols and identity to the masses.¹³

Linguistic identity has long been intertwined in history and across nations and cultures as a subset of national identity.¹⁴ Eighteenth-century German scholars such as Wilhelm von Humboldt, Johann Fichte, and Friedrich Schleiermacher¹⁵ asserted the criticality of language in individual and national expression, with Van Humboldt declaring that “The true homeland is really the language”.¹⁶ These influential writers impacted significantly on European nationalist thinking in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, leading to the conclusion as asserted by Kedourie:

The test, then, by which a nation is known to exist is that of language. A group speaking the same language is known as a nation, and a nation ought to constitute a state.¹⁷

In many European countries, language became understood as an external and visible badge of identity and a key legitimiser of claims for political nationalism. While there were many defining characteristics of a nation, Matthews asserts that “the establishment of a national language was to become the hallmark of the nation state”.¹⁸ Within the European context, many languages existed within states and a number, including Irish, had become minority languages. The ethno-symbolic paradigm of language is well captured by Smith, who highlights the potency of meaning within the common imagery of memories, values, myths, and sentiments in establishing national identity.¹⁹ Critically for this paper, it was considered that “original” languages could not exist alongside other “foreign” or “derived” languages if the purity of the language, or indeed individual and national identity, were to be preserved. As Kedourie states:

its [a nation’s] speech must be cleansed of foreign accretions and borrowings, since the purer the language, the more natural it is, and the easier it becomes for the nation to realize itself, and to increase its freedom.²⁰

Based on these theories and discourses, it was asserted that nations must speak original languages and monolingualism became a key aim of aspiring nation states. Informed by this,

¹¹Matthews, *Nationalism 1789–1945*.

¹²Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; and Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism: New Perspectives on the Past* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).

¹³Anthony Smith, *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010).

¹⁴Durkacz, *Decline of the Celtic Languages*; and Tom O’Donoghue, “Colonialism, Education and Social Change in the British Empire: The Cases of Australia, Papua New Guinea and Ireland,” *Paedagogica Historica* 45, no. 6 (2009): 787–800.

¹⁵Johann Fichte, *Addresses to the German Nation (1808)*, trans. R.F. Jones and G.H. Turnbull (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922), 136–45. <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1807fichte1.asp>; and Friedrich Schleiermacher, as cited in Kedourie, *Nationalism*, 63.

¹⁶Van Humboldt, W. (as quoted in) Rudolph Rucker, *Nationalism and Culture* (Portland: Black Rose Books, 1937), 162.

¹⁷Kedourie, *Nationalism*, 62.

¹⁸Matthews, *Nationalism 1789–1945*, 34.

¹⁹Smith, *Nationalism*.

²⁰Kedourie, *Nationalism*, 61.

nationalists believed that linguistic and state boundaries should align. By 1900, there was a synergetic connection between nation, state, and language, and nationalist movements across Europe, including Ireland, were informed by this symbiotic relationship.²¹ This understanding of the centrality of an original language to national freedom and identity resulted in numerous language revival attempts across Europe to assert national identity.

The growth of nationalism in Europe coincided with the development of national systems of education in many countries, many of which placed the building of national identity and nationhood as a central aim. According to Fichte, the role of the education system and teachers was to fashion the will of the person in line with the views of the nation. Matthews argues that across Europe, “the prime aim of elementary education was national integration – to turn the people into loyal citizens of the nation state”.²² Gellner also notes the centrality of the education system in the process of homogenisation within modernising and industrialised nations, particularly in terms of imparting “legitimate” values, language, and norms to citizens.²³ In this way, there was a close association between the state, education, and nationalism.

Informed by the belief that legitimate nations were monolingual, many national systems of education placed an emphasis on teaching national languages in countries that had mixed languages such as Hungary, Italy, and France. In multilingual contexts across Europe, second or foreign languages were often omitted from curricula, prioritising the “national” language.²⁴ Teaching a common language was perceived as a way to effectively create a common culture and to keep a nation state united, particularly if there was an external threat to its cultural or geographical integrity.²⁵ The next section moves to explore the impact of this wider European thinking on nationalism in Ireland, with a particular focus on language and education.

