Irish in Primary Schools
Long-Term National Trends in Achievement

by
JOHN HARRIS TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN
Patrick Forde Educational Research Centre
Peter Archer Educational Research Centre
Siobhán Nic Fhearaile Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann
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Contents

List of Tables and Figures

Tables

Figures

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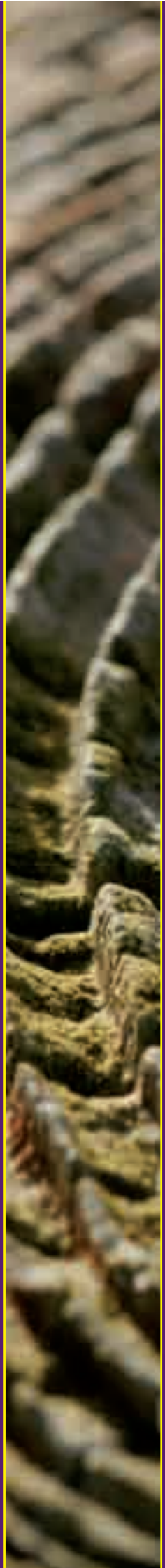


Chapter 1

Introduction

Introduction

Since the late 1960s, national and international assessments of achievement to monitor the performance of education systems have become increasingly common in many countries including Ireland. Unlike other forms of assessment (e.g., public examinations), national and international assessments are focussed not on the performance of individual pupils but on the performance of the system as a whole. In the case of national assessments, there is often a particular interest in looking at changes in achievement over time. In the case of international assessments, there is also an interest in comparing achievement in different countries and educational systems.

The national assessment, which is the subject of the present report, is concerned with the achievement in the Irish language of pupils in sixth grade in primary schools[1]. It was a more ambitious undertaking than previous national surveys of Irish, in that it used three objective tests to measure Irish Listening, Irish Speaking and Irish Reading in three populations of schools - ordinary, all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools. The survey, also involved the collection of background linguistic, social and educational data from parents, teachers and pupils.

The present report contains results relating to Irish Listening, Speaking and Reading. In addition, in the case of Irish Listening and Speaking where we have comparative data from 1985, we examine long-term trends in achievement in the three kinds of schools.

Relationships between key social, linguistic and educational variables and achievement in the three aspects of Irish are analysed. Data on a number of key background variables related to parent and teacher views and practices in relation to Irish are also presented and we compare teacher and parent views wherever possible. We examine changes in teachers' outlook and attitude in relation to Irish between 1985 and 2002.

The concluding chapter was written by the senior author (John Harris). It places the results in the context of a broad review of issues relating to the teaching and learning of Irish at primary level over the last twenty years. A particular focus is on interpreting the significance of long-term trends in achievement in Irish Listening and Speaking. The implications of the findings, both in educational and language maintenance terms, and recommendations for action and future research, are outlined. Because of the volume of data generated in the survey, follow-up studies of a number of additional aspects of achievement in Irish are planned.

The remainder of the present chapter is designed to provide the educational and linguistic context for the report of the Survey of Achievement in the Irish Language (SAIL) by describing previous research on achievement in Irish; reviewing literature on factors associated with achievement in Irish, in particular, and second languages generally; and providing an overview of the other national and international assessments in which Ireland is or has been involved.

[1] For convenience, the survey will sometimes be referred to as SAIL (Survey of Achievement in the Irish Language).

Achievement in Irish in ordinary schools

The main source of evidence on achievement in Irish in primary schools is a series of national surveys conducted by Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann (ITÉ) in the late 1970s and 1980s (Harris, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1988; Harris & Murtagh, 1988a,b) which showed that about one-third of pupils in ordinary schools attained mastery of each of a number of curricular objectives in Irish (Listening and Speaking) at sixth, fourth, and second grade. Criterion-referenced tests, based on the Nuachúrsaí, the official Department of Education audio-visual conversation courses in Irish for primary schools (Department of Education, 1978), were used. Approximately, another third, of pupils made 'at least minimal progress' in relation to each of the objectives at each grade, but did not attain mastery, while about a third failed to make even minimal progress in relation to each of the objectives at each grade level.

The fact that the proportions at each level of performance (mastery, minimal progress, and failure) remained roughly the same as the objectives become more demanding at successive grades was taken to mean that proficiency in Irish was growing during the primary school years. The relatively small proportions attaining mastery of objectives at each grade, however, indicated that there was a very substantial gap between the level of performance in spoken Irish, which the *Nuachúrsaí* aimed at, and the level attained by most pupils (Harris, 1984). It was argued that the gap was primarily due to unrealistic performance expectations rather than to factors such as inadequate teaching or unsuitable courses and methods. This conclusion was based on comparisons between the achievement in spoken Irish of pupils who learned Irish simply as a subject with a variety of other groups who might be described as linguistically or educationally advantaged in relation to Irish e.g., pupils in ordinary schools who were taught some aspects of the curriculum through Irish, pupils in ordinary schools whose parents used some Irish at home, pupils in all-Irish schools, and pupils from English-speaking homes who attended Gaeltacht schools (Harris, 1984).

The indications that the aims of the curriculum in relation to spoken Irish might be somewhat ambitious are broadly consistent with the findings of other research conducted in the 1970s. For example, primary school pupils were found to rate themselves lower in Irish and mathematics than in English relative to their classmates (Kellaghan, Madaus & Airasian, 1982). Earlier, Kellaghan, Macnamara and Neuman (1969) had reported that pupils were more likely to be judged by teachers to have more difficulty with mathematics and Irish generally than with English. In another study, which explored the gender gap in Irish primary schools, the subjects teachers most frequently perceived pupils as requiring additional help with were mathematics and Irish (Department of Education, 1994).

Data gathered between 1973 and 1977 as part of the standardisation of the Drumcondra Attainment Tests indicated that standards of attainment in Irish had declined slightly in the senior grades of primary school and at post-primary level but were holding up well in the junior grades of primary school (Greaney, 1978). Broadly similar findings emerged from other studies in the 1970s and 1980s, based on the perceptions of school principals and classroom teachers, and on public

examination grades (Bord na Gaeilge, 1986; Fontes & Kellaghan, 1977; INTO, 1976; Ó Domhnalláin & Ó Gliasáin, 1976; Ó Riagáin, 1982). Harris (1984) reviewing the three studies based on teachers' judgements suggests that, on balance, they indicated a relatively small decline in standards of oral Irish or general proficiency in Irish at senior grades but an improvement at junior grades. A comparison of the results of the ITÉ national surveys of achievement in Irish in ordinary primary schools in 1978 and 1985, however, revealed a modest but statistically significant increase in the percentage of pupils achieving mastery of each of the sixth-grade objectives over the seven-year period (Harris & Murtagh, 1988a).

Factors associated with achievement in Irish in ordinary schools

A number of studies conducted in primary schools show significant positive associations between achievement in Irish, achievement in other school subjects and general academic ability, as measured by a test of verbal reasoning in English (Fontes, Kellaghan, & O Brien, 1981; Harris & Murtagh, 1988b; Martin & Kellaghan, 1977). Verbal reasoning has also been found to correlate strongly with success in Irish in public examinations at post-primary level (Greaney & Kellaghan, 1984).

Various national and international studies have also indicated that educational outcomes including second-language achievement and attitude, are associated with socioeconomic background (Burstall, 1975, 1979; Hannan, Smyth, McCullagh, O'Leary, & McMahon, 1996; Harris & Murtagh, 1999; Martin & Kellaghan, 1977; Skehan, 1990; Weir, 2001). In interpreting such findings, it should be borne in mind that socioeconomic background is frequently defined in terms of parents' occupational status or other associated factors such as possession of a medical card. It has been argued, however, that the really critical factors in determining success in school are associated with process variables such as parental values, attitudes, and linguistic practices (Kellaghan, Sloane, Alvarez, & Bloom, 1993) and other forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Kellaghan, 2001b) such as parental educational level and the availability of books and other educational resources in the home. A number of parental variables were significantly related to attitude to Irish and achievement in a study carried out by Harris and Murtagh (1999). National surveys of Irish ability and use of Irish among the adult population have also identified significant positive associations between social background and both ability to speak Irish and attitude to Irish (CLAR, 1975; Ó Riagáin, 1997).

It is worth introducing a distinction between Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) - consisting of linguistic knowledge and literacy skills required for academic work - and Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) - the skills required for oral fluency and sociolinguistic appropriateness (Cummins, 1984). Evidence to support the validity of the distinction comes mainly from studies of immersion programmes (Genesee, 1976, 1987). In general, the evidence is that the development of BICS is relatively independent of general ability. In later grades of primary school, however, as programmes become more academic in orientation, thereby calling more on CALP skills, general ability becomes a more powerful

predictor of second-language achievement. Ellis (1994) suggests that the superior performance of higher socioeconomic groups is more likely to be seen in formal language learning (CALP) than in situations requiring more basic communication skills (BICS).

Research on gender differences in second-language achievement indicates that girls, by and large, do better than boys as far as both verbal skills and second-language achievement are concerned (Burstall, 1975; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). In the case of Irish, tests of reading confirm their superior performance (Martin & Kellaghan, 1977). The ITÉ surveys of spoken Irish consistently showed that more girls than boys attain mastery of grade-related objectives in Irish Listening and Speaking (Harris, 1984; Harris & Murtagh, 1988a, 1999). At sixth grade, for example, the difference between the mean percentage of boys and girls attaining mastery over all speaking and listening objectives tested in 1978 was 8.1% (Harris, 1984). Published examination statistics for the three years 1999/2000, 2000/2001, and 2001/2002 also show that girls regularly outperform boys in Irish in both the Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations (Department of Education and Science, 2001, 2002, 2003,). More girls than boys opt for higher level papers, more girls obtain Grades A, B, and C, and fewer girls obtain grades lower than D.

The earlier mentioned study exploring gender differences (Department of Education, 1994) showed that sixth-grade teachers in mixed schools perceived boys as needing assistance with Irish more frequently than girls: 76% of teachers said girls needed additional assistance with Irish, but 94% said that boys needed assistance. Gender differences in attitudes to learning a second language have been examined in a number of studies (Burstall, 1975; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Pritchard, 1987). In general, the results indicate that girls are more favourably disposed to learning a foreign language than boys. Gender is also related to attitudes to learning Irish. A study of secondary school students in Cork City and County noted that girls were more positively oriented towards learning Irish than boys (Ó Fathaigh, 1991). A study of sixth-grade pupils in 20 primary schools nationally also shows that the overall attitude/motivation of girls in relation to Irish is significantly more positive than that of boys (Harris & Murtagh, 1999).

Regional/locational factors have also been found to be related to achievement. In the 1978 sixth-grade survey of spoken Irish, Harris (1983) reported that classes in the Dublin region had significantly lower levels of achievement in Irish than classes in other regions/locations; classes in Munster were best overall. In addition, classes in rural locations had higher achievement, and those in city locations had lower achievement, than other classes. Smaller sixth-grade classes were also associated with significantly higher levels of achievement.

The opportunities for children outside the Gaeltacht to use Irish at home are fairly limited as can be seen from the results of a national survey on languages in Ireland in the early 1990s, the results of which suggested that Irish is never spoken in over two-thirds of Irish homes (Ó Riagáin & Ó Gliasáin, 1994). Nevertheless, various ITÉ surveys have shown significant positive effects of even moderate home use of Irish on pupil achievement in the language (Harris, 1984; Harris & Murtagh, 1988a,b, 1999).

There is evidence that the use of Irish as the medium of instruction outside the language lesson proper is associated with increased proficiency. Quite aside from the high levels of achievement found in all-Irish primary schools (Harris, 1984; Harris & Murtagh, 1988a), pupils in ordinary schools where there is at least some Irish-medium instruction were found to have considerably higher levels of achievement in Irish than pupils in schools where it is not used as a medium of instruction outside the Irish lesson at all. In the 1978 ITÉ sixth-grade survey, for example, the use of some Irish-medium instruction in ordinary schools emerged as a strong predictor of achievement in spoken Irish (Harris, 1983). Similar results were found in the 1985 ITÉ sixth-grade study: the overall mean percentage of pupils in ordinary schools attaining mastery of sixth-grade objectives was substantially different depending on the amount of Irish-medium instruction received: no Irish-medium instruction (30.4%, on average, mastered each objective); less than one-hour of Irish-medium instruction per week (36.1%, on average, mastered each objective); one hour or more of such instruction (48.7%, on average, mastered each objective) (Harris & Murtagh, 1988b; 1999).

The Twenty-Classes Study

The *Twenty-Classes Study* (Harris & Murtagh, 1999) will be described in a little more detail than some of the earlier studies for two reasons: (1) it examined the relationship between a large range of variables relating to Irish in primary school in a single study and (2) a number of instruments from the study were adapted for the 2002 SAIL survey. While the *Twenty-Classes Study* had a national dimension, it was not based on nationally representative samples. The SAIL survey provides an opportunity to establish whether some of the key findings of that earlier study hold at a national level.

Field work for the *Twenty-Classes Study* was carried out by Primary School Inspectors of the Department of Education and Science. The study had two main aims:

1. To describe the range of conditions under which spoken Irish is taught and learned at sixth-class level by studying a small number of diverse classes; which closely matched the picture nationally
2. To describe the teaching and learning of Irish in this small group of classes in more detail, and from a number of different perspectives.

The study required the development of a number of instruments and classroom observation procedures. One such instrument provided a measure of different aspects of pupils' attitudes to Irish and their interest in learning Irish and foreign languages. Another investigated parents' attitudes to Irish and the school, and parents' own practices in relation to such matters as praising their child's achievement in Irish and helping with Irish homework. Each pupil's proficiency in Irish, listening and speaking, was assessed using the ITÉ criterion-referenced tests mentioned above.

Furthermore, two classroom-observation instruments were developed which allowed the inspectors, with the teacher's agreement, to record the activities, materials and dynamics of typical Irish language lessons. Two Inspectors worked side by side, but independently, in each classroom. One recorded the activities and processes of the lesson itself, including variations in general class interest and class attention as the various parts of the lesson unfolded. The other used a different observation instrument to classify the general behaviour, participation and language use of three pre-selected pupils. An audio-tape recording was made of each lesson so that it could be re-examined later to obtain additional information and, if necessary, to correct some of the coding. Results showed that achievement in Irish was significantly related to a large range of teaching, pupil attitude/motivation and parental variables, many of them mentioned below.

Some findings of the study

Pupil attitude/motivation.

Pupils were reasonably well disposed towards the Irish language itself and towards the idea of integrating with the Irish-language-speaking 'group'. But motivation, in other words commitment to learning Irish, was less positive. Pupils with better motivation and attitudes were more successful in learning Irish. Furthermore, pupils tended to have a poor estimation of their own ability in Irish compared to their self-concept in relation to other subjects. A substantial minority were anxious about speaking Irish in class. A substantial minority of pupils did not believe that they had the support and encouragement of their parents in the task of learning Irish. Where parental encouragement was present, it had a strong positive effect on pupil *achievement* in Irish and an even stronger effect on pupils' *attitudes* and *motivation* to learn Irish.

An analysis of data from a questionnaire administered to pupils provided a picture of their reactions to the Irish lessons and courses in their own words. In general, pupils experienced the Irish lesson and materials as boring, old-fashioned and repetitious. They would have liked lessons and courses which were more modern, more fun and more realistic and which placed a greater emphasis on conversations and games. In addition, pupils in classes with low levels of achievement in Irish often complained of difficulty in understanding the lesson or the teacher and expressed general apathy and discouragement about learning Irish.

Parents' views and practices.

Parents were generally positive about Irish and supportive of the notion of their children being taught the language in school. In practice, however, many had a lukewarm attitude to the actual *enterprise* of their children learning Irish. For example, a majority of parents did not directly promote positive attitudes to learning Irish; they were much less likely to praise their child's achievements in Irish than they were to praise achievements in other subjects; and they were less likely to help with homework in Irish than in other subjects. A quarter of parents knew nothing about how Irish was taught while another half knew 'a little'. Parents generally were happy with the efforts of the local school in relation to Irish.

Many of these issues are examined in the survey reported here, providing an opportunity to see whether similar attitudes and practices are found in nationally representative samples.

Direct observations of the teaching of Irish by Inspectors.
The study validates the general orientation to teaching Irish which was recommended in Curaclam na Bunscoile (NCCA, 1999a,b). Classes in which a greater emphasis was placed on communication did better in a variety of ways than classes which were less communicative in orientation: they had higher achievement in Irish, pupils showed higher levels of attention and interest during the lessons and reported lower levels of anxiety about speaking individually in class. In contrast, generally negative outcomes were associated with traditional language-practice (non-communicative) activities such as 'Drills' or repetition-based activities.

Observations of Inspectors also indicated that classes in which pupils spent a lot of time on routine (language-practice type) reading aloud tended to have lower achievement in spoken Irish and less positive attitudes to Irish. In addition, where a lot of time was spent on routine reading aloud, pupils tended to have higher levels of anxiety about the Irish lesson and displayed lower levels of attention and interest in the lesson.

Pupil participation in the Irish class.
Observation of *individual* pupils in each class by Inspectors showed that about half of all pupil 'behaviours' during the Irish lesson consisted of the pupil speaking individually (and in Irish in 91% of cases). The results also showed that (i) pupil speech was not produced very often in the context of real communication or of meaning negotiation, (ii) pupils with lower levels of ability in Irish spoke less often than other pupils, (iii) when pupils with lower levels of ability in Irish were silent, they were less attentive to the lesson than pupils with higher levels of ability who remained silent, and (iv) pupils spoke more often and for longer in classes which emphasised communicative teaching activities.

Achievement in all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools

Our primary focus so far has been on achievement in Irish in ordinary schools and on the factors which are related to it. We turn now briefly to achievement in all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools. Data collected by ITÉ in 1982 (second grade) and 1985 (sixth grade) provide evidence on achievement in spoken Irish in all three populations of schools: ordinary, all-Irish, and Gaeltacht (Harris, 1984; Harris & Murtagh, 1987, 1988a). Results showed that in the case of each Irish Speaking and Listening objective tested, the highest percentage of pupils attaining mastery was always associated with all-Irish schools, the second-highest with Gaeltacht schools, and the lowest with ordinary schools. In second grade, for example, the mean percentage of pupils attaining mastery of each of ten speaking and listening objectives was 83.8% in all-Irish schools, 57.9% in Gaeltacht schools, and 31.1 % in ordinary schools.

