

Learning from Ireland: Literacy, Policy and Practice – A Study Visit Report

This report outlines the findings of a focused study visit to Ireland undertaken by Cefin Campbell MS in the company of Dr Huw Griffiths, Senior Lecturer in Education at the University of Wales, Trinity St Davids, on 23-25 February, 2026. The purpose of the visit was to examine the development of the Irish education system, with particular emphasis on the factors underpinning Ireland's strong literacy performance in successive cycles of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Ireland's consistently high attainment in reading has attracted international attention, particularly given its success in balancing literacy outcomes with broader educational aims such as student wellbeing, curriculum breadth, and cultural identity. The visit therefore sought to explore the policies, practices and structures that have contributed to this success, including approaches to curriculum design, teacher education, language-medium provision, and support for disadvantaged learners.

Through a programme of engagements with policymakers, researchers, teacher educators, and school leaders, this report reflects on key lessons from the Irish context and considers their relevance for educational development in Wales.

Introduction

Our visit to Ireland was organised by Luke O'Donnell, an academic researcher and writer within the School of Education at University of Galway. Luke coordinated a focused two-day itinerary in Galway, designed to build upon the more extensive prior research visit undertaken by Dr Huw Griffiths. While a short timeframe limited the number of institutions we were able to visit, the programme was carefully structured to ensure a breadth of perspectives across policy, practice, and teacher education. The itinerary combined engagement at multiple levels of the Irish education system. This included meetings with academic staff involved in initial teacher education and educational research at the University of Galway, providing an opportunity to explore how policy is interpreted and enacted within higher education. In addition, meetings were held with political representatives, enabling us to consider the national policy context, particularly in relation to language, curriculum reform, and educational equity. These discussions offered valuable insight into the strategic priorities shaping Irish education.

As part of the wider visit, we also travelled to Dublin, where we met with senators, politicians, and policy experts at Dáil Éireann. These engagements provided important national-level perspectives on educational priorities and reform. We further visited the Economic and Social Research Institute, where we met with Prof. Emer Smyth, whose research offered valuable insights into educational inequality, student experience, and system-level outcomes in Ireland.

A central component of the visit was the school visit, which allowed us to observe practice on the ground and engage directly with school leaders and practitioners. This was particularly valuable in contextualising the policy and academic discussions, offering a clearer understanding of how initiatives operate at school level. Importantly, the visit also provided direct insight into how literacy is taught in Irish schools, highlighting the strong emphasis placed on reading. We observed a clear, whole-

school commitment to developing literacy, with reading embedded across the curriculum and promoted as both a core skill and a source of enjoyment.

Overall, despite the condensed nature of the visit, the itinerary provided a well-balanced and coherent programme. It enabled us to triangulate perspectives from research, policy, and practice, and to draw meaningful comparisons with the Welsh context, particularly in relation to language-medium education, curriculum development, and approaches to support learners from diverse backgrounds. Crucially, it also offered valuable insight into the teaching of Irish history and reinforced the central role of reading within the Irish education system, where it is clearly prioritised as a foundational skill underpinning both academic success and broader learning.

Monday 23 February

Meeting with Prof. Seán Ó Grádaigh

Our first meeting in the morning was with Professor Seán Ó Grádaigh (often anglicised as O'Grady) at the Education Department of Galway University. Prof Ó Grádaigh is an Irish educator and teacher educator closely associated with Irish-medium (Gaeilge) education. Based at University of Galway, particularly its Nun's Island campus, he has played a leading role in the development and delivery of teacher-training programmes for post-primary teachers through the medium of Irish. He has also been involved in advancing provision for primary teacher education in Irish, reflecting a broader commitment to strengthening immersion education pathways. Prof Ó Grádaigh is widely regarded as an authority on Irish-medium pedagogy, with experience spanning curriculum development, teacher training, and the practical challenges of sustaining minority-language education within a predominantly English-speaking society. His work engages directly with key questions around language preservation, cultural identity, and the balance between immersion education and preparing pupils for participation in an English-dominant world. As such, he is well placed to comment on both primary and secondary sectors, as well as on the strategic development of teacher education in Irish-medium contexts.

During our meeting, he also highlighted his experience of working collaboratively with Wales, noting his involvement in the Welsh Collaborative Learning Design. He referenced working alongside Dr. Gary Beauchamp of Cardiff Metropolitan University, as part of an Irish delegation that visited Wales to explore shared approaches to curriculum and pedagogy. He reflected that such collaboration offered valuable insights into how both countries are addressing similar challenges around language-medium education, teacher development, and curriculum design in bilingual contexts.