Nationalism, language, and education in an Irish context

Elements of the influence of nationalism are evident in Ireland from the late eighteenth century. For example, the 1798 Rebellion in Ireland was inspired by American and French revolutionaries and attempted, unsuccessfully, to end British rule in Ireland. Irish national identity throughout the nineteenth century was most impactfully defined through association with the Catholic religion, articulating a visible badge of identity for the Irish populace.²⁶ Hepburn argues that cultural nationalism did not compete with or displace the strong basis of Irish identity on Catholicism, but instead they symbiotically complemented and strengthened one another.²⁷ The concept of a cultural nation was important in the Irish context as it allowed for a nation to define itself without specific reference to an existing state, thus necessitating a focus on accentuating a distinct cultural identity.

²¹ Abram de Swaan, *Words of the World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001).

²² Matthews, *Nationalism 1789–1945*, 86. See also: Kedourie, *Nationalism*, 77.

²³ Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*.

²⁴ Yun-Kyung Cha, “Effects of the Global System on Language Instruction, 1850–1986,” *Sociology of Education* 64, no. 1 (1991): 19–32.

²⁵ Keith Darden and Harris Mylonas, “Threats to Territorial Integrity, National Mass Schooling, and Linguistic Commonality,” *Comparative Political Studies* 49, no. 11 (2016): 1446–79.

²⁶ David Cairns and Shaun Richards, *Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).

²⁷ A.C. Hepburn, “Language, Religion and National Identity in Ireland since 1880,” *Perspectives on European Politics and Society* 2, no. 2 (2001): 197–220.

The influence of European nationalist thinkers such as Herder and Fichte regarding language is evident in the assertions of Thomas Davis, leader of the romantic nationalist Young Ireland Movement, when he stated in 1843 that, “[a] people without a language of its own is only half a nation. A nation should guard its language more than its territories – ’tis a surer barrier, and more important frontier, than fortress or river.”²⁸ The language revival movement gathered pace as a mass movement towards the end of the nineteenth century, catalysed by the culturally ideological and counter-hegemonic Gaelic League (1893). In line with wider European thinking, the Gaelic League asserted that language and nationhood were synonymous and that having one without the other was meaningless.²⁹ The Gaelic League promoted a bilingual policy, broadening the language focus to the mass population by establishing local branches, providing an antidote to the culturally assimilative policies being diffused by the education system. The influential roles in other spheres of Ireland’s cultural, political, and educational life of many of the Gaelic League leaders, including Douglas Hyde³⁰ and Eoin MacNeill,³¹ accentuated the power and impact of the movement.

In due course, the language revival in Ireland became entangled with questions of political nationalism and nationhood, and cultural nationalism became linked to political aspirations against the existing regime.³² Ó Fiaich argues that the Irish language revival assumed a robust political dimension given the historical association between efforts to eradicate the Irish language and political subordination.³³ The revival of the Irish language became equally important to political independence for key revolutionaries, including the Irish revolutionary Michael Collins, who asserted that:

We only succeeded after we had begun to get back our Irish ways: after we had made a serious effort to speak our own language . . . The extent to which we become free in fact and secure our freedom will be the extent to which we become Gaels again.³⁴

Ultimately, the language movement in Ireland was seen as an effort to restore a pure Irish-speaking Ireland, reverting to the pre-colonial status quo.³⁵ In line with European nationalist thinking that a legitimate nation could not be established without its original language, the quest to revive the distinct language, traditions, and culture of Ireland became central to the militant nationalist movement.³⁶ In this way, language became a political instrument to achieve cultural assimilationist ends, in establishing cultural cohesion and a consciousness of belonging. Within this context, as argued by Smith at a conceptual level,³⁷ the Irish language

²⁸Thomas Davis, “Our National Language”, *The Nation*, April 1, 1843. <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/E800002-035.html>.