The reasons for the overall substantially lower performance of Gaeltacht schools compared to all-Irish schools are complex and are discussed at some length in relation to the second grade by Harris (1984). Among the factors involved are (i) the substantial proportion (45.8%) of pupils from English-only homes in Gaeltacht schools at the time and (ii) the fact that English-only pupils in Gaeltacht schools were not nearly as successful as English-only pupils in all-Irish schools in acquiring competence in spoken Irish. The explanation for this state of affairs, it was argued, lay mainly in the relationship between home-language and medium of instruction in Gaeltacht schools. The mean percentage of pupils from English-only homes in Gaeltacht schools attaining mastery of each objective was only 41.7%, while the mean percentage of pupils from English-only homes in all-Irish schools attaining mastery was 79.3%. English-only pupils in Gaeltacht schools were generally in grant-minority classes, that is in classes where only a minority of the pupils were in receipt of the native-speaker grant. Although grant-minority classes were found in that study to be receiving a little more than half their instruction through Irish, this was still considerably less than the amount of Irish-medium instruction in all-Irish schools. Teachers of grant-minority classes in Gaeltacht schools also reported less favourable parental attitudes to Irish than teachers in all-Irish schools. In contrast, all-Irish schools, having been set up primarily on the initiative of parents themselves, had more consistently favourable attitudes both to Irish and to Irish-medium instruction (Harris, 1984).

The 1985 sixth-grade study of all-Irish and Gaeltacht pupils showed that while sixth-grade pupils in both kinds of schools were again considerably better than pupils in ordinary schools, the performance of all-Irish and Gaeltacht pupils was much closer at sixth grade than it had been at second grade. While the mean percentage of pupils attaining mastery of the Irish Speaking and Listening objectives was 83.8% and 57.9% for all-Irish and Gaeltacht respectively *at second grade*, it was 80% and 73% respectively at *sixth grade*. In other words, there appears to be a distinctive improvement in the Irish achievement of Gaeltacht pupils between second grade and sixth grade.

Harris and Murtagh (1987) argued that a number of factors, perhaps interacting, may be responsible for this improvement. It seems reasonable to suggest, for example, that children from English-speaking homes in Gaeltacht schools may over time be motivated to acquire native-like competence in Irish where there are substantial numbers of native Irish speakers in a class or where Irish is the dominant language in the community outside the home. Home influence on language use may be stronger at second grade than at sixth grade, both in terms of the child's choice of language and the amount of time the child has been exposed to a particular language. Correspondingly, peer language, both at school and in the community, is likely to be a relatively greater influence as the pupil progresses to the more senior grades in primary school.

Studies of achievement in subjects other than Irish

A brief review of national surveys of achievement in school subjects other than Irish will serve to place the current survey of Irish in a broader context. In an early attempt to use empirical data to assess the academic performance of Irish pupils, Macnamara (1966) compared the performance in English reading of students in Ireland and in England

using tests standardised in England. He found that Irish children did not do as well as their English counterparts. Beginning in 1964, a series of periodic surveys was undertaken in Dublin (McGee, 1977). These used the same English-standardised test as that used by Macnamara (1966) and were carried out at roughly five yearly intervals. In addition, the Department of Education carried out surveys of reading in 1972, 1980 and 1988. Both sets of surveys found significant improvement in standards during the 1970s to the point where the gap between Irish and English students had narrowed considerably. In 1993, a new approach to surveying reading standards, which was again used in 1998 and 2004 was adopted (Cosgrove, Kellaghan, Forde, & Morgan, 2000). Evidence from the more recent surveys indicates that there has been no observable improvement in average performance since the early 1980s.

In 1977, the Department of Education developed criterion-referenced tests of mathematics which were administered to national samples of pupils in second and fourth class that year and to national samples of pupils in sixth grade in 1979 and 1984. Reports of these surveys (Department of Education, 1980, 1985) revealed that performance was weaker in some aspects of the curriculum than in others. Comparison of data from the 1979 and 1984 surveys, both of which involved sixth-grade pupils, suggested gains in achievement in some areas and declines in others. A major national survey of mathematics was carried out with a sample of fourth-class pupils in 1999. Results provide benchmarks for future surveys, the first of which was carried out in 2004 (Shiel & Kelly, 2001).

Ireland has participated in a number of international assessments, details of which are set out in Table 1.1

Table 1.1 International assessments of achievement involving Ireland (1990-2000).

Year	Study	Areas Assessed	Population(s)
1991	International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement Reading Literacy Study (IEA/RLS)	Comprehension of Narrative, Expository Texts and Documents	9- and 14-year olds
1991	Second International Assessment of Educational Progress (IAEPII)	Mathematics, Science	9- and 13-year olds
1994	International Adult Literacy Survey(IALS)	Prose. Quantitative and Document Literacy	Adults 16-65 years
1995	Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)	Mathematics, Science	3rd/4th class, (Primary schools); 2nd/3rd year (Post-Primary schools)
2000	Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)	Reading literacy (major domain), Mathematical Literacy and Scientific Literacy	15-year olds
2003	Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)	Mathematical Literacy (major domain), Reading Literacy and Scientific Literacy	15-year olds

Adapted from Shiel, Cosgrove, Sofroniou and Kelly (2001).

In the international school-based studies prior to PISA (IEA/RLS, IAEP II, TIMSS), the average performance of Irish students was found not to differ markedly from the overall average performance of participating countries. In the major domain assessed in PISA in 2000 (reading literacy) and in one of the minor domains (scientific literacy), Irish students performed significantly above the average for participating countries. In the other minor domain (mathematical literacy), the performance of Irish students was found not to differ significantly from the average for participating countries (Shiel, Cosgrove, Sofroniou, & Kelly, 2001). In PISA in 2003, when mathematics was the major domain, the position of Irish students relative to students in other countries was maintained. There was evidence, however, of a small decline in the performance of Irish students in reading between 2000 and 2003 (Cosgrove, Shiel, Sofroniou, Zastrutzki, & Shortt, 2004).

In the International Adult Literacy Survey (Morgan, Hickey & Kellaghan, 1997; OECD/Statistics Canada, 2000), literacy levels in Ireland were compared with levels in other countries that participated in the survey. In general, Irish adults did badly. About a quarter of the sample were at the lowest level of literacy on the test, placing Ireland well down the league table of participating countries. However, the danger of misinterpreting such comparisons has been noted (see also Archer, 1999; Kellaghan, 2001a; Morgan, Hickey & Kellaghan, 1997).

Conclusion

National assessments of standards of Irish in ordinary primary schools, were conducted in the 1970s and 1980s using criterion-referenced tests of listening and speaking. Results suggested that although proficiency in Irish was growing during the primary school years, there was evidence of a substantial gap between the level of performance in spoken Irish which the *Nuachursaí* (the official conversation courses of the Department of Education) aimed at, and the level attained by most pupils (Harris, 1984). A comparison of the results of surveys of achievement in sixth grade in ordinary schools in 1978 and 1985 revealed a modest but statistically significant increase in the percentage of pupils attaining mastery of each of the sixth-grade objectives over the seven year period.

Achievement in Irish for all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools was most recently examined by ITÉ in 1982 (second grade) and 1985 (sixth grade). Findings indicated that, in the case of each of the Irish Speaking and Listening objectives tested, the highest percentage of pupils attaining mastery was always associated with all-Irish schools. However, the performance of pupils in all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools was much closer in sixth grade than it had been in second grade which was interpreted as evidence of a distinct improvement in the Irish achievement of Gaeltacht pupils between second and sixth grade.

Several studies have been concerned with the relationship between achievement and certain pupil-level and school-level variables. In relation to pupil-level variables, associations have been found between achievement in Irish and pupils' verbal

reasoning ability, socioeconomic background, and gender (girls having higher levels of achievement). Parental ability in Irish and/or use of Irish in the home have also been found to be associated with pupil achievement. School-level variables which have been shown to relate to Irish achievement include school location/region, gender composition of the school, and school size. There is also evidence that the use of Irish as the medium of instruction outside the language lesson proper is associated with increased proficiency.

Other national assessments in Ireland have shown that achievement in English reading has increased from the 1960s to 1980, but has remained stable since then. Assessments in mathematics in 1979 and 1984 suggested gains in achievement in some areas and declines in others. International school-based studies have indicated that the average performance of Irish students either did not differ significantly from the average for participating countries or was better than the average for participating countries.

Chapter 2

Survey Procedures

Survey Procedures

In this chapter, the procedures used in the Survey of Achievement in the Irish Language (SAIL) are described. The chapter is divided into seven sections. The first consists of a description of the main features of the tests of achievement and of the questionnaires used to obtain information about the homes, classrooms and schools of participating pupils. In the second section, the target populations are defined and the method for drawing samples from those populations is described. The fieldwork for SAIL is described in the third section. Response rates for the various instruments, and a description of the procedures for calculating sampling weights, are presented in the fourth and fifth sections. Procedures for the analysis of data are described briefly in the sixth section. Because data from the present survey will be compared with data from the 1985 ITÉ survey, a brief account of the earlier survey (including a description of the sample) is given in the final section of this chapter.

Instruments

Irish tests

It was decided that Irish Speaking, Irish Listening, and Irish Reading would be assessed in SAIL. In the case of English, reading is the aspect of achievement that has been the subject of a number of previous national assessments carried out by the Educational Research Centre (Cosgrove et al, 2000). Listening and speaking were assessed in previous national surveys of Irish carried out by ITÉ (Harris, 1982, 1983, 1984; Harris & Murtagh, 1987, 1988a, 1988b, 1999). It was decided that modified versions of the tests used in these surveys would be used to assess Irish Speaking and Irish Listening skills and that the Educational Research Centre would take responsibility for the development of a new Irish Reading test. Thus, since comparative data were available in the case of the Irish Listening and Speaking tests, it was possible to examine changes over time in levels of achievement in these two aspects of Irish achievement but not in the case of Irish Reading.

A brief overview of the Irish tests will now be presented. Fuller descriptions are given in the appropriate context in Chapters 3 to 5.

The Irish Listening Test is a revised version of a 75-item criterion-referenced test used in national surveys in 1978 and 1985, as well as in the *Twenty Classes Study* described in Chapter 1. It was designed to show whether pupils had attained mastery of seven objectives derived from the Irish curriculum for fifth and sixth grades. All items on the test were in multiple-choice form and were presented on a cassette tape to entire class-groups of pupils. Some modification of the test was necessary to take account of changes that had taken place since its original development, such as the introduction of the euro and changes in fashion relating to house furnishing and cars.

In making these changes, the goal was to make the most valid and reliable comparison possible between achievement in Irish Listening in the ITÉ survey in 1985 and in the SAIL survey in 2002. More specifically, every effort was made to identify and remove any source of extraneous difficulty for pupils in responding to the test items which might have arisen for any reason between 1985 and 2002. A further eight objectives are represented on the Irish Speaking Test. It is individually administered in a face-to-face interview with an experienced tester and consists of 65 items that involve the tester saying sentences, asking questions or showing pictures. Most of the pupils' responses involved a spoken word, phrase, sentence, or extended oral description in response to questions or prompts from the examiner. In one subtest the pupil participated in a conversation and role play with the examiner.

The Irish Listening and Irish Speaking tests were designed as criterion referenced and thus results relating to them have usually been reported in terms of percentages of pupils achieving defined levels of performance - mastery, minimal progress, and failure - in relation to each objective. In a number of studies, however, overall mean scores on these two tests have been used to explore relationships between achievement in Irish and various demographic, school and teaching factors (e.g., Harris, 1983). In presenting results from SAIL also we will have occasion to use mean scores in analyses of the relationship between achievement and other factors. In general, however, results for the Irish Listening and Irish Speaking tests are presented here in terms of the defined levels of achievement mentioned above.

For the assessment of reading in SAIL, it was decided that the main focus would be on reading comprehension which would be assessed through questions about a small number of passages. The selection of passages and formulation of questions was based on an analysis of the two separate, though overlapping curricula for primary schools (one for schools where Irish is the main medium of instruction and another for schools where English is the main medium of instruction). Using this analysis as a starting point, staff at the Educational Research Centre developed a framework (table of specifications) for the new test. The table consists of a cross-classification of text content by process. Content refers to type of text which, for example, can be literary (usually narrative) or informative, consisting of either continuous or non-continuous text. Process refers to the cognitive functions involved in the extraction of meaning from text (e.g., retrieval, inference, interpretation).

It was decided on the basis of the results of a try-out of about 350 test items prior to the survey to produce two separate versions of the test of reading comprehension (one for use in ordinary schools and the other for use in all-Irish schools and schools in the Gaeltacht). The version used in ordinary schools, where English is the medium of instruction, has five subtests. The version for all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools, where Irish is deemed to be the medium of instruction, has six subtests. Each of the subtests in both versions of the test consists of a passage and a series of questions about the passage. For most of the analyses presented in this report where Irish Reading is the focus of attention, mean scores on the separate versions of the test of reading comprehension are reported in the form of an Item Response Theory (IRT) scale score with a mean of 250 and a standard deviation of 50.

As well as being tested on reading comprehension as described in the previous paragraph, pupils in all three samples took a 25-item sentence-completion subtest. The items were taken from the vocabulary section of the Drumcondra Attainment Tests which were standardised nationally between 1973 and 1976. Again, based on the results of the tryout, it was decided that a mixture of items from different levels of the Drumcondra Attainment Tests should be used in order to accommodate the range of pupil performance across groups. Thus, 17 items from the Level III test, standardised for pupils in fifth and sixth grades in primary schools, and the remainder from Levels IV to VI, standardised for students in the Junior Cycle of post-primary schools were used. For convenience, this 25-item test will be referred to as Link 25 and will be reported separately from the main reading comprehension test using a percentage correct metric.

Questionnaires

Reports of the two most recent national assessments of English reading (Cosgrove et al, 2000) and mathematics (Shiel & Kelly, 2001) contain results of analyses of the relationship between achievement and contextual variables related to pupils' schools and homes and between achievement and pupils' attitudes and motivation. Questionnaires for parents, class teachers, school principals and pupils were designed for this purpose. Similar analyses were conducted in the case of Irish Listening and Speaking in the 1980s (Harris, 1983; Harris & Murtagh, 1987). More recently, a series of studies, reported in *Teaching and Learning Irish in Primary School* (Harris & Murtagh, 1999), involved the development of a number of questionnaires and classroom observation instruments to describe the conditions in which the teaching and learning of Irish took place and to relate these to achievement in Irish Listening and Irish Speaking. Building on this work, questionnaires for teachers, pupils, and parents were developed for the present survey. A school questionnaire was also developed. The two main questionnaires contributing data and information in the present report are focussed on teachers and parents. The Teacher Questionnaire sought information on teachers' views and practices in relation to the teaching and learning of Irish while the Parent Questionnaire sought information on parents' views and practices relating to Irish in general and to Irish in the education system.

Populations and samples

It was decided that pupils at the end of sixth grade in 2002 would be the focus of SAIL. Testing at this point would provide a picture of the proficiency in Irish of pupils at the end of their primary education. The introduction of the revised curriculum (NCCA, 1999a,b,c) and the fact that inservice provision related to it was still in progress at the time of the survey, was another argument in favour of testing at this particular time. It is reasonable to assume that pupils in sixth grade generally in 2002, because they would have been taught throughout their primary school careers in accordance with the 1971 curriculum, would have had *relatively* little exposure to the revised curriculum. Thus, their performance in 2002 would represent a meaningful base-line against which subsequent cohorts of pupils, who had been exposed to the revised curriculum, could be compared.

It was important that the present survey would allow for the assessment of levels of achievement in schools in the Gaeltacht and all-Irish schools as well as in ordinary schools. A Gaeltacht school was defined as a school that is located within the official boundaries of the Gaeltacht, as identified by the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (DCRGA). An all-Irish school was defined as a school, outside the Gaeltacht, where Irish is used as the medium of Instruction. These definitions were used in previous work by ITÉ (e.g., Harris & Murtagh, 1999) and the Educational Research Centre (e.g., Ó Siaghail & Déiseach, 2004). Following consultation with other researchers, the survey team designed three separate samples (ordinary schools, all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools). All three involved stratified two-stage cluster samples (i.e., schools were selected first and an intact class was then selected for testing). The populations of interest (sixth-grade pupils in the three types of school) were defined using the DES database for 2000/01 because the database for 2001/02, which clearly would have been more appropriate, did not become available until later. Therefore, the numbers of pupils in sixth grade in 2001/02 were estimated from the numbers of pupils in fifth class in 2000/01.

A variable in the database for 2001/02 was also used to determine which schools belonged to which of the three categories of school. That variable appears in a field in the database headed "Gaelcode" which has three values and three accompanying descriptors: 1(Gaeltacht), 2 (all-Irish) and 3 (ordinary). After schools had been selected, this categorisation was found to contradict the categorisation in another field headed "Gaeltacht" in 18 cases. There are 14 schools that have a Y (for yes) in the Gaeltacht column but a 3 (ordinary) under Gaelcode and four schools that have an N (for no) under Gaeltacht but a 1 (Gaeltacht) under Gaelcode. On the basis of checking with officials of the DES and of DCRGA it seems that neither categorisation is entirely accurate. In the event, it happened that none of the schools that are the subject of contradictory information emerged in the random selection of schools for participation in the survey.

Some sixth grade pupils were not eligible for selection in the three samples. At the first stage of sample selection, special schools and private primary schools were excluded. According to the Department of Education and Science statistical report for 2001/02, there were 6,982 pupils in 125 special schools and 6,381 pupils in the 47 private primary schools that provided the DES with statistical returns of their enrolment (Department of Education and Science, 2003). Very small schools were also excluded at the first stage of sample selection. This exclusion is common on the basis that the collection of data from very small schools (usually defined as schools with fewer than six or seven pupils in the grade of interest) is expensive and adds little to the accuracy of population estimates. For the present survey, it was decided to exclude ordinary and all-Irish schools with less than six pupils in sixth grade since such schools enrol less than 4% of all sixth-grade pupils.