We held a wide-ranging and highly informative discussion with Seán Ó Grádaigh that touched on several key aspects of the Irish education system. He offered valuable insight into the development of DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) provision for disadvantaged communities, which proved particularly helpful in preparing us for our subsequent visit to Radharc na Mara National School, where we would hear directly from Keith Joyce about the challenges faced at school level. Our conversation also explored the teaching of Irish history in schools and the role of

University of Galway in shaping this at initial teacher education level. Prof Ó Grádaigh's expertise in Irish-medium education was especially evident in his reflections on the development of the Irish language in schools. He noted that from the 1960s through to the early 1990s, the language was often taught ineffectively and was widely perceived negatively by pupils. However, he emphasised a significant and positive shift over the past fifteen years, with growing enthusiasm among young people to learn and engage with the language. We also discussed models of teacher professional development in Ireland, including the role of universities in delivering intensive three and five-day courses. These are often undertaken during teachers' summer holidays and offset through the allocation of 'Croke Park hours' across the academic year. Prof Ó Grádaigh then moved on to discuss the Irish School Inspectorate. He characterised the Irish inspectorate as relatively non-threatening, suggesting it is generally viewed by teachers and schools as a supportive body rather than a punitive one. Another area of interest was the Transition Year, undertaken by pupils in Year 11, during which there are no high-stakes examinations. Prof Ó Grádaigh described this as a valuable opportunity for pupils to "have a year to grow up and mature." This was viewed very positively by Dr. Huw Griffiths, who felt that a similar model could be explored in Wales.

Finally, we discussed the structure of the teacher training programme at the University of Galway. Prof Ó Grádaigh noted the competitive nature of entry, with approximately one place available for every four applicants. The programme itself includes a four year undergraduate course and uniquely combines professional teacher training with the completion of a two year MA in Education, offering a strong blend of academic and practical preparation. The two year MA course is also available through the medium of Irish and is popular as Irish language teachers in Gaeltacht schools receive an advanced salary.

While literacy and reading were touched upon in the discussion, Prof Ó Grádaigh did not explore these areas in significant depth, which likely reflects the fact that his primary expertise lies in Irish-medium education and language pedagogy rather than literacy as a distinct field of specialism.

Meeting with Luke O'Donnell

In the afternoon we had an opportunity to discuss further with Luke O'Donnell the points raised in the meeting with Prof Ó Grádaigh. Luke provided a particularly valuable additional perspective, both as an academic education researcher and as a parent living in Ireland, having emigrated there from New Zealand. This dual perspective enabled him to reflect not only on system-level policy and research evidence, but also on lived experience of schooling in Ireland. He offered further insight into literacy development within Irish education, drawing in part on his own experience of having his children educated in Irish-medium schooling. This allowed him to comment on the practical realities of immersion education, particularly in relation to language acquisition, reading development, and parental engagement with schooling in a bilingual context.

In addition, prior to our visit, Luke had undertaken a detailed analysis of developments in Ireland's performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), with a particular focus on literacy outcomes. His analysis explored the trajectory of Ireland's improvement and the educational factors that may have contributed to its strong performance in reading. This provided an important analytical framework for our discussions during the visit and helped to situate the policy and practice observations within a wider international evidence base. His full analysis is included elsewhere in this report.

Tuesday 24 February

School Visit Oranmore

Given our limited time in Ireland, Luke had organised a substantial roundtable meeting in Oranmore, a small village located just outside Galway, bringing together key school leaders and practitioners to enable a comparative discussion across different educational settings. The meeting was attended by Maeve Meeneghan, Principal of Scoil Íosa (an English-medium primary school), Siobhán Ní Chonláin, Principal of Gaelscoil de Híde (an Irish-medium primary school), and Keith Joyce, Principal of Radharc na Mara National School (a DEIS primary school). In addition to the principals, a number of literacy leads and classroom teachers from the participating schools were also present, contributing to a rich professional dialogue focused on teaching practice, curriculum delivery, and approaches to literacy development across different school contexts.

We began our discussion with the teachers by exploring the importance of phonics. It was clear that synthetic phonics is overwhelmingly regarded as a vital foundation for developing early readers, with teachers describing in some detail how it is implemented within their schools. What came across strongly was the consistency of approach across settings, and the high level of professional agreement around its importance and value in supporting early literacy development.