²⁹Douglas Hyde, “The Necessity for de-Anglicising Ireland,” Paper delivered before the Irish National Literary Society in Dublin, November 25, 1892, <https://www.thefuture.ie/wp-content/uploads/1892/11/1892-11-25-The-Necessity-for-De-Anglicising-Ireland.pdf>.

³⁰Douglas Hyde, a son of a Church of Ireland rector, first President of the Gaelic League and first President of Ireland, portrayed the Irish language as the *sine qua non* of Irish identity.

³¹Eoin MacNeill, a Catholic from Ulster, was Secretary of the Gaelic League, a university professor and the first Minister for Education in the Free State in the 1920s.

³²Hepburn, “Language, Religion and National Identity.”

³³Tomás Ó Fiaich, “The Language and Political History” in *A View on the Irish Language*, ed. Brian Ó Cuív (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1969), 101–11.

³⁴Michael Collins, *The Path to Freedom: Articles and Speeches of Michael Collins* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1922), <http://www.generalmichaelcollins.com/on-line-books/the-path-to-freedom-index/chapter-7-distinctive-culture/>.

³⁵Fionntán de Brún, *Revivalism and Modern Irish Literature: The Anxiety of Transmission and the Dynamics of Renewal* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2019).

³⁶Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922–1979* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1979).

³⁷Smith, *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History*. See also Margaret O’Callaghan, “Language, Nationality and Cultural Identity in the Irish Free State, 1922–7,” *Irish Historical Studies* 24, no. 94 (1984): 226–45.

became symbolically central in the debates over the future nation of Ireland even though it had become demographically and economically peripheral by the early twentieth century. In the words of the Irish playwright Brian Friel in *Translations*, a play on the infinite mysteries of language, the Irish language was “full of the mythologies of fantasy and hope and self-deception – a syntax opulent with tomorrows”.³⁸

The main vehicle for the promotion of the Irish language was to become the education system. Under British rule, the national system of education, established in 1831, placed political and cultural assimilation and enculturation as a core aim. The rules, regulations, and curricula issued by the National Board up to the 1870s made no mention of the Irish language, effectively excluding it from schools. The diffusion of hegemonic British values and the denial of separate cultural and linguistic identities was achieved by the close control of textbooks, teacher training, teacher management, and the curriculum by the National Board.³⁹ However, it must be noted that the policy to focus on the English language within the education system was largely supported by the parent population which was conscious of the social and economic advantages offered by a knowledge of English.

The National Board vigorously ignored and resisted requests for the Irish language to be included on the curriculum, granting few practical concessions in relation to the Irish language. For example, schools were permitted to teach Irish as an Extra Subject outside school hours from 1878 and to use Irish as an aid to teach English in Irish-speaking regions from 1883. The Gaelic League’s demands focused on the principle of bilingualism, providing that Irish be used as a medium of instruction and taught as a subject in areas where it was the language of the home. The chief victory for the Gaelic League campaigners came with the introduction of the Bilingual Programme in 1904, which permitted the teaching of Irish in schools in Irish-speaking areas upon special conditions.⁴⁰

Despite these concessions, by the early 1900s, the National Board, and indeed teachers, became the locus of blame for the erosion of national identity and schools became a key focus for the cultural and linguistic revival. For example, the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language, whose primary focus was the promotion of the Irish language in schools, stated in its 1901 report that:

It is earnestly to be hoped that the National School Teachers of Ireland will take up the teaching of Irish far more generally than they have hitherto done, as it is on the schools our main reliance must be placed for the preservation of the Irish language, so that National Schools may become the chief instrument in the resuscitation of the language, as they have so largely contributed in the past to bring about its neglect and decay.⁴¹

Despite the efforts outlined above, the Irish language occupied a lowly position and status within the curriculum and in wider society by the 1920s. Of the approximately 8,000 schools in 1920, only 237 operated the Bilingual Programme and 1,560 taught Irish as an Extra Subject.⁴² Given this historical backdrop, there was great hope that education under a Free State government would reverse previous policies and extend provision for bilingual education as

³⁸Brian Friel, *Translations* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), Act 2.