In the Gaeltacht, however, over 17% of pupils are in schools with less than six pupils in sixth grade. Therefore, it was decided to use 'less than three' rather than 'less than six' as the threshold for exclusion in these schools. This meant that only Gaeltacht schools with one or two pupils in sixth grade were excluded. Such schools are attended by only about 2% of Gaeltacht pupils.

Pupils who were the subject of an official exemption from learning Irish under the terms of DES Circular 12/96 and/or who were in a special class in a mainstream primary school were also excluded from the population of interest. Because no central register of exempted pupils exists, it was only possible to exclude such pupils after initial contact had been made with schools (see below).

For the first stage of sampling (the selection of schools), the three groups of schools were stratified by size. In the case of ordinary and all-Irish schools, three strata were used: large (more than 27 pupils in sixth grade) medium (between 15 and 27 pupils) and small (between 6 and 14 pupils). In the case of the Gaeltacht, four strata were used. Large and medium sized schools were defined in the same way as in the other two samples (i.e., more than 27 pupils and between 15 and 27 pupils). However, other schools were assigned to two strata: small (between 7 and 14 pupils) and very small (between 3 and 6 pupils).

Decisions on the numbers of schools to select were based on an estimate of the numbers of schools in which the assessments could be carried out in a reasonably short period of time (see section on fieldwork below) and on estimates of the amount of variance in achievement between schools sometimes called the intra-class correlation or rho. Between-school variance is an important consideration because of the tendency for students of similar levels of achievement to be clustered in particular schools or classes within schools. As a result of this tendency, samples such as the one used for SAIL need to have many more students than would be the case if a simple random sample of students was selected (i.e., a sample in which every pupil in the population has an equal chance of being selected). The loss of precision resulting from the use of a cluster sample rather than a simple random sample (the design effect) can be quantified in advance of determining the number of schools and pupils to be selected if (a) the value of rho can be estimated and (b) the average number of pupils in each cluster (in this case, sixth grade) in each stratum is known.

For the purposes of selecting the ordinary school sample for the present survey, data from a try out of the new Irish reading test and from the standardisation of the Drumcondra Attainment Tests in 1970s indicated that rho=0.3 would be a reasonable assumption (i.e., that 30% of the variance in achievement would be between schools). Average cluster sizes were then estimated for each of the three strata (large, medium, and small). Using the appropriate formula (Kish, 1965), it was established that a sample of 140 ordinary schools would be equivalent in terms of precision to a simple random sample of 427 pupils. Thus, what is termed the "effective sample size" for the present survey is 427. Previous national assessments have sought to achieve an effective sample size of at least 400.

There was no satisfactory basis for quantifying rho for all-Irish schools and schools in the Gaeltacht, although there was some evidence from the try-out of the reading test that rho in all-Irish schools would be lower than in ordinary schools, and some evidence in ITÉ data that rho in Gaeltacht schools would be higher than in ordinary schools. It was decided to select a larger number of Gaeltacht schools than all-Irish schools, prompted by the expectations about the different values of rho noted above, as well as by the fact that many Gaeltacht schools are small. In addition, practical considerations, including the fact that testing could not take place in more than 220 schools in total, set limits on the number of all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools which could be included. Taking all these factors into account, it was eventually decided to include 30 all-Irish and 50 Gaeltacht schools in the relevant samples.

To complete the first stage of sample selection, schools in each category (i.e., ordinary, all-Irish, and Gaeltacht) were sorted according to size (the number of pupils in sixth grade) and the proportion of female pupils in the school within each stratum (large, medium, small and, in the case of the Gaeltacht, very small). Schools were then selected with a probability proportional to size using a random, fixed interval selection procedure.

At the second stage of selection, all sixth-grade pupils were selected in the case of schools with just one sixth-grade class. In the case of schools with more than one sixth-grade class, one intact class was selected at random by the survey team when the school principal had provided data on the number of sixth-grade classes (prior to the commencement of the survey). In the 1998 national assessment of English reading (Cosgrove et al., 2000) second stage sampling involved the random selection of pupils. In the case of the 1999 national assessment of mathematics (Shiel & Kelly, 2001) all pupils were selected at the second stage. It was decided that neither of these options was viable for SAIL. Testing of all sixth-grade pupils in schools with more than one sixth-grade class would have taken more time than was available and random selection would have been too disruptive of school routine. The administration of the Group Tests (reading and listening) and the Pupil Questionnaire required pupils to be together on five separate occasions over three days. A disadvantage of using an intact class is that it is likely to result in larger values of rho than would otherwise be the case because classes tend to be more homogeneous than fixed numbers of pupils selected at random across classes.

Tables 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3 contain information on the features of the three samples as they were designed (the design samples) and of the populations these samples were selected to represent.

Table 2.1 Numbers of schools and pupils in the ordinary school population, numbers of schools in the sample, and estimated numbers and percentages of schools and pupils in the designed ordinary school sample by stratum.

Ordinary					
Cluster Size	Number of schools in the population	Number of schools in the design sample	Number of eligible pupils in the population	Estimated number of eligible pupils in the design sample	Estimated percentage of eligible pupils in the design sample
Large	540	70	26,843	2,100	7.8%
Medium	602	35	11,923	693	5.8%
Small	1,073	35	10,372	336	3.2%
Total	2,215	140	49,138	3,129	6.4%

Large = more than 27 pupils, medium = 15-27 pupils, small = 6-14 pupils.

Table 2.2 Numbers of schools and pupils in the all-Irish school population, numbers of schools in the sample, and estimated numbers and percentages of schools and pupils in the designed all-Irish school sample by stratum.

All-Irish					
Cluster Size	Number of schools in the population	Number of schools in the design sample	Number of eligible pupils in the population	Estimated number of eligible pupils in the design sample	Estimated percentage of eligible pupils in the design sample
Large	32	12	1,156	360	31.1%
Medium	29	11	643	253	39.3%
Small	19	7	210	77	36.7%
Total	80	30	2,009	690	34.4%

Large = more than 27 pupils, medium = 15-27 pupils, small = 6-14 pupils.

Table 2.3 Numbers of schools and pupils in the Gaeltacht school population, numbers of schools in the sample, and estimated numbers and percentages of schools and pupils in the designed Gaeltacht school sample by stratum.

Gaeltacht					
Cluster Size	Number of schools in the population	Number of schools in the design sample	Number of eligible pupils in the population	Estimated number of eligible pupils in the design sample	Estimated percentage of eligible pupils in the design sample
Large	6	6	196	180	91.8%
Medium	17	9	321	175	54.5%
Small	42	24	423	228	53.9%
V. Small	46	11	209	51	24.4%
Total	111	50	1,149	634	55.2%

Large = more than 27 pupils, medium = 15-27 pupils, small = 7-14 pupils, very small = 3-6 pupils.

It should be noted that the entries in the last two columns (numbers and percentages of pupils in the designed sample) are estimates based on numbers in fifth class in the previous year and assumptions about the typical number of pupils in participating classes.

When schools were contacted and a sixth-grade class was selected in cases where that was necessary, it emerged that the actual number of pupils on roll in the final set of selected classes was quite close to the estimates in Tables 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3. When the selected schools were contacted it was also possible to establish that a total of 99 pupils in the samples (95 in ordinary schools, none in all-Irish schools and four in the Gaeltacht) were in receipt of an exemption from learning Irish under the terms of Circular 12/96. The number of pupils actually on roll in selected classes when testing began, minus the number of pupils with an exemption, constitute the target sample as shown in Table 2.4. It may be noted that substantial proportions of the populations of sixth-grade pupils in all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools were tested - a third of all-Irish sixth-grade pupils and over a half of sixth-grade Gaeltacht pupils.

Table 2.4 Number of schools in the sample, the number of pupils in selected schools in the sample minus the number of official exemptions, and percentage of the population of pupils in the sample.

Type of School	Number of schools in sample	Number of pupils in target sample	Percentage of pupils
Ordinary	140	3037	6.2%
All-Irish	30	683	34.0%
Gaeltacht	49	615	53.5%
Total	219	4335	8.3%

School principals also indicated that there were a total of 58 pupils who although not the subject of an official exemption, were not capable of sitting the tests. These pupils are part of the target sample, even though they could not be tested.

Because it is individually administered, it would not have been possible for every pupil in the sample to take the Irish Speaking Test and therefore, it was necessary to select a subsample. When a schedule for testing was developed it became clear that seven pupils per school was the maximum that could be administered the test. It was decided, therefore, to test seven pupils in any school that had at least seven pupils in sixth grade and to test every pupil in schools with less than seven pupils. This procedure meant that a pupil in a school with seven or fewer pupils that had been included in the sample had a probability of 1 of being selected for the Irish Speaking Test. In the case of larger schools, a pupil's probability of being selected for the Irish Speaking Test was inversely related to the size of the class.

Provision was made for the random replacement of selected pupils who were not available at the time the Irish Speaking Test was administered. Pupils who were selected for the Irish Speaking Test, but who had been absent for the Irish Listening Test, were also replaced. This was in line with previous surveys where the Irish Speaking Test was only administered to pupils who had already taken the Irish Listening Test. It should be noted, of course, that where the number in a class was seven or less, pupils could not be replaced.

Table 2.5 contains details of the sub-samples for the Irish Speaking Test as they were designed and as they were modified in the light of information from schools.

Table 2.5 Number of pupils in the designed and target sub-sample and the number of pupils in the target sub-sample who took the Irish Speaking Test as a percentage of the number of pupils in the population.

Type of school	Number of pupils in designed sub-sample (Irish-speaking)	Number of pupils in target sub-sample (Irish-speaking)	Percentage of population
Ordinary	980	975	2.0%
All-Irish	210	210	10.5%
Gaeltacht	336	313	27.2%

Field work procedures

After the sample of schools had been selected, the Deputy Chief Inspector of the DES wrote to all the schools inviting them to participate in the survey. Enclosed with the letter were forms on which the principal teacher was asked to list the classes in which there were sixth-grade pupils and, for each such class, the names and dates of birth of all sixth-grade pupils. Schools that had not returned the forms within two weeks of the letter having been issued were contacted by a member of the research team. Schools were informed that they would be contacted by a fieldworker over the following few weeks.

A team of retired primary school inspectors and retired principal teachers was appointed to carry out fieldwork. A total of 32 persons assisted in the administration of the survey in schools.

A briefing meeting was held at which each test administrator was provided with a manual containing copies of the test instruments, the context questionnaires, and detailed instructions for the administration of the tests and questionnaires. Fieldworkers were also given a list of the schools to which they had been assigned. The procedures to be followed during the administration of the survey were explained. Test administrators made preliminary visits to schools during the period 14 March to 12 April 2002. This visit had a number of purposes: (1) meet the Principal and the teacher of the selected sixth-grade class and explain the survey

procedures to them; (2) make arrangements for the main testing of pupils during the period 15 April -24 May; (3) administer the Pupil Questionnaire; (4) record the number of pupils who had an exemption from studying Irish according to circular 12/96; (5) establish whether any pupils were to be withdrawn from testing for other agreed reasons; and (6) distribute the questionnaires that were to be returned completed and collected at the time of the main testing. The Principal was requested to complete the School Questionnaire and the class teacher the Teacher Questionnaire. The test administrator administered the Pupil Questionnaire to the pupils in the selected sixth-grade class. On completing the administration of the Pupil Questionnaire, he/she gave a copy of the Parent Questionnaire to each pupil participating in the survey. A letter outlining the purpose of the survey and requesting the parent's co-operation was included, and parents were asked to return the completed questionnaire to the class teacher sealed in the envelope provided.

The test administrators returned to each school for a minimum of two days to undertake the main testing programme. On Day 1, the three sections of the Reading Test were administered to the class in three separate testing sessions of approximately 45 minutes. In addition, test administrators were advised to complete a minimum of two Irish Speaking Tests at times when group testing with the class was not in progress. The Irish Listening Test was administered during the first period of the day on Day 2, followed by the remainder of the individual Irish Speaking Tests. The questionnaires, completed by the Principal, the class teacher and the parents were collected. Arrangements were made to collect any other questionnaires at a later date, or the Principal was requested to return them to the Educational Research Centre by post. In cases where it was not possible to complete the individual Irish Speaking Test within the two-day testing schedule, test administrators could return to a school for a further half-day to complete testing.

On completion of the fieldwork in schools, a debriefing meeting was held with the test administrators in late June. At the meeting, the test administrators were given an opportunity to describe their experiences in the schools that they visited and pass on any additional information that they felt might help in the interpretation of data from the survey and might be of assistance in the planning of future surveys.

Response rates

Of the 220 schools selected at the first stage of sampling, 210 agreed to participate. Schools that chose not to participate were replaced in accordance with a procedure which ensured that the replacement school was as close as possible in terms of size and gender composition as the originally selected school. For one of the schools that refused to participate, it was not possible to identify a suitable replacement. Therefore, 219 schools participated in SAIL.

Because not all pupils were present when testing was carried out, the number of pupils for whom we have data on each instrument is always lower than the number of pupils in the target sample. In addition, not all parents returned the Parent Questionnaire. Tables 2.6, 2.7, and 2.8 contain the numbers of pupils and parents for whom data are available on each of the instruments in each of the three samples. These tables also show the number of pupils in the target sample and corresponding response rates.

Table 2.6 Response rates in ordinary schools for Irish achievement tests and pupil and parent questionnaires

Instrument	Number of pupils	Target sample	Response rate
Irish Reading Test	2,726	3,037	89.8%
Irish Listening Test	2,728	3,037	89.8%
Pupil Questionnaire	2,778	3,037	91.5%
Parent Questionnaire	2,744	3,037	90.4%
Irish Speaking Test	950	975	97.4%

Table 2.7 Response rates in all-Irish schools for Irish achievement tests and pupil and parent questionnaires

Instrument	Number of pupils	Target sample	Response rate
Irish Reading Test	624	683	91.4%
Irish Listening Test	640	683	93.7%
Pupil Questionnaire	609	683	89.2%
Parent Questionnaire	609	683	89.2%
Irish Speaking Test	208	210	99.1%

Table 2.8 Response rates in Gaeltacht schools for Irish achievement tests and pupil and parent questionnaires

Instrument	Number of pupils	Target sample	Response rate
Irish Reading Test	547	615	88.9%
Irish Listening Test	550	615	89.4%
Pupil Questionnaire	573	615	93.2%
Parent Questionnaire	575	615	93.5%
Irish Speaking Test	294	313	93.9%

All but three of the 219 school principals (all three school types) returned a completed School Questionnaire. A Teacher Questionnaire was received from 218 of the 219 participating schools.

Sampling weights

To ensure that analysis of data from the selected samples reflected the populations from which the samples were drawn, a series of sampling weights were calculated. Weights are necessary because schools and classes (and therefore pupils) were

sampled disproportionately with regard to their overall presence in the population. Weighting of data ensures that groups of pupils that are over-represented (e.g. pupils in large schools) do not exert an undue influence on estimates of population values and, therefore, do not bias findings. To prevent such bias, each pupil's score is multiplied by the inverse of the pupil's probability of being selected for the survey. The probability of selection is the product of the probability of the school being selected, the probability of the particular class being selected within a selected school, and (in the case of the Irish Speaking Test) the probability of the particular pupil being part of the sub-sample for that test.

The weighting process had two further features. The first was a correction to account for non-response at each level (e.g., a school declining to take part in the study or a pupil being absent on the day of testing) and is simply the number of schools or pupils selected divided by the number of schools or pupils from which data were returned. The second involved multiplying the weights calculated in the manner described above by the overall sampling fraction (the number of pupils in the sample divided by the number of pupils in the population). This step avoids confusion between sample estimates and total population parameters.

For the purpose of calculating sampling weights, the samples from the three school types (ordinary, all-Irish and Gaeltacht) can be regarded as having been drawn from three separate populations. This, therefore, requires three sets of weights, one for each school type. In addition, separate weights were needed for each of the three tests (Reading, Listening, and Speaking). Since it was intended that all pupils would take the Irish Reading and Irish Listening Test, the weights for these tests differ only in terms of corrections made for non-response at pupil level. The Irish Speaking Test was taken by a randomly selected subset of the pupils who had already been selected to take the Irish Listening and Irish Reading Tests. Thus, a separate weight was created for analysis of this test. The details of the weighting process are in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1 Formulae for the calculation of sampling weights

Raw scores of the Irish Listening and Irish Reading Tests were multiplied by:

n/N (sbw x scnr x cbw x pcnr)

Raw scores on the Irish Speaking Test were multiplied by:

n/N (sbw x scnr x cbw x pbw x pcnr)

n	is the number of pupils in the sample,
N	is the number of pupils in the population,
sbw	is the school base weight or the inverse of the probability of the school being selected
scnr	is the correction for non-response at the school level
cbw	is the class base weight or the inverse of the probability of the class being selected and is, therefore, equal to the number of sixth-grade classes in the school,
pcnr	is the correction for non-response at the pupil level,
pbw	is the pupil base weight or the inverse of the probability of the pupil being one of the seven pupils selected to take the Irish Speaking test.

Analysis of data

Data from all three tests, the Teacher Questionnaire and the Parent Questionnaire were matched at the level of the pupil. This means that it is possible to examine the average achievement of pupils having a particular attribute according to one of the questionnaires (e.g., the percentage of pupils whose parents are native Irish speakers). It also means that results relating to the Teacher Questionnaire can be reported in terms of percentages of pupils (e.g., the percentage of pupils whose teachers believe that standards of Irish reading have declined).

In this report, means and percentages are accompanied by standard errors calculated using the statistical package WesVar (Westat, 2000). A standard error is a measure of the extent to which a sample estimate of a mean or percentage is likely to differ from the true (unknown) value for the population from which the sample is drawn. WesVar uses a resampling ("jacknife") technique to generate a standard error for each population estimate, taking account of the design of the sample (in this case a two stage cluster sample). The result is that the standard errors are larger in the present survey than they would have been if it had been possible to use a simple random sample of pupils across all schools.

