

Teacher Professional Development and Immersion Education

Spotlight on an Irish-medium teacher development programme

Introduction and research base

This article presents key messages from the international research base on teacher professional development (PD) in general and on immersion education PD. It spotlights a programme in Trinity College Dublin for teachers in Irish-medium and Gaeltacht schools, describing its focus and design and outlining key principles underpinning it. It underscores the importance of collaborative learning, building leadership capacity in and through the programme, and the crucial role of practice and practitioner research to develop participants' adaptive expertise and agency to realise national policies on school evaluation and language education.

Teacher professional development can be summarised as 'the ability to improve teaching' (Sims et al., 2023). A consensus view of effective PD suggests it is sustained over time, involves teacher collaboration, has teacher investment and endorsement, balances subject knowledge and general pedagogical techniques, involves external expertise, and has practical application (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021).

Sims et al. (2023) acknowledge the challenges in designing PD that results in 'sustained improvements in teaching' through changes in teaching practices. In their guidance report for the Education Endowment Foundation, they suggest four mechanisms for effective PD:

1. building knowledge and insight
2. motivating teachers
3. developing teaching techniques
4. embedding practice.



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This article spotlights a programme in Trinity College Dublin for teachers in Irish-medium and Gaeltacht schools, outlining its key principles in the context of an international research base on teacher professional development and immersion education. It underscores the importance of collaborative learning, building leadership capacity in and through the programme, and the crucial role of practice and practitioner research.

The international research base examining approaches to immersion education teachers' PD is somewhat limited. Tedick and Wesely (2015, p.36) argue that 'there is still a notable lack of research on a wide variety of topics relating to teacher development, including pre-service teacher preparation, [and] the professional trajectories of immersion . . . teachers'. They deem such developmental activities as crucial, both practically and theoretically, for immersion educators. From a contextual standpoint, there are specific calls for Irish-immersion teachers to have ease of access to quality, specialised, and targeted PD, as well as considerations about barriers to participation, such as time and cost (Nic Aindriú et al., 2022, 2023).

Across all sources of literature presented here, particular levers of effective professional development that improve student learning experiences and outcomes are highlighted, including: realistic implementation strategies for instruction, support in embedding and sustaining instructional practice, a focus on motivating participants through goal-setting and reinforcement opportunities, and opportunities to learn collaboratively with and from other educators on the programme. These factors capture the overarching evidence-based approaches and underlying mechanisms that foster enhanced practice through quality PD.

Programme for teachers in Irish-medium and Gaeltacht schools

The M.Oid. san Oideachas Lán-Ghaeilge agus Gaeltachta is a programme designed for teachers and school leaders in Irish-language immersion schools or Gaeltacht schools, giving participants the opportunity to reach the highest standards of Irish language as well as educational practice in their school contexts. The programme is deeply rooted in the Teaching Council's (2011) Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education, which champions 'innovation, integration, improvement' and nurtures 'reflective, enquiry-oriented, life-long learners'.

This foundation is complemented by other key policies such as Looking at Our Schools 2022 and the Cosán Framework for Teachers' Learning, ensuring that our approach is both comprehensive and contemporary. At the heart of our programme lies a research-informed theory of action that embraces participative, experiential, and constructivist approaches to PD. Its aim is to facilitate not just learning but transformation – personal and professional – for every participant. To bring its vision to life, a suite of practical processes that weave through the programme have been designed, including:

- » critical reading tasks from a broad research base, paired with structured reflection prompts, encouraging deep learning through research-led

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teaching with both content and personal growth, engaging both role and identity considerations

- » enquiry-based learning tasks, using various paradigms to hone research and decision-making skills crucial for school improvement
- » collaborative learning, challenging personal and professional beliefs
- » digital tools and platforms to develop the contemporary professionalism required in the Covid-19 era
- » sustained engagement with established and emerging policies and frameworks, ensuring learning is authentic and applicable to participants' professional contexts
- » consistent focus on equity and inclusion to challenge and sensitise participants to critically examine blind spots and become agents of positive change
- » portfolio-based learning, with an emphasis on language development, allowing participants to document their progression and identify areas for further growth.

Throughout the programme, participants' adaptive expertise is fostered, and they are prepared to lead in the unique contexts of immersion and Gaeltacht education to be equipped with the tools, mindset, and confidence to make a lasting impact in their schools and the broader education system.

Looking ahead

The role of digital technology to enhance the PD experience for national reach cannot be overstated.

The research base on effective PD is still nascent, particularly for immersion and Gaeltacht education. But based on our ongoing experience and evaluation, the significance of collaborative learning and building leadership capacity, and the role of digital technology to enhance the PD experience for national reach, cannot be overstated. This is particularly the case in a sector experiencing ongoing demand for growth and the same complexity and challenge as the English-speaking part of Ireland's education system – but often without parity of provision in professional development, especially in harder-to-reach areas, where some school communities may be located.

Trinity College Dublin's M.Oid. programme exemplifies a locally conscious and globally outward-looking programme that adopts a research-driven approach to developing participants' adaptive expertise, while enhancing their language proficiency. This approach builds bridges between the international and national research base, the national policy context, and school and classroom realities, integrating several key mechanisms of effective PD. The success of any programme like ours, including less-formal approaches to PD, will rest in its ability to be rigorous and at the same time responsive to participants' contexts, and to be focused on nurturing both individual capacities and systemic capacity for the success of immersion education.

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