³⁹John Coolahan, “Education and Ethnicity,” *Paedagogica Historica* 37, no. 1 (2001): 16–33.

⁴⁰Tom O’Donoghue, *Bilingual Education in Ireland 1904–1922: The Case of the Bilingual Programme of Instruction* (Perth: Murdoch University, 2000).

⁴¹Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language, *Report for 1901* (Dublin: Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language, 1901), 1–2, <https://pfts-oireachtas.s3.amazonaws.com/DriveF/Data/Library3/Library1/GH000027.pdf>.

⁴²*Statistics relative to the Position of Irish in the National Schools (prior to 1922)*, Box 367, File 17511, National Archives (Ireland).

provided for in the 1918 Gaelic League Education Programme.⁴³ The paper now proceeds to examine the ways in which the education system was mobilised from the 1920s to revive the Irish language as part of the building of national identity and nationhood.

Primary school curriculum development in the 1920s

First National Programme Conference (1922)

Similar to nationalist discourses in other European systems, the Free State government articulated that the “chief function of Irish educational policy is to conserve and develop Irish nationality”.⁴⁴ Further insight into this vision is evident in the words of Pádraic Ó Brolcháin, Chief Executive Officer for Education, who cited the aim of the government as follows:

it is the intention of the new government to work with all its might for the strengthening of the national fibre by giving the language, history, music and tradition of Ireland their natural place in the life of Irish schools.⁴⁵

Schools, and I would argue the curriculum in particular, encapsulate and disseminate a range of values, meanings, and expectations of the wider nation and are central in the development of a national imaginary through their inculcation in children. Given the political and social instability from 1919 to 1923, including the War of Independence, the Civil War, and the partition of Ireland, it was the teacher union, the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation (INTO), as opposed to the government which took the initiative of establishing a conference to develop a curriculum for primary schools. Indeed there was no Ministry for Education as part of the First Dáil (parliament) (1919–1921) and educational matters were subsumed within Aireacht na Gaeilge, the Ministry for Irish. This association between education and the Irish language is indicative of their interconnectedness and the prominence of Irish language promotion and revival within education policy.

The first National Programme Conference met between January 1921 and January 1922 and its aim was “to frame a programme, or series of programmes, in accordance with Irish ideals and conditions – due regard being given to local needs and views”.⁴⁶ The composition lacked representation of the wider stakeholders in Irish education at the time, some refusing to attend and others not invited.⁴⁷ Despite a majority of teachers within the conference membership, the patriotic fervour of the era and the large number of members with a deep sympathy to Gaelic League ideals led to ambitious curriculum planning regarding the Irish language. In addition to the conference members, deliberations were greatly influenced by an external advisor, Rev. Professor Timothy Corcoran SJ, Professor of Education in University College Dublin. Corcoran was highly influential in clerical, educational, and revival discourses and he argued in his extensive writings of the potential of the national school system to revive the Irish

⁴³The Education Programme of the Gaelic League 1918, as cited in Áine Hyland and Kenneth Milne, *Irish Educational Documents – Volume 1. Selection of Extracts from Documents relating to the History of Irish Education from the Earliest Times to 1922* (Dublin: Church of Ireland College of Education, 1987), 190.

⁴⁴Eoin MacNeill, “Irish Educational Policy II,” *Irish Statesman*, October 24, 1925, 200.

⁴⁵Department of Education, *Statistics relating to National Education in Saorstát for the Year 1922–23* (Dublin: The Stationery Office, 1925), 6.