Features of the 1985 survey and sample

We turn now to a brief description of the 1985 survey of achievement in Irish Listening and Speaking at sixth grade and the approach to sampling. As in the case of the survey reported here, the 1985 survey was based on separate samples of pupils from ordinary, all-Irish, and Gaeltacht schools. However, unlike the present survey, in which the school was the initial sampling unit, the initial sampling unit in 1985 was the class. For each type of school, all classes with sixth-grade pupils, excluding those in private and special schools, were listed. The order of listing classes was by school roll number, and classes in schools containing more than one sixth-grade class were listed consecutively. Starting with a random number, classes were selected from the list at equal intervals. Because of the size of the selection intervals no more than one sixth-grade class could be selected from any school. This procedure resulted in a sample of 129 sixth-grade classes in ordinary schools, 16 sixth-grade classes in all-Irish schools, and 35 sixth-grade classes in Gaeltacht schools. All testing, was conducted by primary-school inspectors of the Department of Education. A small number of pupils who had either never studied Irish or who had only recently begun to do so were excluded from the sample. Achievement test data were collected from 2203 pupils in ordinary schools, 301 pupils in all-Irish schools, and 369 pupils in Gaeltacht schools.

In making comparisons between the 1985 and 2002 samples in relation to achievement in Irish Listening and Irish Speaking, a small number of sixth-grade classes will be excluded from the 1985 sample to balance the omission of corresponding classes in selecting the 2002 sample. The excluded classes are ones in which there are less than six pupils in sixth grade, in the case of ordinary and all-Irish schools, and less than three pupils in the case of Gaeltacht schools. A total of

50 pupils are excluded from the 1985 sample in this way, 48 from ordinary schools and two from Gaeltacht schools.

One procedural difference between the 1985 and 2002 surveys may be noted here. In the case of ordinary and all-Irish schools, the Irish Speaking Test in 1985 was divided into two halves (Part a and Part b), with each half being administered to alternate pupils. The division of the test was carried out in terms of whole objectives. Thus, all items relating to an objective were assigned to the same half of the test and within that half of the test, items relating to each objective appeared in the same order as on the original test. The assignment of alternate halves of the test meant that Irish Speaking data was generated for each pupil in ordinary and all-Irish schools in the 1985 sample. But half these pupils took only Part a items and the other half took Part b. In the case of Gaeltacht schools in 1985, all pupils took the whole Irish Speaking Test (see Chapter 4 for further details). In 2002, in contrast, sub-samples of pupils in all three types of school took the *whole* Irish Speaking Test.

One of the consequences of this difference in administration of the Irish Speaking Test in the two surveys is that, while there is no difficulty comparing data relating to individual test objectives over time, overall mean scores on the Irish Speaking Test in the two time periods cannot be compared in the case of ordinary school and all-Irish school pupils. They can be compared, however, in the case of Gaeltacht school pupils. Overall mean scores can also, of course, be compared in the case of Irish Listening for all three types of school, since the assignment of alternate halves in 1985 only applied to the Irish Speaking Test.

Information on the teaching and learning of Irish was also collected by means of a Teacher Questionnaire in 1985. Because several relevant questions appeared in both the 1985 and the 2002 versions of the Teacher Questionnaires, an analysis of changes in some teachers' attitudes and practices is possible. Teacher Questionnaire data were collected from the teachers of a total of 2104 pupils in ordinary schools in 1985, the only sample used as a comparison with 2002 data. Again, for the purposes of comparison, the smallest schools were omitted.

Conclusion

Achievement in Irish was measured using modified versions of criterion-referenced tests that had been used in previous surveys by ITÉ and a new test of reading developed at the ERC. A series of questionnaires were also used to obtain information on context variables such as teachers' views and practices in relation to teaching and learning Irish (the Teacher Questionnaire) and parents' educational and socioeconomic backgrounds as well as their knowledge and use of Irish and their attitudes to Irish in general and to Irish in the education system (the Parent Questionnaire).

Pupils in sixth grade in all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools as well as in ordinary schools were the focus. Two-stage cluster sampling was used to select samples of 140 ordinary schools, 30 all-Irish schools and 50 Gaeltacht schools. One intact class was

tested in each participating school using group-administered tests (Irish Listening and Reading) and a random sample of up to seven pupils was individually tested on Irish Speaking.

Fieldwork for the survey was carried out by a team of 32 retired school inspectors or principals who made a preliminary visit to each of the schools assigned to them and then returned to the school for at least two full days of testing.

A total of 219 schools participated in the survey. Because of pupil absences when testing took place, the number of pupils for whom data on each instrument are available was always less than the number in the target sample. Response rates for the four pupil-level instruments (three tests and the Pupil Questionnaire) ranged from 88.9% to 99.1% across school types. The response rate for the Parent Questionnaire ranged from 89.2% to 93.5%. A Teacher Questionnaire was received from 218 of the 219 participating schools.

A sampling weight was applied to each pupils score to take account of the overrepresentation of some groups (e.g., those in large schools) and of non-response at the school and pupil levels.

Because the present survey replicates many features of a previous ITÉ survey in 1985, it is possible to examine changes that occurred in the intervening period, in relation to achievement on the Listening and Speaking Tests though not on the Reading Test. Analysis of change in some teacher attitudes and practices is also possible.

Chapter 3

Irish Listening Achievement

Irish Listening Achievement

Description and revision of the Irish Listening Test

The Irish Listening Test used in the 2002 survey is a revised version of a criterion-referenced test (*Triail Éisteachta ITÉ - VI*) previously used in surveys by ITÉ in 1978 and 1985 (Harris, 1983; 1984; Harris & Murtagh 1988a: Harris, Murtagh, Hickey, De Nais & Ó Domhnalláin, 1985). An important goal in using this test in the 2002 survey was to establish if there had been any significant changes in achievement in listening in Irish at the sixth-grade level since 1985. Our interest in measuring these long-term changes was also a major factor governing the kind of changes we decided to make in the original test. Basically, we wished to make the minimum possible number of changes in content and in administration so that a comparison between pupil performance using the test in 2002 and in the 1985 *Triail Éisteachta ITÉ - VI* would not be unnecessarily complicated. We will first describe the original *Triail Éisteachta ITÉ - VI* and then the changes in content and administration which were made.

Content and objectives of the Irish Listening Test

The original Irish Listening Test used in the 1978 national survey was designed to show whether pupils had attained mastery of particular objectives. These objectives were determined by the content of the Department of Education audio-visual *Nuachúrsaí* (Ireland: Department of Education, 1978) for 5th and 6th grades. The *Nuachúrsaí* were the official Department of Education courses in spoken Irish, which dominated the teaching of Irish and lesson materials until the revised curriculum was issued in 1999. Thus, the sixth-grade pupils tested in the 2002 national survey largely learned Irish under the 'old' curriculum and were exposed to teaching materials which were influenced by that curriculum. To that extent, *Triail Éisteachta ITÉ - VI* which had been used in testing Irish listening in 1978/1985 was considered to be still basically the most suitable test for assessing the listening skills of sixth-grade pupils in 2002, subject to certain peripheral changes which are described below. The issues involved in translating the content of the *Nuachúrsaí* into content-skill objectives for the original *Triail Éisteachta ITÉ-VI* are discussed in some detail by Harris (1984).

The Irish Listening Test objectives are identified here by brief names such as *General comprehension of speech* and *Understanding the morphology of verbs in listening*. A list of the seven objectives tested may be found in Table 3.1. All items were in multiple-choice form and were presented on a cassette tape to entire class-groups of pupils. Examiners could give instructions in Irish or English, whichever language would best ensure that the pupil understood the task. The items themselves, however, were entirely in Irish. The cassette was recorded by male and female native speakers of Connaught Irish. Each spoken item on the tape was followed by the various multiple-choice spoken answers. Key parts of some groups of items were repeated. Some items had printed versions of the answer options in the pupils' booklets. No item could be answered by reading alone, however, and the vast majority of items

could be answered without making any use of the printed material at all. Answers were recorded by pupils marking one of four letters in the test booklet. Considerable use was made of drawings. The Irish Listening Test was administered in most cases before the individual Irish Speaking Test (see Chapter 2).

Table 3.1 List of objectives on the Irish Listening Test and the number of items used to test each.

Objectives on the Irish Listening Test	Number of items
1. Sound discrimination	10
2. Listening vocabulary	20
3. General comprehension of speech	25
4. Understanding the morphology of verbs	8
5. Understanding the morphology of prepositions	4
6. Understanding the morphology of qualifiers	4
7. Understanding the morphology of nouns	4

Three levels of performance in relation to each objective were distinguished: 'mastery', 'minimal progress' and 'failure to make minimal progress' (see Harris, 1984). The percentage of items correct which counted as mastery was 75%. In applying this criterion, fractional results were truncated: that is we accepted as a success the whole number score immediately below the fractional score appropriate to the criterion. This level was decided when the test was originally developed and was based primarily on the judgments of a group of primary-school inspectors using a modified version of the Angoff method (Angoff, 1971; Livingston & Zieky, 1982; Harris, 1984). Minimal progress was defined as 40% (or more) correct responding, but less than the 75% needed for mastery. 'Failure' was defined as less than 40% correct responding. In both these cases also criterion scores which resulted in fractions were truncated.

Most of the data which we will be presenting about performance on the test will consist of the percentage of pupils who achieved each of these three defined levels of performance on each objective: (i) mastery, (ii) at least minimal progress without attaining mastery, and (iii) failure to make even minimal progress.

It may be useful to describe one of the objectives, *General comprehension of speech*, as an illustration of our approach to testing. Items in three different formats were used in testing *General comprehension of speech*. One group of items required pupils to identify which of four different drawings exactly matched the situation described in a simple spoken sentence. The second group of items required the pupil to listen to a statement and then to answer a spoken multiple-choice question concerning the speaker's identity, location or feelings, the identity of the person addressed, the occasion on which the statement was uttered, or the content of the statement itself. The third group of items required the pupil to listen to a brief (60+ words) spoken description of an incident and then to answer a series of multiple-choice questions involving the identification of information or the making of simple inferences.[2]

[2] See also discussion of morphology related objectives in Chapter 4 (page 54).

Revision of *Triail Éisteachta - VI* for use in the 2002 survey

As pointed out earlier, the objectives and content of the Irish Listening Test are very relevant to the population of sixth-grade pupils who participated in the 2002 survey because, for most of the eight years of their primary school career, they would have learned Irish under the 1971 curriculum. That is, they would have been taught spoken Irish using either the audio-visual *Nuachúrsaí* (Department of Education, 1978) or one of the commercially produced courses based on that same syllabus and teaching method. Teachers would have been following basically the old curriculum up to 1999 at the very least, when the revised curriculum, *Curaclam na Bunscoile*, was published (NCCA, 1999a,b,c). The *Primary Curriculum Support Programme* began inservice training and school planning days for the revised curriculum in Irish in 2000 and this was still in progress as the 2002 survey was being carried out. September 2003, the officially recommended start-up date for implementing the curriculum, was also when the first new Irish courses based on the revised curriculum for senior grades became available from one of the commercial publishers. Reponses by teachers to a questionnaire administered as part of the 2002 survey indicated that at the time of testing a quarter of them had not even begun to implement the revised curriculum.

Quite apart from all this, the overall goal of Irish language teaching at primary level - to equip pupils to communicate in Irish - has not in any case changed under the revised curriculum. What has changed is the general approach to teaching and learning in the classroom, and the tasks and activities the pupil is engaged in. But pupils who are learning Irish in the new explicitly communicative environment would be expected to develop the same command of vocabulary, ability to comprehend spoken Irish and other linguistic and communicative skills as pupils who were being taught with the old audio-visual approach and materials. There is in any case, of course, a considerable amount of overlap between the communicative functions and topics covered in the *Nuachúrsaí* and in the revised curriculum, as indeed there is in any second or foreign language programme at primary level.

Despite the general suitability of *Triail Éisteachta - VI*, it was necessary to make some essential changes to produce the 2002 Irish Listening Test while at the same time not changing the content-skill objectives or items in any fundamental way. The 2002 version of the test retains the content and format of the original 1978 *Triail Éisteachta - VI* but incorporates a number of general changes in materials, as well as a number of specific changes in the content of particular items. In making these changes, we were concerned to make the most valid and reliable comparison possible between achievement in Irish Listening nationally in 1985 and 2002. More specifically, we wanted to remove extraneous sources of difficulty for pupils in responding to the test items which might have arisen for various reasons between 1985 and 2002. Evidence presented later suggests that the changes we made had the intended effect.

There were both specific and general changes in materials as follows:

(1) We had to change the drawings and/or the language content in the case of a number of specific items in order to accommodate changes in culture or in the physical environment in the interim. Among the issues of this

kind were the changeover from the pound to the euro, changes in house furnishings and cars, and a greater awareness of gender stereotyping. It is difficult to see how the changes relating to these topics in themselves would alter the difficulty level of items, but of course that possibility has to be considered.

(2) Having implemented this small number of changes, it was clear that we would have to redo all the other drawings in the original test to preserve uniformity of style.

(3) We felt we had no option but to record anew the cassette tape used for delivering the items using new speakers as the quality of the original recordings had deteriorated over the intervening period. In recording material, we examined carefully the timing and pace of the original recording and strove to maintain these in the new version.

In making these changes, we decided to err on the side of making the items easier than they had been for pupils in 1985. The decision to make changes which were likely if anything to reduce test difficulty was important because pre-testing of the listening and speaking items in a number of schools prior to the 2002 survey suggested the probability that standards of achievement in Irish in ordinary schools had fallen since 1985. The views of teachers and principals as later recorded in questionnaires administered during the survey itself supported this judgement (see Chapter 7). Complaints about the lack of suitable teaching materials for Irish during the 1990s, and a belief among teachers that Irish was the subject most in need of review and renewal (INTO, 1996; 1998a, b), were also broadly consistent with a fall in standards since 1985. We wanted to ensure as far as possible, therefore, that any sources of extraneous difficulty for pupils related to unsuitable items would be removed so that it would not be a plausible explanation for a deterioration in standards of achievement were the data to indicate such a result.

There are a number of kinds of achievement data from the 2002 survey, as well as item analysis data from 1985 and 2002, which indicate that we were successful in removing any major extraneous source of difficulty for pupils taking the test in 2002.

(1) Pupils who are likely a *priori* to have high levels of Irish Listening achievement in the language (e.g., by virtue of attending an all-Irish school) do as well overall in terms of mean score on the test in 2002 as their peers did in 1985. In other words, if sixth-grade pupils have the requisite listening skill in Irish, the 2002 version of the test appears to pose no intrinsic difficulty for them. This increases our confidence in concluding that the decline in performance of pupils in ordinary schools between 1985 and 2002 which is revealed in our data is a true decline in proficiency in Irish and not some artefact of extraneous sources of difficulty.

(2) The 11 items with specific changes are associated with a mean reduction (between 1985 and 2002) in the percentage of pupils in ordinary schools succeeding on them which is not significantly different from the mean

reduction for items which do not have specific changes. The mean fall in percentage for 'changed' items is 17.9% (SD=12.89) while the mean fall for the other 64 items is 17.2% (SD=12.36).

(3) The five most radically changed items within these 11 are associated with an overall *smaller* decrease in pupil performance between 1985 and 2002 than items generally. The mean percentage of pupils succeeding on each item in 1985 exceeds that in 2002 by 17.3%. In the case of the five most radically changed items, however, the mean decline on each item is only 13.8% (see Table 3.2). Thus, the process of change appears likely to have reduced the difficulty of these items relative to other ones.

Table 3.2 Mean percentage difference in item difficulty in ordinary schools between 1985 and 2002.

1985 – 2002	Mean Difference *(SD)*
Mean difference in difficulty for all 75 items	17.3% *(12.35)*
Mean difference in difficulty for unchanged items (n=64)	17.2% *(12.36)*
Mean difference in difficulty for changed items (n=11)	17.9% *(12.89)*
Mean difference in difficulty for 5 most changed items	13.8% *(15.88)*

Irish Listening achievement

Mastery, minimal progress and failure in 1985 and 2002

In this section we examine the performance of sixth-grade pupils on the Irish Listening Test in 2002 and compare it to equivalent data from the 1985 survey. Our general questions are: How do pupils perform in relation to the various Irish Listening objectives in ordinary, all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools? Has achievement in Irish listening changed significantly since 1985? What is the magnitude of the change? Is the change more focussed on certain linguistic or listening skills rather than others?

We present data in relation to each of the seven objectives on the test for each of the two points in time. These consist of the percentages of pupils nationally who (a) attain mastery (b) make at least minimal progress and (c) fail to make minimal progress in relation to each objective. These data will also indicate whether changes in Irish Listening skills are more closely associated with some curricular objectives, or dimensions of performance, than with others. We present mean raw scores on the test as a whole later in the chapter.

Ordinary schools

Data on the percentages of pupils attending ordinary schools who attained the highest level of performance (mastery) are presented in Table 3.3. These show that there has been a substantial fall-off between 1985[3] and 2002 in the percentage of

[3] A small number of sixth-grade classes in small schools were excluded from the 1985 sample (n=50 pupils in total) in order to maintain comparability with the 2002 sample which omitted the smallest schools (i.e. where there were less than 6 pupils in sixth grade in ordinary schools or less than 3 pupils in sixth-grade in Gaeltacht schools).

pupils attaining high levels of performance for six of the seven Irish Listening objectives. All six declines are statistically significant[4]. For example, there was a fall of 36.1% and 40.5% respectively in the percentages of pupils mastering the *Listening vocabulary* and *General comprehension of speech* objectives. This leaves very small minorities of pupils (5.9% and 7.8% of pupils respectively) in ordinary schools that achieve high levels of performance on these two objectives in 2002. The decline in relation to these objectives would seem to be of particular importance because they are central to the use of Irish for real communication.

Objectives relating to *Understanding the morphology of verbs in listening* and *Understanding the morphology of prepositions in listening* are associated with falls of 24% and 22.1% respectively, with only 2.9% and 11.8% respectively still mastering these objectives in 2002. Two other objectives are associated with a decline in the percentage achieving mastery of 16.6% and 13.1% respectively. *Sound discrimination* is the only objective where the decline in performance is not statistically significant.

Table 3.3 Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools who attain mastery on each objective on the Irish Listening Test in 1985 and 2002.