We then moved on to discuss the teaching of older readers, with a particular focus on reading for pleasure and the development of reading fluency. These principles closely align with the fundamental ideas underpinning Dr Huw Griffiths' reading scheme, *Cynllun Darllen Twrch*, which emphasises progression from technical decoding towards confident, expressive and meaningful reading. Although the teachers did not use the specific term *FASE reading*, their discussion clearly reflected its principles in practice. FASE Reading is a structured approach to shared oral reading, where reading is understood as Fluent, Attentive, Social, and Expressive. In this model, pupils read with increasing fluency, developing confidence in decoding and phrasing; they remain attentive because any student may be called upon at any time; reading is inherently social, with all pupils engaged as both readers and listeners in a shared activity; and it is expressive, with pupils encouraged to use tone, rhythm and emphasis to convey meaning rather than simply accuracy.

Very interesting insights were provided by Keith Joyce, Principal of the DEIS school, where over half of the pupils come from the Traveller community. He explained that in

some cases pupils are the only readers within their families, which has shaped the school's approach to parental engagement. Parents are actively encouraged to attend basic literacy sessions in school, which are designed in an accessible and supportive way and often focus on shared activities such as playing literacy-based games with their children. This approach was presented as a key strategy in building confidence, breaking down barriers to engagement, and strengthening home school relationships.

It was also evident that the Irish Government has made significant investment in books and wider literacy resources for schools, supporting consistent access to high-quality reading materials across different settings. In contrast to Wales, pupils in Ireland typically remain in primary education up to the end of what would be equivalent to Year 7. This is widely recognised in academic literature as a crucial stage in literacy development, when pupils' comprehension skills begin to align more closely with their decoding ability, allowing for deeper engagement with texts.

Across all three schools represented, pupils were reported to read a minimum of six novels alongside their teachers, with carefully designed supporting resources developed to enhance comprehension and discussion. In Wales, by contrast, there is evidence that the amount of reading undertaken by pupils often declines significantly upon entry to secondary school. We were also shown a range of books and associated teaching resources used in Irish schools, which illustrated the level of structured support provided for reading development.

In addition, we discussed the prominence of Irish history within the curriculum. Teachers expressed surprise at the comparatively limited focus and resource provision for Welsh history in Wales, and several strongly emphasised the importance of ensuring that the "story of Ireland" is taught in a coherent and accessible way to all pupils, as part of a wider commitment to national identity, language, and cultural understanding.

Meeting with Eamon Ó Cuív

Eamon Ó Cuív is a retired TD and former Senator who held many Ministerial positions in a Fianna Fáil led government between 1992-2024, and for a period was his party's Deputy Leader. Ó Cuív is the grandson of Fianna Fáil founder, Taoiseach and President of Ireland, Éamon de Valera. Listed below were his Ministerial responsibilities during a long and distinguished career:

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government

Minister for Defence

Minister for Social Protection

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs

Minister of State

Minister of Agriculture, Food & Rural Development

Minister of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands

In a broad ranging discussion, he highlighted the importance of building a strong economy in or near to Irish speaking Gaeltacht areas and ensuring that larger towns provide good leisure and lifestyle opportunities in order to keep young people in their communities. He referred to the development of Galway as a major international business hub specialising in tech and life sciences with a strong footprint in digital technology, software and finance. This provided well paid jobs in a range of sectors which not only created local employment but provided opportunities for those who wanted to return home from amongst the Irish diaspora.

In terms of language planning and legislation he believed that Ireland could learn a lot from the Welsh experience, believing that government support is crucial for developing Irish and Welsh-medium education and promoting their use within communities and digitally. He strongly advocated for more collaboration between Irish, Scottish and Welsh parliaments.

Wednesday 25 February

Meeting in Dáil Éireann, Dublin

Following an earlier meeting in Wales with a delegation of Irish politicians who had visited to examine the development of bilingualism in Wales, a further meeting was arranged in Dublin by Eoghan Ó Cruadhlaich, the senior civil servant with responsibility for the Irish language.

At Dáil Éireann, we met again with Aengus Ó Snodaigh TD (Sinn Féin), Shane Moynihan TD (Fianna Fáil), and Shane Curley (Senator Fianna Fáil), alongside a number of other Deputies, Senators and officials. The meeting was both constructive and notably open in tone, with a clear willingness on all sides to share experiences and explore areas of common interest. One of the most significant themes to emerge was the strong desire among Irish politicians to work more closely with Wales on language policy and development. There was a consistent view that Wales represents a leading example in the promotion and normalisation of a minority language within public life, particularly in education, legislation, and institutional support. This perception positioned Wales not only as a partner but as a model from which Ireland is keen to learn, especially in relation to scaling language use beyond the classroom and into wider society.