⁴⁶National Programme Conference, *National Programme of Primary Instruction* (Dublin: The Educational Company of Ireland 1922), 3.

⁴⁷Thomas Walsh, *Primary Education in Ireland, 1897–1990: Curriculum and Context* (Bern: Peter Lang 2012), 131–33.

language, equally blaming the National Board for its demise.⁴⁸ The conference report issued in 1922 championed an Irish language revival, rather than the policy of bilingualism based on the various regional linguistic contexts of Ireland as advocated by the Gaelic League Education Programme of 1918. Provisions of the first National Programme Conference became operational in April 1922.

The narrative of the short introduction to the programme is interesting for the purpose of this paper's focus on nationalism. It criticises the previous programme, designed in 1900 under British rule, as being "out of harmony with national ideals and requirements".⁴⁹ Moreover, the subordinate position and status of the Irish language prior to political independence was lamented, asserting that it was a subject "the vast majority of the Irish people wished to have taught to their children".⁵⁰ The veracity of this statement is questionable considering the apathy of the majority of the population towards the Irish language prior to independence⁵¹ and the controversy around the introduction of the Bilingual Programme in a small number of schools from 1904.⁵²

The provisions of the 1922 programme resulted in a "raising of the status of the Irish language both as a school subject and as an instrument of instruction".⁵³ In practical terms, this involved the teaching of the Irish language in all classes for one hour per day using the direct method. Moreover, and more challenging, the programme provided for an immersive approach for the first two years of schooling, with the "work in the Infant Standardsto be entirely in Irish".⁵⁴ A denigration of the English language is evident in the tone and content of the curriculum. For example, the study of works by European authors translated into English is advocated rather than the reading of works by English authors. As the curriculum states:

English authors, as such, should have just the limited place due to English literature among all the European literatures.⁵⁵

It was expected that schools that previously employed the 1904 Bilingual Programme would teach all subjects, except English, through the medium of Irish.

Not only was Irish to be used as a medium of instruction in the infant classes and taught to all classes as a subject, the curriculum also made provision for the teaching of other subjects through the medium of Irish. For example, in line with nationalist thinking, a focus on Ireland was the main emphasis in History and Geography and the programme stated that "Instruction in the History and Geography of Ireland is to be given through the medium of Irish."⁵⁶ In History, study of the biographies of "outstanding personages" included a long list of

⁴⁸Timothy Corcoran, "The Language Campaigns in Alsace-Lorraine," *Studies* 13, no. 50 (1924): 201–13; Timothy Corcoran, "The Irish Language in the Irish Schools," *Studies* 14, no. 55 (1925): 377–88, 379; and Timothy Corcoran, "The Native Speaker as Teacher," *Irish Monthly* 51 (1923): 187–90, 187.

⁴⁹National Programme Conference, *National Programme of Primary Instruction* (1922), 3.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

⁵¹Commission on the Restoration of the Irish Language, *Summary, in English, of the Final Report* (Dublin: The Stationery Office, 1963); and Adrian Kelly, *Compulsory Irish: Language and Education in Ireland 1870s–1970s* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2002).

⁵²O'Donoghue, *Bilingual Education in Ireland 1904–1922*.

⁵³National Programme Conference, *National Programme of Primary Instruction* (1922), 4.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 13.

revolutionary and nationalist figures. History as a subject was also to be used in the development of national character. As the curriculum states:

One of the chief aims of the teaching of history should be to develop the best traits of the national character and to inculcate national pride and self-respect. This will not be attained by the cramming of dates and details but by showing that the Irish race has fulfilled a great mission in the advancement of civilisation and that, on the whole, the Irish nation has amply justified its existence.⁵⁷

The nationalist focus is also evident in geography where students in the fourth standard were required to acquire “[s]uch knowledge of the Globe and the Map of the World as is necessary to fix the position of Ireland”.⁵⁸ Similarly in singing: “Instruction in Singing is to be given through the medium of Irish, and all songs are to be in the Irish language.”⁵⁹