Ordinary Schools Listening objective	Attain Mastery 1985	2002	Difference (2002-1985)
Sound discrimination	84.7% *(1.39)*	84.2% *(1.41)*	- 0.5%
Listening vocabulary	42.0% *(3.00)*	5.9% *(1.08)*	**- 36.1%**
General comprehension of speech	48.3% *(2.94)*	7.8% *(1.20)*	**- 40.5%**
Understanding the morphology of verbs	26.9% *(2.35)*	2.9% *(0.61)*	**- 24.0%**
Understanding the morphology of prepositions	33.9% *(2.43)*	11.8% *(0.91)*	**- 22.1%**
Understanding the morphology of qualifiers	30.6% *(2.68)*	14.0% *(1.42)*	**- 16.6%**
Understanding the morphology of nouns	16.8% *(1.54)*	3.7% *(0.49)*	**- 13.1%**

Significant differences ($p<.05$) are printed in bold. Standard error printed in italics. N (1985) = 2155, N (2002) = 2728.

Tables 3.4 and 3.5 show the percentage of pupils in ordinary schools attaining *minimal progress* and *failing* respectively in 1985 and 2002. These tables also allow us to see how the reduction in the percentages of pupils attaining *mastery* in 2002 results in increases in the percentages judged to be making *minimal progress* or *failing* in 2002. Looking at the third column of each of these two tables, we see that what has happened is that for most objectives there has been a moderate increase in the percentage of pupils reaching the lower level of performance defined as minimal progress (or an actual decrease in one case), but a larger increase in the percentage failing. For example, *Listening vocabulary* and *General comprehension of speech* are associated with an increase between 1985 and 2002 of 27.9% and 24.4% respectively in the percentages failing (Table 3.5). Increases in the percentages making at least minimal progress are only 8.3% and 16% respectively.

[4] Differences between pairs of percentages in 1985 and 2002 were tested by referring each difference and its standard error to critical values associated with the z distribution, rather than the t distribution, as this avoids the complexities involved in calculating the degrees of freedom corresponding to values of t (Agresti & Finlay, 1997, pp. 219-222).

Table 3.4 **Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools who make at least minimal progress (but not mastery) on each objective on the Irish Listening Test in 1985 and 2002.**

Ordinary Schools Listening objective	At least minimal progress 1985	2002	Difference (2002-1985)
Sound discrimination	11.6% *(1.07)*	12.8% *(1.03)*	+1.3%
Listening vocabulary	43.5% *(2.08)+*	51.8% *(1.88)*	**+8.3%**
General comprehension of speech	39.9% *(2.12)*	55.9% *(1.74)*	**+16.0%**
Understanding the morphology of verbs	45.4% *(1.41)*	48.3% *(1.30)*	+2.9%
Understanding the morphology of prepositions	56.5% *(1.99)*	69.3% *(1.17)*	**+12.8%**
Understanding the morphology of qualifiers	53.7% *(1.92)*	62.7% *(1.11)*	**+9.0%**
Understanding the morphology of nouns	63.4% *(1.21)*	58.8% *(1.36)*	**-4.6%**

Significant differences (p<.05) are printed in bold. Standard error printed in italics. N (1985) = 2155, N (2002) = 2728.

Table 3.5 **Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools who fail each objective on the Irish Listening Test in 1985 and 2002.**

Ordinary Schools Listening objective	Fail 1985	2002	Difference (2002-1985)
Sound discrimination	3.9% *(0.53)*	3.1% *(0.66)*	- 0.8%
Listening vocabulary	14.4% *(1.93)*	42.3% *(2.00)*	**+ 27.9%**
General comprehension of speech	11.8% *(1.59)*	36.2% *(1.75)*	**+ 24.4%**
Understanding the morphology of verbs	27.7% *(2.00)*	48.7% *(1.40)*	**+ 21.0%**
Understanding the morphology of prepositions	9.6% *(0.93)*	18.9% *(1.09)*	**+ 9.3%**
Understanding the morphology of qualifiers	15.7% *(1.42)*	23.3% *(1.22)*	**+ 7.6%**
Understanding the morphology of nouns	19.7% *(1.54)*	37.5% *(1.54)*	**+ 17.8%**

Significant differences (p<.05) are printed in bold. Standard error printed in italics. N (1985) = 2155, N (2002) = 2728.

All-Irish schools

Very high percentages of pupils achieved mastery of most objectives in 2002 in all-Irish schools (Tables 3.6 to 3.8). *Listening vocabulary* and *General comprehension of speech*, for example, are mastered by 89.3% and 96.3% respectively. In the case of a further three objectives, the lowest percentage attaining mastery is 86.4%. Only two objectives are associated with mastery percentages less than this: *Understanding the morphology of verbs in listening* (mastered by 61.3% of pupils) and *Understanding the morphology of nouns* (32.1% of pupils).

Table 3.6 **Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in all-Irish schools who attain mastery on each objective on the Irish Listening Test in 1985 and 2002.**

All-Irish Schools Listening objective	Attain Mastery 1985	2002	Difference (2002-1985)
Sound discrimination	96.0% *(1.24)*	97.0% *(1.06)*	+1.0%
Listening vocabulary	90.4% *(4.04)*	89.3% *(3.13)*	-1.1%
General comprehension of speech	96.4% *(1.00)*	96.3% *(1.92)*	-0.1%
Understanding the morphology of verbs	76.1% *(3.72)*	61.3% *(4.02)*	**- 14.8%**
Understanding the morphology of prepositions	93.0% *(1.44)*	86.4% *(1.57)*	**- 6.6%**
Understanding the morphology of qualifiers	80.1% *(2.69)*	87.8% *(2.12)*	**+7.7%**
Understanding the morphology of nouns	56.5% *(6.89)*	32.1% *(3.06)*	**- 24.4%**

Significant differences ($p<.05$) are printed in bold. Standard error printed in italics. N (1985) = 301, N (2002) = 640.

Despite the generally high percentages of all-Irish pupils mastering most Irish Listening objectives in 2002, there are statistically significant declines since 1985 in the case of three of the seven objectives. Two of the three manifesting a significant decline are the least frequently mastered objectives just mentioned - *Understanding the morphology of verbs in listening* (where there is a fall of 14.8% since 1985) and *Understanding the morphology of nouns* (where there is a fall of 24.4%). The third objective associated with falling percentages is *Understanding the morphology of prepositions in listening* (a decline of 6.6%). Note that two central Irish Listening objectives, *Listening vocabulary* and *General comprehension of speech*, are mastered by very similar percentages of pupils in 1985 and 2002 and the differences are not statistically significant.

More generally, it may be noted that in the case of all-Irish schools the size of the decline between 1985 and 2002 in the percentages achieving 'mastery' levels of performance in relation to six of the seven objectives (Table 3.6) is much smaller than in ordinary schools (Table 3.3) and, of course, any fall is from a much higher base in 1985 in the case of all-Irish schools. Six of the objectives are associated with significant declines in ordinary schools as opposed to three in the case of all-Irish schools. In the case of one objective, *Understanding the morphology of qualifiers in listening* the percentage actually increases significantly (7.7%) in all-Irish schools. A further objective *Sound discrimination* is also associated with an increase in the percentage attaining mastery in 2002, but this is not statistically significant.

Table 3.7 **Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in all-Irish schools who make at least minimal progress (but not mastery) on each objective on the Irish Listening Test in 1985 and 2002.**

All-Irish Schools Listening objective	At least minimal progress 1985	2002	Difference (2002-1985)
Sound discrimination	3.7% *(1.12)*	2.7% *(1.07)*	-1.0%
Listening vocabulary	9.0% *(3.63)*	10.2% *(3.03)*	+1.2%
General comprehension of speech	3.7% *(1.00)*	3.7% *(1.92)*	0%
Understanding the morphology of verbs	22.9% *(3.44)*	38.1% *(3.85)*	**+15.2%**
Understanding the morphology of prepositions	7.0% *(1.44)*	13.2% *(1.46)*	**+6.2%**
Understanding the morphology of qualifiers	19.9% *(2.69)*	11.9% *(2.10)*	**-8.0%**
Understanding the morphology of nouns	39.2% *(5.51)*	61.5% *(2.72)*	**+22.3%**

Significant differences (p<.05) are printed in bold. Standard error printed in italics. N (1985) = 301, N (2002) = 640.

Table 3.8 **Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in all-Irish schools who fail each objective on the Irish Listening Test in 1985 and 2002.**

All-Irish Schools Listening objective	Fail 1985	2002	Difference (2002-1985)
Sound discrimination	0.3% *(0.36)*	0.3% *(0.23)*	0%
Listening vocabulary	0.7% *(0.45)*	0.5% *(0.29)*	-0.2%
General comprehension of speech	0% *(-)*	0% *(-)*	0%
Understanding the morphology of verbs	1.0% *(0.53)*	0.6% *(0.36)*	-0.4%
Understanding the morphology of prepositions	0% *(-)*	0.4% *(0.25)*	+0.4%
Understanding the morphology of qualifiers	0% *(-)*	0.3% *(0.05)*	**+0.3%**
Understanding the morphology of nouns	4.3% *(1.78)*	6.5% *(1.32)*	+2.2%

Significant differences (p<.05) are printed in bold. Standard error printed in italics. N (1985) = 301, N (2002) = 640.

Comparing data in Tables 3.6 and 3.7, it may be noted that the three objectives manifesting a statistically significant decline in the percentages attaining mastery between 1985 and 2002 (Table 3.6) are also associated with increases of very nearly the same magnitude in the percentages making minimal progress in the same period (Table 3.7), increases which in all three cases are also statistically significant. In other words, a segment of the all-Irish school population appears to have slipped from mastery to minimal progress in relation to these objectives. But the drop in performance does not extend to an increase in failure in these three objectives. Failure on all of the seven listening objectives is extremely low in all-Irish schools, and in all but one case *Understanding the morphology of qualifiers in listening* (where the increase is only 0.3%), has not changed significantly since 1985 (Table 3.8).

'Failure' of course does not mean that a pupil has made no progress in listening achievement at all. Since the conclusions about percentages of pupils failing apply to sixth-grade objectives, a pupil could fail to master an objective at this level, but still have made progress in that knowledge-skill objective at a lower grade level.

Gaeltacht schools

Tables 3.9 to 3.11 show the mastery, minimal progress and failure rates relating to each Irish Listening objective for Gaeltacht schools. For all seven objectives, the percentages attaining mastery in Gaeltacht schools in 2002 are intermediate between ordinary and all-Irish schools, though considerably closer to all-Irish schools (Table 3.9). For example, the percentages attaining mastery of *General comprehension of speech* in Gaeltacht schools in 2002 was 73.3% whereas it was 96.3% in all-Irish schools (Table 3.6) and 7.8% in ordinary schools (Table 3.3).

Table 3.9 Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in Gaeltacht schools who attain mastery on each objective on the Irish Listening Test in 1985 and 2002.

Gaeltacht Schools Listening objective	Attain Mastery 1985	2002	Difference (2002-1985)
Sound discrimination	82.6% *(2.02)*	89.8% *(1.84)*	**+7.2%**
Listening vocabulary	80.1% *(3.82)*	65.3% *(5.66)*	**-14.8%**
General comprehension of speech	84.7% *(3.25)*	73.3% *(5.24)*	- 11.4%
Understanding the morphology of verbs	60.8% *(5.94)*	44.7% *(5.40)*	**-16.1%**
Understanding the morphology of prepositions	71.7% *(5.69)*	60.4% *(5.33)*	-11.3%
Understanding the morphology of qualifiers	64.6% *(5.03)*	68.5% *(4.88)*	+3.9%
Understanding the morphology of nouns	44.1% *(6.08)*	32.8% *(5.37)*	-11.3%

Significant differences (p<.05) are printed in bold. Standard error printed in italics. N (1985) = 367, N (2002) = 550.

As can be seen from Table 3.9, two of the objectives are mastered by less than 50% of Gaeltacht pupils in 2002 - *Understanding the morphology of verbs in listening* (44.7%) and *Understanding the morphology of nouns in listening* (32.8%). Table 3.9 also shows that five of the seven objectives are associated with a fall in performance between 1985 and 2002, but the fall is statistically significant only in the case of two objectives - *Listening vocabulary* (a drop of 14.8%) and *Understanding the morphology of verbs in listening* (a fall of 16.1%). It is notable also that in four of the five objectives associated with a decline in the percentage of pupils attaining mastery, the decline is resolved in a greater increase in the percentage attaining minimal progress (Table 3.10) than in failure (Table 3.11). There is a significant *increase* (7.2%) in the case of *Sound discrimination*. One other objective *Understanding the morphology of qualifiers*, shows an increase in the percentage of pupils attaining mastery but this is not significant.

Table 3.10 **Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in Gaeltacht schools who make at least minimal progress (but not mastery) on each objective on the Irish Listening Test in 1985 and 2002.**

Gaeltacht Schools Listening objective	At least minimal progress 1985	2002	Difference (2002-1985)
Sound discrimination	12.8% *(1.84)*	9.2% *(1.51)*	-3.6%
Listening vocabulary	18.5% *(3.53)*	29.7% *(4.75)*	+11.2%
General comprehension of speech	13.9% *(2.85)*	22.4% *(4.35)*	+8.5%
Understanding the morphology of verbs	30.8% *(4.41)*	41.0% *(3.31)*	+10.2%
Understanding the morphology of prepositions	26.7% *(5.53)*	34.2% *(4.09)*	+7.5%
Understanding the morphology of qualifiers	30.5% *(4.00)*	26.1% *(3.87)*	-4.4%
Understanding the morphology of nouns	46.9% *(3.87)*	49.9% *(4.08)*	+3.0%

None of the differences are significant. Standard error printed in italics. N (1985) = 367, N (2002) = 550.

Looking at all seven Irish Listening objectives, the failure rates in Gaeltacht schools in 2002 (Table 3.11) are much closer to those of all-Irish schools (Table 3.8) than to those of ordinary schools (Table 3.5). For example, the percentage of pupils in Gaeltacht schools who fail *Understanding the morphology of verbs* is 14.3%, while it is 0.6% in all-Irish schools and 48.7% in ordinary schools. For most objectives, *changes* in failure rates between 1985 and 2002 are closer to those in all-Irish schools than in ordinary schools. For example, increases in failure rates since 1985 are significant for only one Irish Listening objective in the case of all-Irish schools, three objectives in the case of Gaeltacht schools, and six objectives in the case of ordinary schools. For most objectives, the increase in the percentage of Gaeltacht pupils failing is less than 4 % and in one case, *Sound discrimination* there is a significant *decrease* in the percentage failing.

The relative difficulty of the various objectives is broadly similar in the three school populations. Thus, the most frequently mastered objectives in ordinary schools also tend to be relatively frequently mastered in all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools. All-Irish and Gaeltacht rankings of objectives in terms of the percentages attaining mastery are the closest, however, with five objectives having identical ranks in these two types of schools and two having ranks which differ only by one.

Finally, in considering the implications for Gaeltacht schools, it is important to bear in mind the linguistically diverse nature of these schools in terms of pupils' home language background and the extent of Irish-medium instruction at school (Harris, 1984; Harris & Murtagh, 1987). Thus, comparisons of changes in Irish achievement over time in Gaeltacht schools, and an examination of any changes in the performance differential between such schools and ordinary and all-Irish schools over time, require much more detailed analysis. We will return to a further examination of achievement in Gaeltacht schools in Chapter 7.

Table 3.11 **Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in Gaeltacht schools who fail each objective on the Irish Listening Test in 1985 and 2002.**

Gaeltacht Schools Listening objective	Fail 1985	Fail 2002	Difference (2002-1985)
Sound discrimination	4.6% *(0.96)*	1.1% *(0.42)*	**- 3.5%**
Listening vocabulary	1.4% *(0.57)*	4.9% *(1.42)*	**+ 3.5%**
General comprehension of speech	1.4% *(0.66)*	4.3% *(1.46)*	+ 2.9%
Understanding the morphology of verbs	8.5% *(2.65)*	14.3% *(3.00)*	+ 5.8%
Understanding the morphology of prepositions	1.6% *(0.70)*	5.4% *(1.52)*	**+ 3.8%**
Understanding the morphology of qualifiers	4.9% *(1.52)*	5.4% *(1.57)*	+ 0.5%
Understanding the morphology of nouns	9.0% *(2.93)*	17.3% *(2.88)*	**+ 8.3%**

Significant differences (p<.05) are printed in bold. Standard error printed in italics. N (1985) = 367, N (2002) = 550.

Figures 3.1 to 3.4 are designed to illustrate for four of the Irish Listening objectives the changes between 1985 and 2002 in the percentages of pupils in ordinary, all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools who attain mastery, make minimal progress, or fail. They also illustrate the differential rates of decline in performance in the three types of school.

Figure 3.1 **Percentages of sixth-grade pupils in 1985 and 2002 who achieve different levels of performance on the objective *Sound discrimination*.**

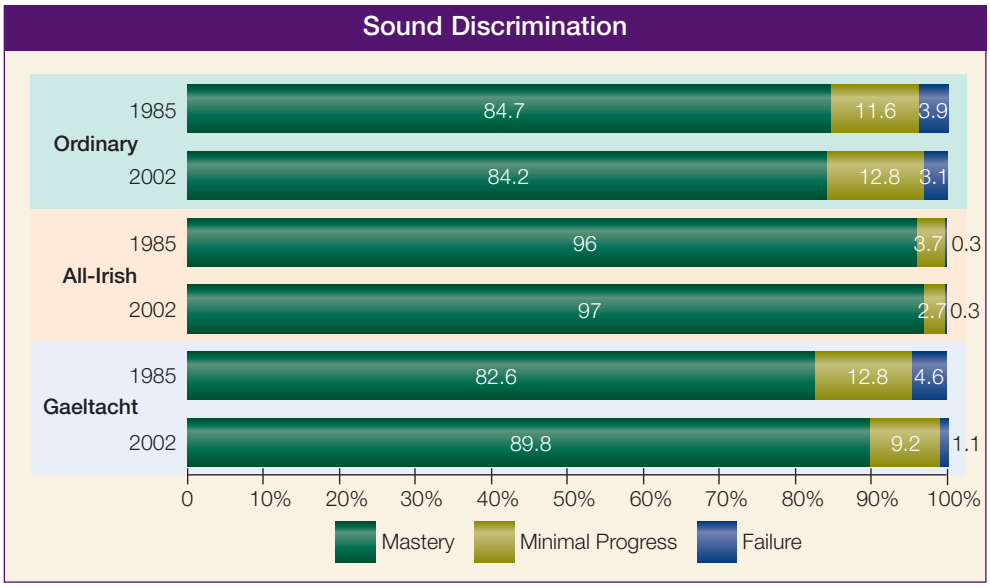


Figure 3.2 Percentages of sixth-grade pupils in 1985 and 2002 who achieve different levels of performance on the objective *Listening vocabulary*.