A particularly forward looking element of the discussion centred on the opportunities presented by emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence and virtual reality. Irish representatives highlighted their capacity to draw upon the presence of major multinational technology companies such as Amazon and Google, both of which have established significant operations in Ireland. These relationships were seen as offering real potential to develop innovative digital tools and resources to support language learning, usage, and visibility in everyday life. It was also noted that initial discussions had already taken place with Scotland and representatives of the Scottish Parliament. This raised the prospect of a trilateral collaboration between Wales, Ireland, and

Scotland, bringing together expertise and shared challenges across three minority-language contexts. Such a partnership was viewed as having the potential to deliver a genuinely ground-breaking initiative, particularly in the digital sphere, that could significantly strengthen the long-term sustainability and relevance of Welsh, Irish, and Scottish Gaelic in a rapidly evolving technological landscape.

Meeting with Prof Emer Smyth, Economic and Research Institute, Dublin

Our final engagement on our visit was at the Economic and Social Research Institute in Dublin, where we met Prof Emer Smyth. Prof Smyth is one of Ireland's leading educational researchers and a senior figure within the ESRI, with extensive experience in analysing education systems, student outcomes, and social inequality. Her work is widely recognised for its depth and influence on national education policy, particularly in relation to how students experience schooling and how systems respond to diverse learner needs. The Economic and Social Research Institute plays a central role in informing public policy in Ireland through rigorous, evidence-based research. Within the field of education, the ESRI has developed a substantial body of work examining areas such as student engagement, transitions between primary and post-primary education, educational disadvantage, and the impact of policy reforms on learner outcomes. Its research often draws on large-scale longitudinal studies, most notably the *Growing Up in Ireland* study, which tracks the development and educational experiences of young people over time.

Prof Smyth provided valuable insight into how this research is used to shape and evaluate education policy in Ireland. In particular, she highlighted the importance of understanding the student voice and the lived experience of learners within the system, rather than relying solely on attainment data. Her work has explored issues such as the transition from primary to secondary education, student wellbeing, and the factors influencing engagement and achievement, all of which are highly relevant to understanding Ireland's overall educational performance.

Our discussion offered an important analytical perspective to complement the school and policy visits undertaken during the trip. It reinforced the value of longitudinal and system-level research in identifying both strengths and challenges within education, and in supporting evidence-informed decision-making. In particular, it provided a deeper understanding of how Ireland's strong performance in areas such as literacy is situated within a broader context of student experience, equity, and system design. The meeting was especially valuable as it allowed us to revisit many of the themes that had emerged throughout the visit and to test them against a robust research base. Prof Smyth discussed in detail how Ireland responded to its relatively poor performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2009, particularly through increasing the time and focus devoted to reading within schools. Her analysis closely echoed the earlier insights provided by Luke O'Donnell, reinforcing the view that sustained, system-wide prioritisation of literacy has been central to Ireland's subsequent improvement. She also emphasised the importance placed on reading for pleasure, a theme consistently highlighted during our school visit in Oranmore. In addition, she drew attention to ongoing challenges, including a notable

decline in reading engagement among boys at secondary level, an issue that continues to require targeted intervention despite overall national success in literacy outcomes.

The discussion also explored the prominent role of Irish history within the curriculum, reflecting its importance in shaping cultural identity and student engagement. Broader systemic issues were considered, including the impact of socio-economic disadvantage and the role of DEIS schools in addressing educational inequality. Prof. Smyth also reflected on the value of the Transition Year as a distinctive feature of the Irish system, which she characterised in broadly similar terms to earlier discussions. Importantly, she also offered a forward-looking perspective, outlining key challenges facing the Irish education system in the coming years, including maintaining literacy standards, addressing inequalities, and responding to changing student needs. She also noted that Ireland have high rates of young people transitioning to tertiary education with about 60-65% of school leavers going on to university where they pay an annual registration fee of £2,500.

What made this discussion particularly significant was the extent to which it validated and reinforced the observations gathered throughout the visit, but with the added weight of rigorous research evidence. This provided a strong foundation for drawing informed conclusions and meaningful comparisons with the Welsh context.