The tone and philosophy of the 1922 curriculum was authoritarian and didactic, focused almost exclusively on the needs of the state as opposed to pedagogical or child-centred concerns.⁶⁰ In order to provide time for the new focus on the Irish language and culture, Drawing, Elementary Science, Cookery, Laundry, Hygiene, Nature Study, and Needlework (in the lower classes) were removed as obligatory subjects. Under Sorin and Galloway’s framework on the construction of children and childhood,⁶¹ the “child as commodity” is prevalent in the 1922 curriculum. Children in this context were used as a commodity to promote Irish nationhood and to achieve a national aim of state legitimacy. In this way, the curriculum was to have a role in the development of cultural norms both in terms of linguistic identity and in the interpretation and portrayal of Ireland’s past. Teachers too were conceptualised as agents of state policy, tasked with enacting curricular provisions beyond the linguistic competence of the majority. For example, at the time of introducing the curriculum provisions in 1922, 9% of primary school teachers had the required competence qualification to teach the Irish language,⁶² rising to 20% by 1924.⁶³ The focus is clearly on the revival of the Irish language rather than promoting bilingualism, an ambition that continued and intensified in a revision of the curriculum in 1926.

Second National Programme Conference (1926)

A review of the 1922 curricular provisions was initiated in 1925 by the Minister for Education after many representations, particularly from the INTO, that enactment of the earlier curriculum relating to the Irish language was unfeasible for teachers. The composition of this Second National Programme Conference was more representative but the Minister had an inbuilt majority of 11 nominees. The purpose of the Second National Programme Conference was:

⁵⁷Ibid., 5.

⁵⁸Ibid., 13.

⁵⁹Ibid., 14.

⁶⁰Thomas Walsh, “Concepts of Children and Childhood from an Educational Perspective 1900–1940: Context Curriculum and Experience”, in *Constructions of the Irish Child in the Independence Period, 1910-1940*, eds. Ciara Boylan and Ciara Gallagher (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 25–47.

⁶¹Reesa Sorin and Greta Galloway, “Constructs of Childhood, Constructs of Self,” *Children Australia* 31, no. 2 (2006): 12–21.

⁶²Department of Education, *Report of the Department of Education for the School Year 1924–25 and the Financial and Administrative Years 1924–25–26* (Dublin: The Stationery Office, 1926), 31.

⁶³Deputy McGilligan, *Dáil Debates*, June 2, 1925, vol. 12, col. 2.

To consider the suitability of the National Programme of Primary Instruction at present in operation in the National Schools, to report to the Minister for Education thereon, and to make recommendations to him as regards any alterations which may seem desirable.⁶⁴

Rev. Corcoran was again an influential external advisor to the conference and his oral evidence focused primarily on the Irish language, particularly in the infant classes. The thrust of his advice was that “Every part of the curriculum, under 8 years of age, should be annexed to Irish and subserve oral command of it.”⁶⁵ He envisaged that it would “take a generation to alter the actual speech of a district” but that Irish could be restored in that time frame through the school system, with English becoming a “subordinate” second language.⁶⁶

A nationalist discourse is again evident in the Introduction to the 1926 programme, when it articulates the need to outline “clearly and strikingly an ideal of primary education which would be worthy of Ireland”.⁶⁷ The ultimate aim of restoring Irish as the spoken language of Ireland was maintained, with the report concluding:

The members of the Conference were, therefore, at one in holding that the true and only method of establishing Irish as a vernacular is the effective teaching of it to the Infants.⁶⁸