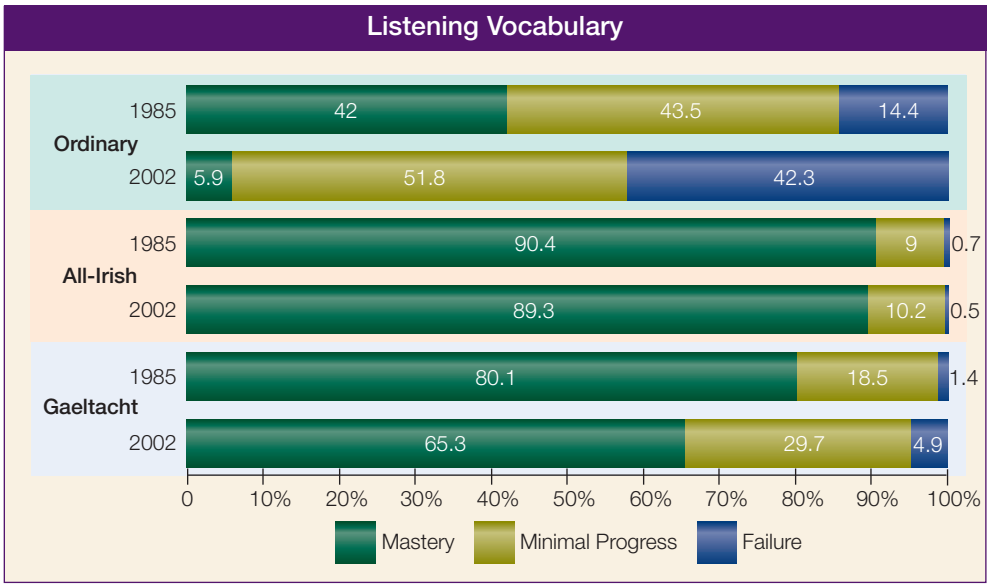


Figure 3.3 Percentages of sixth-grade pupils in 1985 and 2002 who achieve different levels of performance on the objective *General comprehension of speech*.

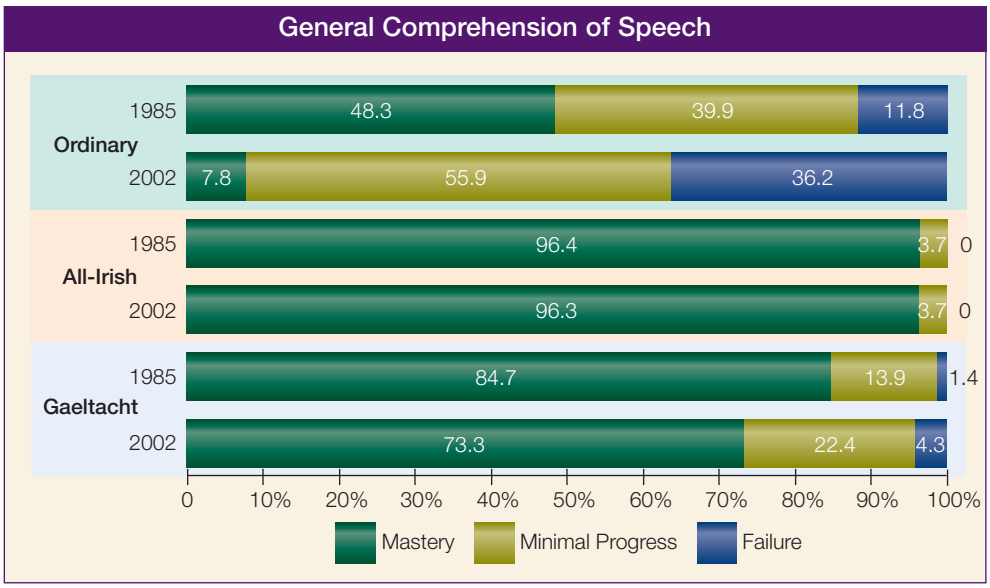
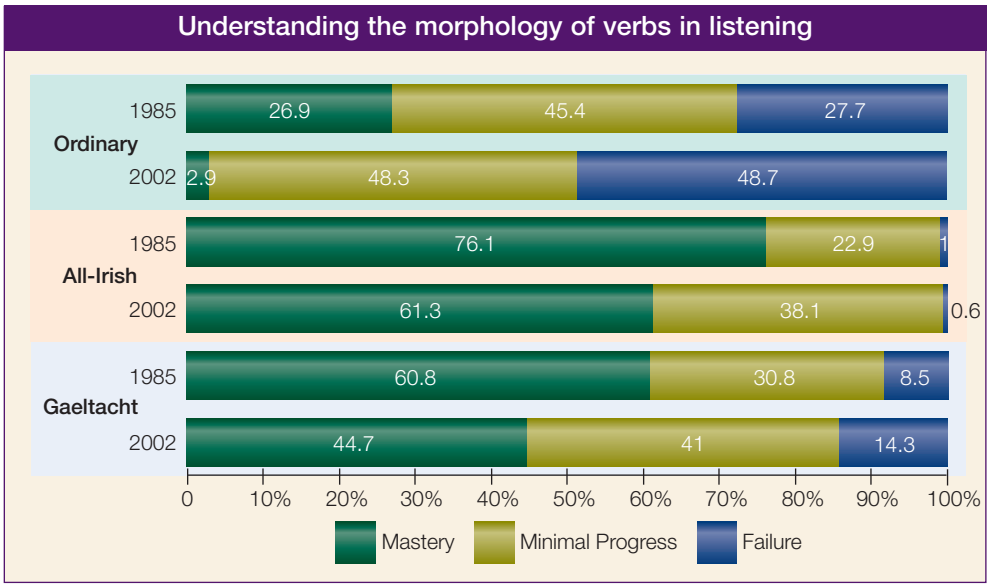


Figure 3.4 **Percentages of sixth-grade pupils in 1985 and 2002 who achieve different levels of performance on the objective *Understanding the morphology of verbs in listening*.**



Growth in all-Irish population and decline in ordinary-school achievement

We turn now to a consideration of one possible explanation for the substantial decline between 1985 and 2002 in achievement in Irish Listening in ordinary schools. This explanation centres around the possibility that the decline is linked in some way to the dramatic growth in the population of all-Irish schools during the same period. While it must be emphasised that this is no more than a hypothesis, it is worthy of investigation if only because it is often mentioned anecdotally. One version of this hypothesis is that the particular pupils who were 'lost' to ordinary schools during this period, and were 'gained' by all-Irish schools, were likely to have the kind of educational, linguistic or family background that would tend to produce relatively high levels of interest and achievement in Irish anyway. Data presented later in Chapters 6 and 7 confirm the existence of linguistic home-background differences between ordinary and all-Irish schools. This kind of linguistic background, the argument goes, is exactly what might prompt the parents of such pupils to choose an all-Irish over an ordinary school in the first place. For the same reason, it is plausible to think that these same pupils, had they chosen ordinary schools, would have contributed greatly to the maintenance of the established Irish-achievement profile of the latter schools. For the sake of brevity, we will call these pupils 'high-Irish-potential' pupils. Clearly, given the 17-year gap between the two surveys, we are not talking here about individual pupils actually switching from particular ordinary schools to all-Irish schools. Rather we are talking about a situation where high-Irish-potential pupils, from families who would traditionally have chosen ordinary schools, chose with increasing frequency between 1985 and 2002 to attend all-Irish schools.

The question we are seeking to answer, then, is how credible is it that the decline in achievement in ordinary schools could have resulted from the change in the

populations attending the two school types. Is it possible that those high-Irish-potential pupils who were traditionally destined for ordinary schools moved in sufficient numbers to all-Irish schools to produce a decline in performance of the scale described earlier? While there is no way of obtaining a definitive answer to this question, we have formulated two tests which we believe produce a persuasive answer[5]. The first test involves estimating the number of high-Irish-potential pupils who would have to have moved from ordinary schools to all-Irish schools during the 17-year period under consideration to account for a decline in achievement in ordinary schools of the size observed. That estimated number can then be compared with the number who actually changed to all-Irish schools during the period in question. The second perhaps more direct test involves in effect 'relocating' the additional pupils in all-Irish schools in 2002 in ordinary schools. We can then estimate the extent to which the 2002 performance of ordinary schools is reinstated to its 1985 level as a result of the relocation of the high-Irish-potential pupils.

Before we proceed to the results of these two tests, we need to present data on overall performance in Irish Listening in the different populations of schools. For present purposes, the kind of data on individual objectives presented earlier would be too detailed. Instead, we will use the raw score (number correct) on the Irish Listening Test as a global measure of individual pupil achievement. Mean raw scores on the Irish Listening Test for ordinary, all-Irish, and Gaeltacht schools in 1985 and 2002 are given in Table 3.12. Consistent with the earlier data on mastery, minimal progress, and failure, the mean scores show that there has been a considerable drop between 1985 and 2002 in performance in ordinary schools: over 12.9 raw score points on a 75-item test, almost the 1985 standard deviation. In addition, it is clear that within ordinary schools there has been a sharp reduction in the spread of scores, with the standard deviation falling from 13.65 in 1985 to 9.35 in 2002. This pattern is at least consistent with the possibility that some high-Irish-potential pupils who were in ordinary schools in 1985 are absent from this population in 2002. It is also consistent, of course, with the possibility that for a variety of other reasons a smaller proportion of pupils in ordinary schools in 2002 achieve high levels of achievement than in 1985.

Table 3.12 Mean raw scores of pupils on the Irish Listening Test in 1985 and 2002 in ordinary, all-Irish, and Gaeltacht schools.

School Type	1985 Mean *(SE)*	Standard deviation	2002 Mean *(SE)*	Standard deviation	Difference 2002-1985
Ordinary	46.9 *(0.97)*	13.65	34.0 *(0.47)*	9.35	**-12.9**
All-Irish	66.0 *(1.09)*	6.95	63.7 *(0.71)*	6.56	-2.3
Gaeltacht	59.8 *(1.46)*	11.23	56.1 *(1.80)*	13.72	-3.7

Significant differences ($p<.05$) are printed in bold. Standard errors are printed in italics.

Our first test, it will be recalled, involves estimating the number of high-Irish-potential pupils who would have had to move from ordinary schools to all-Irish schools to account for the decline in ordinary school performance. In order to make this estimation, let us suppose that high-Irish-potential pupils perform

[5] We are indebted to David Millar of the Educational Research Centre who helped us to formulate these two tests and who also carried out the weighting and data analysis required to implement them.

comparatively well, achieving a mean raw score of 66 out of 75 on the Irish Listening Test (this is the 1985 mean for all-Irish pupils in Table 3.12). We will assume that other pupils (non high-Irish-potential pupils) achieve a mean of 34 out of 75 (this is the mean raw score of pupils in ordinary schools in 2002).

In order to achieve the actual mean raw score of 46.9, which was realised in 1985 (see Table 3.12), the population of ordinary schools in that year would have to be made up of 40% high-Irish-potential pupils and 60% non high-Irish-potential pupils. And in order to reach a mean raw score of 34 in 2002 (Table 3.12), the relative percentages would have to have changed to 3% and 97% respectively. That is, if it were to be argued that the decrease in performance on the Irish Listening Test in ordinary schools were solely attributable to changes in the population of pupils attending the two school types, the percentage of high-Irish-potential pupils in ordinary schools would have to have dropped from 40% to 3% during the period in question.

But this would represent a movement of pupils away from ordinary schools and into all-Irish schools which vastly exceeds what actually happened. It would require that 38 percent of pupils in ordinary schools in 1985, all of them high-Irish-potential pupils, had switched to all-Irish schools by 2002. In reality, between 1985 and 2002 the percentage of pupils attending all-Irish schools rose from approximately 1.1 percent to 5.0 percent (Table 3.13)[6]. In the same period, the percentage of pupils attending ordinary schools fell from 96.9 to 93.2%. Clearly, then, the decline in Irish Listening performance in ordinary schools between the two time periods is far greater than could be explained by the actual increase in the numbers attending all-Irish schools. On the basis of this first test, then, it has to be concluded that factors other than the movement of high-Irish-potential pupils out of ordinary schools must be responsible for a decline in achievement on the scale observed.

In this connection, it is also notable from Table 3.13 (see last row) that the proportion of pupils in ordinary schools where all subjects are taught through English increased from 55.7% in 1985 to 64.7% in 2002. Correspondingly, the proportions of pupils in those ordinary schools where some subjects are taught through Irish decreased from 40.2% to 28.4% in 2002. The significance of this in terms of the decline in achievement in Irish Listening in ordinary schools in the period under consideration is that we know from previous research that pupils in ordinary schools who are taught some aspects of the curriculum, apart from Irish, through Irish have substantially higher levels of achievement in Irish than other pupils (Harris, 1983, 1984; Harris & Murtagh, 1988b). We return to a discussion of this issue in Chapter 8.

We turn now to the second test of the hypothesis. This involves estimating the effect on the mean raw score on the Irish Listening Test in ordinary schools of reintroducing the high-Irish-potential pupils which they had 'lost' to all-Irish schools. We assume once again for this purpose that high-Irish-potential pupils achieve a mean of 66 out of 75 while other pupils achieve a mean of 34 out of 75.

Table 3.14 shows the estimated effect on the Irish Listening Test mean score for ordinary schools of reintroducing the high-Irish-potential pupils who were 'lost'.

[6] Based on the entire student population, Junior Infants to 6th Class.

Data in the first row represents the baseline for our estimate. It shows the percentage of high-Irish-potential pupils in ordinary schools as being zero (the three cells on the left) and takes the actual mean raw score for ordinary schools in 2002 as being representative of the Irish Listening achievement of all pupils in such schools – which, after all, is what a mean is supposed to be. The second row shows the effect of relocating high-Irish-potential pupils in the ordinary school population and assumes that the performance of these pupils is represented by a mean score of 66.

Table 3.13 Medium of instruction in schools by number of schools and number of pupils in each category of school.

	1984/1985			2001/2002		
Medium of instruction	Schools	Pupils	% Pupils	Schools	Pupils	% Pupils
All-Irish in Gaeltacht	128	11117	2.0	108	7491	1.8
All-Irish outside the Gaeltacht	48	6256	1.1	115	20996	5.0
Ordinary schools with some classes taught through Irish	20	5488	1.0	4	903	0.2
Ordinary schools with some subjects taught through Irish	1192	222999	40.2	866	118936	28.4
Ordinary schools with all classes taught through English	1878	309223	55.7	2009	271249	64.7
Totals	3266	555083	100.0	3102	419575	100.0

Source: Department of Education and Science statistical reports for 1984/1985 and 2001/2002.

Table 3.14 Hypothetical model of the effect on Irish Listening Test scores in ordinary schools in 2002 of reintroducing the high-Irish-potential pupils 'lost' to all-Irish schools in the period since 1985.

	Percentage of pupils in ordinary schools			Irish Listening Test Mean raw scores (out of 75)		
Year	*High-Irish-potential* pupils	*Other* pupils	Total	*High-Irish-potential* Mean	*Other pupils* Mean	Overall Mean
2002 baseline*	0	100	100	66	34	34.0
2002: hypothetical (high-Irish-potential pupils replaced)	4[7]	96	100	66	34	35.3

* As our baseline, we take the actual ordinary-school mean in 2002 (last cell on the right in this row) and assume there are no high-Irish-potential pupils in such schools.

It can be seen, however, that the effect of this relocation is to raise the overall mean for ordinary schools to only 35.3 (as opposed to the actual mean of 34 achieved in 2002 and the 46.9 achieved in 1985). Incidentally, by assuming that these pupils whom we are 'relocating' in 2002 are performing at the average level for all-Irish schools, we are maximising their potential to 'correct' ordinary school achievement in 2002 back to its 1985 level. In reality, immersion education typically produces levels of second language achievement which are very rarely matched by the kind of

[7] Note that 3.7 percent of all students would represent an addition of approximately 4 percent of the 93.2 percent in ordinary schools in 2002.

mainly subject-only approach used in ordinary schools. That is, if high-Irish-potential pupils had stayed in ordinary schools, it is extremely unlikely that their Irish achievement, even in the most favourable circumstances, would have been as high as we estimated it to be using a mean raw score of 66. The fact that, even with the benefit of this very generous correction, the adjusted mean score for Irish Listening in 2002 still only rises to 35.3 means that we have to look elsewhere for an explanation for the decline in Irish achievement in ordinary schools between 1985 and 2002.

Conclusion

Whether we examine overall mean scores or the percentages attaining mastery of individual objectives it is clear that there has been a considerable drop between 1985 and 2002 in performance in Irish Listening in ordinary schools. The fall in mean score on the Irish Listening Test in ordinary schools amounts to 12.9 raw score points, almost the 1985 standard deviation. There is no significant difference between mean scores in Irish Listening in 1985 and 2002 for all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools.

There has been a substantial and statistically significant fall-off between 1985 and 2002 in the percentage of pupils in ordinary schools attaining high levels of performance (mastery) for six of the seven Irish Listening objectives tested. For example, there was a fall of 36.1% and 40.5% respectively in the percentages of pupils mastering the *Listening vocabulary* and *General comprehension of speech* objectives. Only 5.9% and 7.8% of pupils respectively in ordinary schools achieve mastery on these two objectives in 2002.

For most objectives, the decline in the percentage of pupils in ordinary schools attaining mastery is associated with a moderate increase in the percentage of pupils reaching the lower level of performance defined as minimal progress, but a larger increase in the percentages failing. For example, *Listening vocabulary* and *General comprehension of speech* are associated with an increase between 1985 and 2002 of 27.9% and 24.4% respectively in the percentages failing, while increases in the percentages making at least minimal progress are only 8.3% and 16% respectively.