While the general thrust of the evidence to the conference called for a modification and relaxation of the Irish language requirements in the infant classes,⁶⁹ the resulting report and subsequent policy made little substantive alterations to the compulsory nature of Irish as a medium of instruction in the infant classes. One concession introduced involved allowing English to be taught before 10.30am and after 2.00pm, a provision that had little practical effect considering the late starting time and early finishing time for young children in schools. Moreover, the 1926 revisions heralded the introduction of a transitional Higher Course and Lower Course in both Irish and English. It was envisaged that the Higher Course would be taught in the predominant language of the school and the Lower Course in the other language, with a view to progressing to a position where all schools were capable of delivering the Higher Course in Irish as teacher qualifications improved. The curriculum document asserts that the role of the teacher is to “impart to children (4–8) a vernacular power over the language”.⁷⁰ This clearly evidences an aim of revival of the Irish language rather than bilingualism as had been the earlier, pre-independence aim of the Gaelic League.

Requirements in other subjects largely reinforced and solidified the earlier 1922 provisions, including the teaching of other subjects through Irish. The teaching of History was envisaged as a way to develop an understanding of Ireland’s national history, with a focus advocated on “important personages and striking incidents in our national history”.⁷¹ History teaching was to focus on the “the struggle for the land and the language” and the inculcation of national pride was advocated, advising teachers that:

⁶⁴National Programme Conference, *Report and Programme presented by the National Programme Conference to the Minister for Education* (Dublin: The Stationery Office, 1926), 4.

⁶⁵Evidence of Rev. Corcoran to Second National Programme Conference, Box 130, File 8536, Part 2 (National Archives Ireland).

⁶⁶*Ibid.*

⁶⁷National Programme Conference, *Report and Programme* (1926), 9.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 10.

⁶⁹For a full account, see Walsh, *Primary Education in Ireland*, 142–50.

⁷⁰National Programme Conference, *Report and Programme* (1926), 10.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 13.

In general, the periods of our History which are more inspiring and better calculated to lead to pride of country should be more specially dwelt on.⁷²

In Music, fear was expressed that the “linguistic and musical conditions” then prevalent endangered the preservation of “native music of great intrinsic and national value”.⁷³ Schools and teachers were seen as the remedy in safeguarding Irish musical traditions. Moreover, the report advocated closer supervision of publishers and the vetoing of unsuitable books to ensure “... that the books produced by them may promote the educational aim of the nation”.⁷⁴

In summary, the curriculum developed following political independence in Ireland can be viewed as a pedagogical manifestation of the desired national identity, or at least a significant step towards its articulation. Rev. Corcoran’s emphasis on immersion education and of the direct method of teaching underpinned Irish language provisions, focusing on language revival rather than bilingualism. Schools were appropriated as symbols and statements of national identity and the national character of the curriculum was asserted as a representation of a total break from the colonial past. Education as a process, and by virtue of this, children as educational objects, were conceptualised as entities that could be moulded as required to symbolise the new national identity. Pedagogical concerns, and the previous child-centred curriculum, were trumped by new nationalist imperatives. And the stakes were high – the very existence and legitimacy of the Free State depended on the development and assertion of a distinct national identity in which the Irish language was the central linchpin.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper has shown how the coalescence of wider European concepts and ideologies regarding nationalism, language, and education impacted directly on pre-independence nationalist thinking and post-independence curriculum developments in Ireland in the 1920s. Reviving elements of the past, and returning to previous understandings, mythologies, and imaginaries, have been a recurring critical cultural practice in post-colonial contexts. This endeavour to create a new future is often based on the generation of a new or revised past,⁷⁵ one that reframes, eulogises, accentuates, or recreates certain aspects of the nation’s history. Friel succinctly captures this sentiment in his play *Translations* when he states “that it is not the literal past, the ‘facts’ of history, that shape us, but images of the past embodied in language”.⁷⁶ This resulted in efforts to create “an island of authenticity”⁷⁷ by emphasising the cultural distinctiveness of the Irish nation. This resonates with the importance assigned by Smith to the subjective, symbolic and sociocultural elements of nationalism, linked to the emotional power of national identity.⁷⁸

In the Irish context, the Irish language was considered to be the most visible manifestation and purest justification of political and cultural separateness and distinct nationality. It was perceived as the most tangible link to a pure and “authentic” past, while radiating a purity in

⁷²Ibid., 40.

⁷³Ibid., 14.

⁷⁴Ibid., 16.

⁷⁵Smith, *Nationalism*.

⁷⁶Friel, *Translations*, Act 3.

⁷⁷White, “Impact of British Colonialism,” 7.

⁷⁸Smith, *Nationalism*.

the present. This resonated with the key characteristics of nationalism traced in this paper, particularly the belief that aspiring and emergent nation states should speak an original language. Mirroring the thinking of Herder, Fichte, and other thinkers regarding language and nationalism, there was no place for “foreign accretions and borrowings”⁷⁹ in the language of the new nation state. Bilingualism was no longer a sufficient policy platform for the new nation state. The education system continued to be used as a powerful tool of political and cultural assimilation, with the emphasis on cultural nationalism as opposed to cultural imperialism. The Irish language was to be displayed as a visible badge of differentiated identity by the new nation to legitimise the right to nationhood among the nations of the world. In Ireland, similar to other jurisdictions using the school system to build nationhood,⁸⁰ it was hoped that the school would become a microcosm of wider society, infusing students, families and communities with a vernacular grasp of the Irish language.

The criticality of this key signifier of national identity was arguably accentuated by the partition of Ireland following the War of Independence, necessitating the exhibition of distinctiveness both within and beyond the island. O’Callaghan argues that partition affected the “spiritual clarity” of independence and nationalism as Ireland was divided and remained somewhat within the British Empire, falling short of the republican dream.⁸¹ The buoyancy and optimism of the achievement of political independence, mixed with the disappointment of partition, accelerated the thrust for full revival of the Irish language to legitimise the new nation state. Ideology trumped pragmatism at the birth of the Free State.

Fifteen years after the establishment of the Free State, the words of the then Taoiseach (prime minister) Éamon de Valera indicate the fight for revival and for the nation’s legitimacy was ongoing:

... we cannot fulfil our destiny as a nation unless we are an Irish nation – and we can only be truly that if we are an Irish-speaking nation.⁸²

The failure of the revival policy in subsequent decades resulted in a quest for survival of the Irish language, shifting eventually to a strategy of bilingualism. Ultimately signifiers beyond the Irish language came to the fore in the representation and definition of Irish national identity.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

⁷⁹Kedourie, *Nationalism*, 61.

⁸⁰Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*; Sabiha Bilgi, “Monuments to the Republic: School as a Nationalising Discourse in Turkey,” *Paedagogica Historica* 50, no. 3 (2014): 356–70; Hsuan-Yi Huang, “Rethinking Taiwanese Nationality and Subjectivity: Implications from Language Issues in Colonial Taiwan in the 1920s,” *Paedagogica Historica* 53, no. 4 (2017): 428–40; Fatih Yazıcı and Tercan Yıldırım, “History Teaching as a Nation-building Tool in the Early Republican Period in Turkey (1923–1938),” *Paedagogica Historica* 54, no. 4 (2018): 433–46; and Agnes Vamos, “Hungarian–Russian Bilingual Schools in Hungary during the Soviet Occupation (1945–1989),” *Paedagogica Historica* 54, no. 3 (2018): 301–19.

⁸¹O’Callaghan, “Language, Nationality and Cultural Identity.”

⁸²Éamon de Valera, “The Constitution of Ireland,” in *Speeches and Statements by Eamonn de Valera 1917–1973*, ed. Maurice Moynihan (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1980), 365.

Notes on contributor

Dr Thomas Walsh is a lecturer and Deputy Head of Department in the Department of Education, Maynooth University. Tom joined the Department in 2014 having previously worked as a primary school teacher, an education researcher and a primary school inspector at the Department of Education and Skills. His research interests include history of education, early childhood education, education policy and legislation.