In all-Irish schools very high percentages of pupils achieved mastery of most objectives in 2002. *Listening vocabulary* and *General comprehension of speech*, for example, are mastered by 89.3% and 96.3% respectively. In the case of a further three objectives, the lowest percentage attaining mastery is 86.4%. Despite the generally high percentages of all-Irish pupils mastering most Irish Listening objectives in 2002, and the fact that overall mean score on the test in 1985 and 2002 do not differ significantly, there are statistically significant declines since 1985 in the percentage of pupils mastering three objectives - *Understanding the morphology of verbs in listening* (a fall of 14.8%), *Understanding the morphology of prepositions in listening* (a decline of 6.6%) and *Understanding the morphology of nouns* (a fall of 24.4%). It is notable that unlike the situation in ordinary schools, the decline in the percentages attaining mastery of specific objectives in all-Irish schools involves a

slippage to minimal progress rather than to failure. It should be mentioned also that the two central Irish Listening objectives, *Listening vocabulary* and *General comprehension of speech*, are mastered by very similar percentages of pupils in 1985 and 2002 and the differences are not statistically significant. These latter objectives are also the ones tested by the greatest number of items. Finally, in this regard, the percentage of pupils in all-Irish schools attaining mastery of one Irish Listening objective, *Understanding the morphology of qualifiers*, actually increased significantly between 1985 and 2002.

For all seven objectives, the percentages of pupils attaining mastery in Gaeltacht schools in 2002 are intermediate between ordinary and all-Irish schools, though considerably closer to all-Irish schools. For example, the percentages attaining mastery of *General comprehension of speech* in Gaeltacht schools in 2002 was 73.3% whereas it was 96.3% in all-Irish schools and 7.8% in ordinary schools. Two objectives are mastered by less than 50% of Gaeltacht pupils in 2002 - *Understanding the morphology of verbs in listening* (44.7%) and *Understanding the morphology of nouns in listening* (32.8%).

Although overall mean Irish Listening score in Gaeltacht schools did not differ significantly between 1985 and 2002, two specific objectives are associated with a statistically significant fall in the percentages of pupils attaining mastery - *Listening vocabulary* (a fall of 14.8%) and *Understanding the morphology of verbs in listening* (a fall of 16.1%). There is also, however, a significant increase (7.2%) in the percentage attaining mastery of one objective, *Sound discrimination*.

The hypothesis that the substantial decline between 1985 and 2002 in achievement in Irish Listening in ordinary schools resulted from the growth in the population of all-Irish schools during the same period was examined. The argument for this hypothesis centres around the possibility that the particular pupils who were 'lost' to ordinary schools during this period might have had the kind of educational, linguistic or family background that would tend to produce relatively high levels of interest and achievement in Irish anyway. The main test involved in effect 'relocating' the additional pupils in all-Irish schools in 2002 back into ordinary schools and estimating the extent to which the 2002 performance of ordinary schools is reinstated to its 1985 level as a result of the relocation of the high-Irish-potential pupils. No support was found for this hypothesis.

The results for ordinary schools are of concern in both educational and language maintenance terms. The fact that children are no longer anything like as successful in acquiring proficiency in spoken Irish in school as they were in the mid 1980s is one issue. But the implications for the broader language-maintenance enterprise in Ireland are also potentially serious. Ordinary primary schools have always had a key role in ensuring the transmission of a knowledge of the spoken language to each new generation. The estimates reported here undermine any notion that all-Irish schools, rapid and all as their growth has been, are presently taking up the slack in language maintenance terms nationally which resulted from the fall-off in achievement in ordinary schools.

Chapter 4

Irish Speaking Achievement

Irish Speaking Achievement

Description and revision of the Irish Speaking Test

As in the case of the Irish Listening Test (discussed in Chapter 3), the sixth-grade Irish Speaking Test used in the survey is a revised version of a criterion-referenced test (*Triail Chainte ITÉ - VI*) previously used in surveys by ITÉ in 1978 and 1985 (Harris, 1983; 1984; Harris & Murtagh, 1988a: Harris, Murtagh, Hickey, De Nais & Ó Domhnalláin, 1985). Again, our interest in measuring long-term changes in achievement in Irish Speaking between 1985 and 2002 was an important factor in determining our approach to making some essential changes in the original test. Basically, we wished to make the minimum possible number of changes in the content and administration of *Triail Chainte ITÉ - VI* so that a comparison between pupil performance using the test in 2002 and in 1985 would not be unnecessarily complicated. We will first describe the original *Triail Chainte ITÉ - VI*, in both its 1978 and 1985 form, and then the changes in content and administration to make it suitable for the 2002 survey.

Content and objectives of Triail Chainte ITÉ - VI

The original *Triail Chainte ITÉ - VI* used in the 1978 national survey was designed to show whether pupils had attained mastery of (or other defined levels of performance in relation to) particular objectives. Objectives may be thought of as consisting of ability to perform specific speaking tasks in Irish requiring the kind of knowledge and skill which the curriculum was designed to develop. The objectives are identified here by brief names such as *Control of the morphology of verbs in speaking*. These objectives were determined by the content of the *Nuachúrsaí* lessons for 5th and 6th grades. The *Nuachúrsaí* were the official Department of Education audiovisual courses in Irish which dominated the teaching of Irish and lesson materials until the revised curriculum was issued in 1999.

For the reasons already described in Chapter 3 in relation to the Irish Listening Test, we can be reasonably sure that the sixth-grade pupils tested in the 2002 national survey largely learned Irish under the 1971 curriculum (Department of Education, 1971) and were exposed to teaching materials and teaching methods which were heavily influenced by that curriculum even where teachers used textbooks produced by commercial publishers. To that extent, the items and objectives used in testing Irish Speaking in 1978 and 1985 were considered to be still suitable for assessing sixth-grade pupils Irish Speaking achievement in 2002. A fuller discussion of the content-skill objectives underlying the Irish Speaking Test is provided by Harris (1984).

In the 1985 survey of Irish speaking at the sixth-grade level, an extra *second grade* objective, *Communication*, described more fully below, was added to the 1978 version to establish the extent to which sixth-grade pupils had acquired the most basic spoken communication skills in Irish by end of primary school. Another reason the second grade *Communication* subtest was added was so that we could

compare growth in the achievement of communication skills between second and sixth grade. This was possible because we had previously tested a national sample of second grade pupils on these second grade *Communication* items in 1982. The inclusion of the items in the 1985 survey of sixth-grade pupils allowed us to make such a comparison, albeit separated by three years.

In revising the 1985 version of the Irish Speaking Test for the 2002 survey, it was decided not to use items relating to two objectives which we had tested in 1985 and 1978, *Pronunciation* and *Control of the syntax of questions*. To understand why these items were not administered in 2002, it must be explained that when we added the second grade *Communication* objective in 1985, the resulting test was then too long to be administered in full to each pupil. Thus, in the 1985 survey, the Irish Speaking Test was divided into two parts, with alternative sections being administered to every second pupil in ordinary and all-Irish schools. In the case of Gaeltacht schools, the whole test was administered to each pupil and provision was made for a break in the middle of the testing session.

In 2002, the alternate administration of halves was not a viable option for a number of reasons (e.g., the range of other Irish achievement tests and questionnaires which had to be administered and the fact that only seven pupils were to be tested in Irish Speaking in each school). We decided instead, therefore, to omit the two objectives to compensate for the addition of *Communication* and to administer the resulting shortened Irish Speaking Test in full to each selected pupil. We did not want to dispense with the *Communication* items, since they measure a very important objective and are pitched at a relatively low grade-level in terms of difficulty, being based on the second-grade curriculum. It was important that we would have at least one broad-based objective, pitched at a relatively low level of difficulty, in anticipation of a decline in standards. The *Communication* objective would allow us to make useful comparisons with 1985 even in the case of pupils who might have very low levels of achievement in Irish speaking. The eight objectives tested in the 2002 version of the Irish Speaking Test (derived from *Triail Chainte ITÉ-VI*) are shown in Table 4.1.

Not all the objectives are equally important. We are particularly concerned with objectives which involve knowledge or skill which seem closest to what might be generally understood by the description 'being able to speak Irish': *Communication, Fluency of oral description* and *Speaking vocabulary*. These would also probably be seen as particularly important in the early stages of learning Irish. *Control of the morphology of verbs* is also important because it is crucially related to meaning in an interactive communicative context. Somewhat less emphasis will be placed on the three objectives related to *Control of the morphology of nouns, qualifiers and prepositions*, objectives which, for practical reasons, we have had to test with relatively few items.

Table 4.1 List of objectives on the Irish Speaking Test and the number of items used to test each.

Objectives on the Irish Speaking Test	Number of items
1. Communication (second grade objective)	18
2. Fluency of oral description	10
3. Speaking vocabulary	10
4. Control of the morphology of verbs	8
5. Control of the morphology of prepositions	4
6. Control of the morphology of qualifiers	4
7. Control of the morphology of nouns	4
8. Syntax of statements in speaking	7

In order to give a clearer indication of the kinds of items involved in the Irish Speaking Test, we give a more detailed description below of how *Communication* and *Fluency of oral description* were tested. We also describe briefly some aspects of the testing of objectives concerned with morphology.

Communication (second grade objective)

In the case of *Communication* (18 items) the emphasis was on assessing the pupil's ability to communicate in simple spoken Irish, well within the linguistic limits defined by the *Nuachúrsaí* at the second grade level. The method of testing and scoring allowed the pupil to succeed on an item even if some English was used - just as long as the main ideas were conveyed in Irish. The items used to test this objective were divided into two groups of nine. The first group involved pupils telling about various aspects of their lives, routine, family, possessions and so on in response to questions put by the examiner. Pupils were generally communicating information which was new to the examiner. Each item consisted of a number of question-answer sequences, with the pupil's contribution being judged according to how successfully his or her message had been communicated in Irish. Examples of some of the topics discussed were (1) the pupil's name, age, and class, (2) the pupil's family/people at home, (3) the journey to school, (4) playing outdoors, (5) the pupil's possessions, (6) the pupil's school bag. Terms such as family or toys, which might pose difficulties for pupils whose Irish was limited, were avoided as necessary in various ways - by approaching the topic indirectly, by use of examples, or by referring directly in some way to the particular pupil or to the immediate setting of the test.

The second group of nine *Communication* items involved a role-playing task. The examiner showed the pupil a series of pictures which described a simple incident of the kind frequently portrayed in the *Nuachúrsaí* at second grade. The examiner and pupil each adopted the role of one of the characters represented and spoke the part. Three picture sequences, each representing three items, were used. The pupil's contribution was evaluated on the basis of whether the clearly intended message was effectively communicated (or the conversation developed in some other appropriate way) in comprehensible Irish. The communicative functions involved for the pupil included asking for information, giving information, confirming a fact, seeking an explanation, giving an explanation, offering help, thanking someone, making a

suggestion, and giving an instruction. Only the more common vocabulary items and structures included in the *Nuachúrsaí* at second grade were required for successful completion of the task.

In the case of all items used to test *Communication*, the examiner rephrased his or her remarks, questions, or statements in specified ways whenever the pupils did not appear to comprehend. If a response was not forthcoming, further help in the form of prompts and mimes was given, although this more direct help was taken into account in scoring the item. No English was used. Each item on the *Communication* subtest was scored by the examiner according to a 5-point rating scale:

1. The pupil fails to communicate the message; says nothing at all; gives the main elements of the message in English; or says something meaningless in Irish.
2. The pupil only barely succeeds in communicating the message. Syntax, morphology and pronunciation are so defective that a native speaker would have major difficulties understanding the message and would be obliged to rely heavily on context. Some English words are tolerated as long as the pupil succeeds in expressing some part of the basic message in Irish.
3. The pupil communicates the message satisfactorily. Syntax, morphology and pronunciation are sufficiently defective as to bother the listener, but the meaning is expressed in such a way that a native speaker could understand it without too much trouble using only normal contextual cues. English words are tolerated as long as they are unimportant or peripheral aspects of the message.
4. The pupil is completely competent in expressing himself or herself in the language, although it would be apparent that she or he was not a native speaker. Mistakes in syntax, morphology and pronunciation during conversation are only barely noticeable. The pupil's intended message would be easily understood by a native speaker without recourse to context. There is no circumlocution in Irish and no English words are used.
5. Fully effective communication at the native speaker level.

A rating of 3 or more was counted as a success (equivalent to 'correct' on items testing other objectives). A rating of either '1' or '2' was counted as a failure. In the original version of this scale used in the 1985 survey, there was no category '5' (native speaker competence); effectively pupils performing at a native speaker level were included in the rating of '4'.

Fluency of oral description (sixth-grade speaking objective)

In the case of *Fluency of oral description*, the pupil was required to produce without undue hesitation a series of connected sentences which told the story underlying a series of pictures. Grammatical inaccuracies were ignored in assigning scores unless they were so serious as to render the sentences fundamentally incomprehensible. The individual sentences had to be broadly consistent with the pictures, however, and had to build up into a coherent narrative. It was not sufficient, for example, to

simply name an incidental object in a picture. It should be noted too that the examiner was instructed to supply the intended sentence *after* the pupil had given his or her response, whenever this appeared to the examiner to be necessary to maintain narrative continuity and to avoid misunderstanding. The pupil's score was based on 10 items, one item corresponding to each picture.

Speaking objectives concerned with morphology

Four objectives were concerned with various aspects of morphology in the case of both the listening and speaking tests. The items in these cases require pupils to say or identify the correct *form* of a particular Irish word to fit a given spoken or pictorial context. In fact, however, the term morphology has to be interpreted fairly loosely here, since in any reasonably natural testing situation it is impossible to fully separate the different types of linguistic knowledge contributing to a response. This will be particularly true in the case of items testing speaking objectives, where the pupil does not have ready-made, supplied responses from which to choose. For example, items relating to the morphology of prepositions may actually involve knowledge of such things as the correct preposition to use with a given verb, or the preposition necessary to convey a particular meaning, as well as knowledge of the conjugated forms of prepositions.

The content sampled in the case of objectives relating to the morphology of prepositions, qualifiers, and nouns includes the following: prepositional pronouns and pronouns used with verbs; case and comparative forms of adjectives, ordinal and personal forms of numbers, and adverbs of position and direction; and case and plural forms of nouns. All items used to test these aspects of morphology focus on matters that would arise frequently in the *Nuachúrsaí* and in Irish lessons generally at this grade level.

Revision of *Triail Chainte ITÉ - VI* items for use in 2002 survey

The items in the 2002 version of the Irish Speaking Test (*Triail Chainte ITÉ-VI*) retain the content and format of the original version. However, a very small number of minor changes similar to those made in the Irish Listening Test had to be made in the content of particular items to remove gender bias and to reflect social change between 1985 and 2002. The essential linguistic content and linguistic context were not changed in any way. Teachers with considerable experience in teaching at primary level were consulted in making these changes and were agreed that they were minimal and did not alter the difficulty of items. Changes were also made in the drawings.

The individually-administered Irish Speaking Test was in most cases administered after the group-administered Irish Listening Test. The Irish Speaking Test was administered to each pupil in a face-to-face interview with an examiner. All testing was conducted either by former school inspectors of the Department of Education and Science, or former school principals. Examiners could give instructions in either Irish or English in introducing each new task or set of items, whichever language would better ensure that the pupil understood the task. The items themselves, however, were entirely in Irish. The examiner was instructed to adjust the test material to local speech norms.

While, in general, each pupil selected for testing was administered all items, provision was made in the 2002 administration for the examiner to discontinue testing groups of items in cases where it was clear from the pupil's previous performance that he or she had no possibility of succeeding on them. This kind of flexibility was possible in the case of the Irish Speaking Test because, unlike the Irish Listening Test, it was individually administered. Individual administration also allowed the examiner to offer generous encouragement and praise to the pupil for his or her efforts. Detailed instructions to examiners on the circumstances in which further testing was to be discontinued indicated that, in all but exceptional circumstances, items 1-38 (up to the end of *Speaking vocabulary*) could be administered to all pupils who qualified for inclusion in the survey since they were likely to be able to attempt at least occasional items in the group. In cases where pupils had found the Irish Speaking Test difficult generally, whether discontinued or not, examiners were instructed to end the session with a few of the most simple exchanges in Irish with the pupil in order to affirm the pupil's existing competence in Irish and so that the occasion would end on a positive and encouraging note.

As in the case of the Irish Listening Test, three levels of performance in relation to each speaking objective were distinguished: 'mastery', 'minimal progress', and failure to make minimal progress. The percentage of items correct associated with these levels of performance was the same as in the Irish Listening Test (75% for mastery; 40% for minimal progress). Most of the data which we will be presenting about performance on the test will consist of the percentage of pupils who attained each of these three levels of performance on each objective.

Irish Speaking: Mastery, minimal progress and failure in 1985 and 2002

We turn now to an examination of the performance of sixth-grade pupils on the Irish Speaking Test in 2002 and, where possible, compare it to equivalent data from the 1985 survey. Some of the general questions we would like to answer are:

- What is the overall level of performance on the Irish Speaking test in each type of school - ordinary, all-Irish and Gaeltacht.
- What percentages of pupils attained mastery of most objectives in 2002? What kind of objectives were most often mastered?
- Has achievement in Irish Speaking changed significantly since 1985? What is the magnitude of the change? Where change occurs, is it to be observed more in the case of some objectives rather than others? Is the change more focussed on certain linguistic or speaking/communicative skills than on others?
- Are there differences between ordinary, all-Irish, and Gaeltacht schools in the magnitude of the changes in achievement since 1985?
- What percentage of pupils in 1985 and in 2002 had very low levels of competence in speaking Irish? What specific topics could the weakest pupils speak about, and how well could they speak about each of these topics?

Irish Speaking in ordinary schools

The percentage of sixth-grade pupils who attained mastery of each of the Irish Speaking objectives in 1985 are shown in the left hand column of Table 4.2 with the corresponding percentages from the 2002 survey in the middle column[8]. Differences between the 1985 and 2002 percentages are in the third column. We will examine these data from two general perspectives - the overall trend in achievement between 1985 and 2002 and the stability of performance in relation to particular objectives and groups of objectives.

It can be seen that the trend in achievement is consistently downwards. All eight objectives show decreases in the percentages of pupils achieving mastery between the two points in time, and these declines are statistically significant[9] in all but one case (*Control of the morphology of qualifiers in speaking*). Some of the decreases are very substantial - a difference between the 1985 and 2002 populations of 20.4% in the case of *Fluency of oral description*, for example, and of 21.1% in the case of the *Communication* (second grade) objective. The relative decline is also very substantial. For example, while *Fluency of oral description* and *Communication* were mastered by a little more than half the pupils in 1985, they were mastered by a little less than a third in 2002. It is notable also that these same objectives are ones involving very general speaking ability and thus the decline in the percentages of pupils attaining high levels of performance on them is a matter of considerable importance. More generally it can be seen that in 2002, five of the eight objectives are mastered by less than 20% of pupils whereas in 1985 only two of the eight objectives were mastered by such low percentages. *Control of the morphology of verbs* and *Control of the syntax of statements* have the lowest percentages of pupils attaining mastery in 2002 (3.7% and 7.5% respectively).

Table 4.2 Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools who attain mastery on each objective on the Irish Speaking Test in 1985 and 2002.

Ordinary Schools Irish Speaking objectives	Attain Mastery 1985	Attain Mastery 2002	Difference (2002-1985)
Communication (second grade objective)	54.0% [a] *(2.98)*	32.9% *(2.80)*	**-21.1%**
Fluency of oral description	50.3% [a] *(2.69)*	29.9% *(2.69)*	**-20.4%**
Speaking vocabulary	22.8% [b] *(2.56)*	8.8% *(1.27)*	**-14.0%**
Control of the morphology of verbs	12.1% [b] *(1.71)*	3.7% *(1.06)*	**-8.4%**
Control of the morphology of prepositions	28.0% [b] *(2.30)*	14.1% *(1.84)*	**-13.9%**
Control of the morphology of qualifiers	27.3% [b] *(2.52)*	21.6% *(2.74)*	-5.7%
Control of the morphology of nouns	21.9% [b] *(2.17)*	15.8% *(2.12)*	**-6.1%**
Control of the syntax of statements	19.7% [a] *(1.92)*	7.5% *(1.24)*	**-12.2%**

Significant differences (p <.05) are printed in bold. Standard errors are printed in italics. N 1985: a = 1043, b = 1112; N 2002 = 950. The Irish Speaking Test was divided into two halves, with each half being administered to alternate pupils in 1985. See text for details.

[8] A small number of sixth-grade classes in small schools were excluded from the 1985 sample (n=50 pupils in total) in order to maintain comparability with the 2002 sample (see Chapter 2).

[9] See footnote on testing the significance of differences between pairs of percentages in 1985 and 2002 on page 35.

Broadly speaking, the pattern of results across objectives is fairly similar at the two points in time. Objectives which were mastered by relatively high proportions of pupils in 1985 are again the objectives mastered relatively often in 2002. For example, *Fluency of oral description* and *Communication* (second grade) are the two most frequently mastered objectives, while *Control of the morphology of verbs in speaking* is the least frequently mastered objective in both 1985 (12.1%) and 2002 (3.7%). If the percentages of pupils mastering each of the eight objectives in 1985 and 2002 are ranked, four of the objectives have the same rank.

We next examine how the substantial decline in the percentage of pupils attaining mastery of each objective between 1985 and 2002 affected the percentages falling into the 'minimal progress' (i.e., without reaching mastery) and 'failure' categories. Comparing the third columns of Tables 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4, it can be seen that the fall in the percentages of pupils attaining mastery of each Irish Speaking objective between 1985 and 2002 more often resulted in an increase in 2002 in the percentages *failing* than an increase in the percentages making minimal progress. In fact, for six of the eight objectives, the percentages of pupils making minimal progress also *decreased* between 1985 and 2002 (though none to a statistically significant degree) in addition to the decrease in the percentages attaining mastery already mentioned. Only two objectives, *Fluency of oral description* and *Communication* (second grade) show an increase in the percentages making minimal progress between the two time periods. These increases are 6.2% and 8.2% respectively and both are statistically significant (Table 4.3). Even in the case of these two objectives, however, the increases in the percentages failing (Table 4.4) between 1985 and 2002 (14.3% and 12.9% respectively) are also statistically significant.

Table 4.3 Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools who make at least minimal progress (but not mastery) on each objective on the Irish Speaking Test in 1985 and 2002.

Ordinary Schools Irish Speaking objectives	At least minimal progress 1985	2002	Difference (2002-1985)
Communication (second grade objective)	14.3% [a] *(1.25)*	22.5% *(1.77)*	**+8.2%**
Fluency of oral description	22.6% [a] *(1.62)*	28.8% *(1.98)*	**+6.2%**
Speaking vocabulary	28.8% [b] *(2.14)*	25.3% *(2.39)*	-3.5%
Control of the morphology of verbs	24.6% [b] *(2.14)*	19.8% *(2.12)*	-4.8%
Control of the morphology of prepositions	45.2% [b] *(1.81)*	40.5% *(2.25)*	-4.7%
Control of the morphology of qualifiers	46.8% [b] *(2.33)*	45.1% *(2.49)*	-1.7%
Control of the morphology of nouns	48.1% [b] *(2.29)*	42.4% *(2.29)*	-5.7%
Control of the syntax of statements	32.4% [a] *(1.84)*	28.4% *(2.60)*	-4.0%

Significant differences ($p < .05$) are printed in bold. Standard errors are printed in italics. N 1985: a = 1043, b = 1112; N 2002 = 950.

In other words, the decrease between 1985 and 2002 in the percentages attaining mastery of each objective is a consequence of an increase in 'failure' rather than an increase in achieving minimal progress. These patterns can be seen in Figures 4.1 to 4.4 which show the changes between 1985 and 2002 in the percentages in ordinary schools reaching the three defined levels of performance for four key Irish Speaking objectives. We will return later to the pattern of performance of all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools - also represented in Figures 4.1 to 4.4 - when the more detailed tabular presentation of data relating to achievement in these schools has been discussed.

Looking again at Table 4.4, it can be seen that all but one of the Irish Speaking objectives are associated with significant increases between 1985 and 2002 in the percentages failing. The percentage failing in 2002 ranges from 33.3% in the case of *Control of the morphology of qualifiers in speaking* to 76.5% in the case of *Control of the morphology of verbs in speaking*. Perhaps of greater concern are the very substantial percentages failing in the case of two objectives involving general speaking skills which are central to the use of Irish in conversational settings: *Fluency of oral description* which 41.3% fail and *Communication* (second grade) which 44.6% fail.

Table 4.4 Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools who fail each objective on the Irish Speaking Test in 1985 and 2002.

Ordinary Schools Irish Speaking objectives	Fail 1985	Fail 2002	Difference (2002-1985)
Communication (second grade objective)	31.7% [a] *(2.86)*	44.6% *(2.90)*	**+12.9%**
Fluency of oral description	27.0% [a] *(2.25)*	41.3% *(3.03)*	**+14.3%**
Speaking vocabulary	48.5% [b] *(3.21)*	65.9% *(2.74)*	**+17.4%**
Control of the morphology of verbs	63.4% [b] *(3.04)*	76.5% *(2.48)*	**+13.1%**
Control of the morphology of prepositions	26.8% [b] *(2.60)*	45.4% *(2.62)*	**+18.6%**
Control of the morphology of qualifiers	25.9% [b] *(2.76)*	33.3% *(2.78)*	+7.4%
Control of the morphology of nouns	30.0% [b] *(3.07)*	41.8% *(2.88)*	**+11.8%**
Control of the syntax of statements	47.9% [a] *(2.87)*	64.1% *(2.93)*	**+16.2%**

Significant differences ($p < .05$) are printed in bold. Standard errors are printed in italics. N 1985: a = 1043, b = 1112; N 2002 = 950.

It is important to emphasise at this point, particularly since these failure rates are so high, that the term 'failure' in relation to an objective is strictly interpreted. The conclusions we have stated apply only to performance relating to an objective tested at a particular grade level. To say that a pupil has failed certain speaking objectives does not mean that he or she has no speaking ability in Irish at all. Pupils who have failed to make progress on the sixth-grade *Fluency of oral description*, for example, may well have reached worthwhile levels of performance in relation to the corresponding objective at a lower grade level.

Admittedly, this argument is weakened by the performance of pupils on the *Communication* objective, where the content/skill dimension is defined at the second grade level. It will be recalled that 44.6% of sixth-grade pupils were registered as *failing* to make minimal progress on this objective. To bring the definition of failure in relation to Irish-speaking ability into sharper focus, and to give it a more explicit, practical form, we will look in some detail later in the chapter at the performance of pupils with very low levels of achievement in spoken Irish, particularly their ability to engage in spoken communication on a number of very basic topics.

Looking at the results for ordinary schools more generally, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that there has been a substantial and statistically significant decrease between 1985 and 2002 in the percentages of sixth-grade pupils achieving high levels of performance ('mastery') in relation to a broad range of Irish Speaking objectives and a corresponding significant increase, often of a greater magnitude, in the percentages failing to make progress in relation to most of these objectives.

Figure 4.1 **Percentages of sixth-grade pupils in 1985 and 2002 who achieve different levels of performance on the second grade *Communication* objective.**

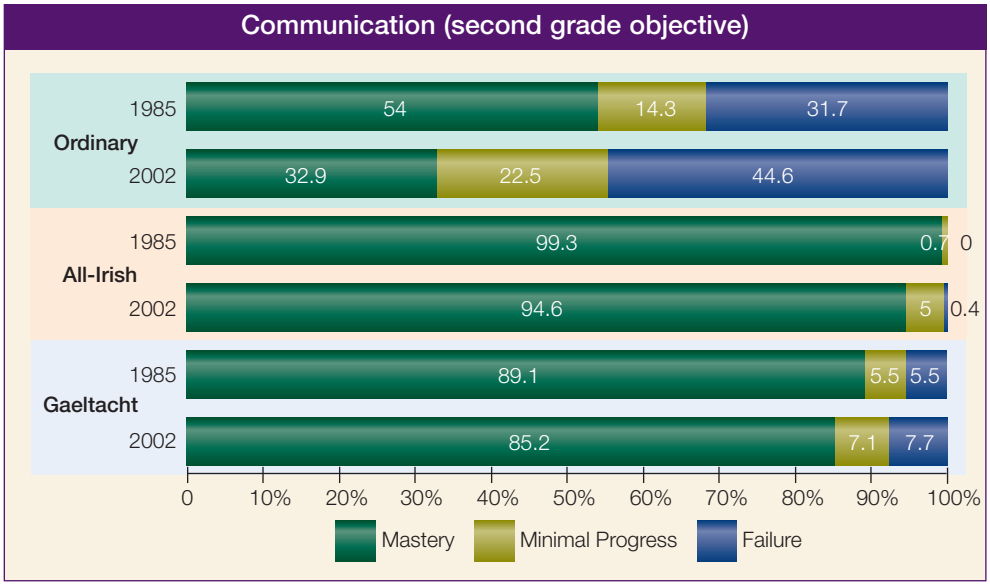


Figure 4.2 Percentages of sixth-grade pupils in 1985 and 2002 who achieve different levels of performance on the objective *Fluency of oral description*.

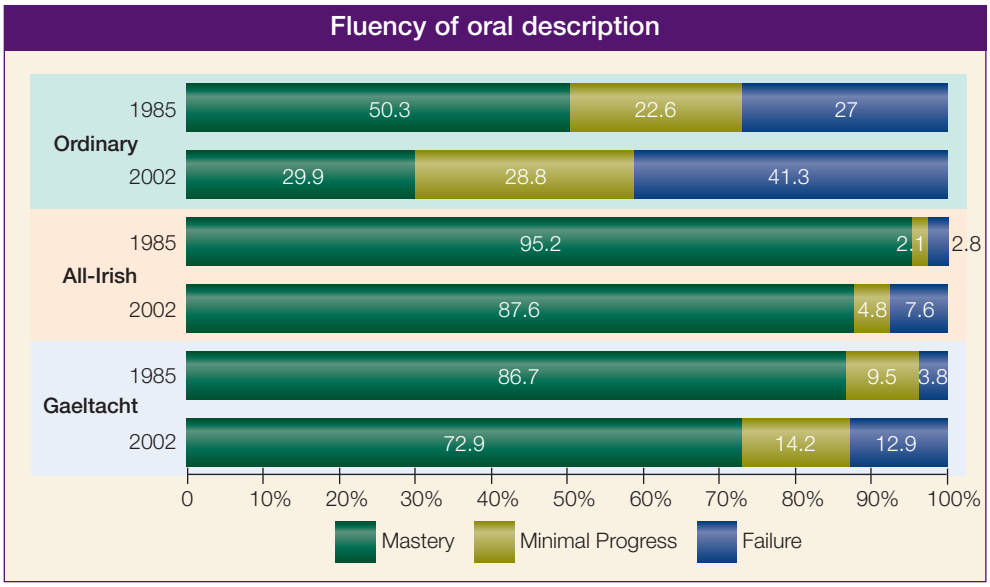


Figure 4.3 Percentages of sixth-grade pupils in 1985 and 2002 who achieve different levels of performance on the objective *Speaking vocabulary*.

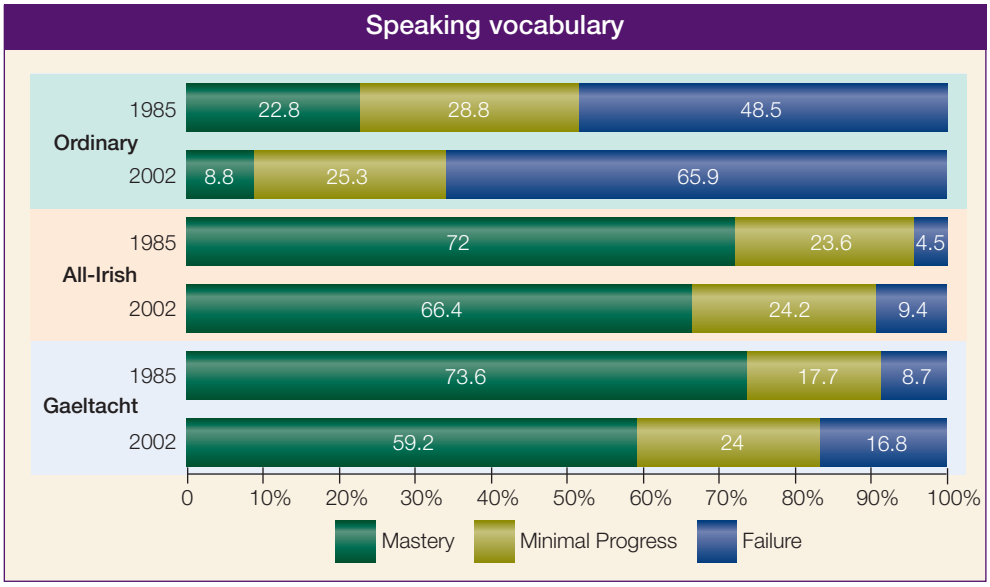
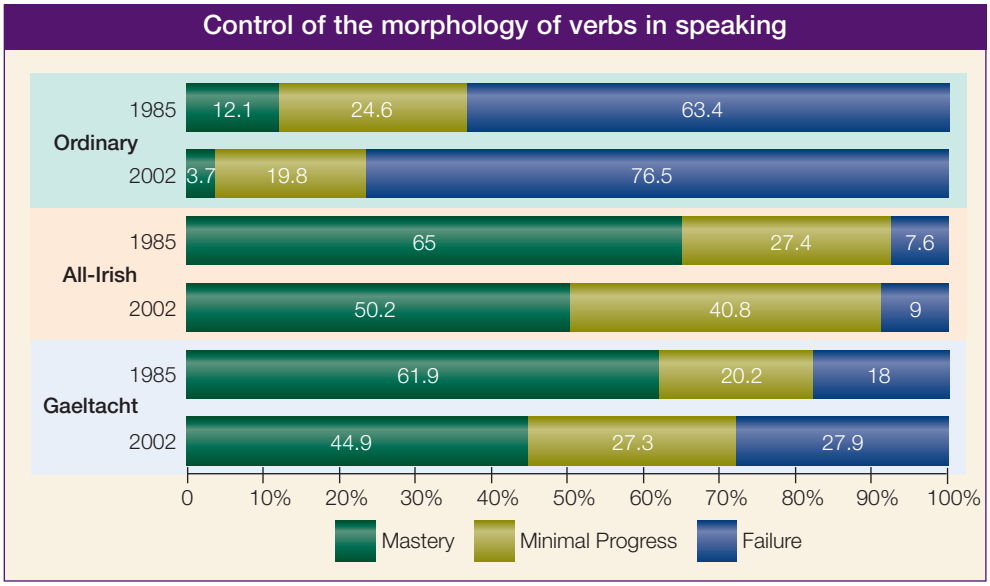


Figure 4.4 **Percentages of sixth-grade pupils in 1985 and 2002 who achieve different levels of performance on the objective *Control of the morphology of verbs in speaking*.**



Irish Speaking in all-Irish schools

Compared to pupils in ordinary schools, high percentages of sixth-grade pupils in all-Irish schools attained mastery of each Irish speaking objective both in 1985 and 2002 (Tables 4.5 to 4.7). For example, in 2002, all objectives are mastered by more than 50% of pupils. It will be recalled that in ordinary schools, *the highest* percentage for any objective was 32.9% (*Communication*). More specifically, in the case of the two central Irish Speaking objectives of *Fluency of oral description* and *Communication* (second grade), the percentages of pupils in all-Irish schools attaining mastery in 1985 were 95.2% and 99.3% respectively while in 2002 they were 87.6% and 94.6% respectively. Though the percentages for both these objectives are lower in 2002, the differences are not statistically significant.

In fact, of the eight Irish Speaking objectives assessed only one, *Control of the syntax of statements in speaking*, is associated with a statistically significant decline in the percentages of all-Irish pupils attaining mastery between 1985 and 2002 - a fall of 34.2%, from 93.8% to 59.6%. It may be noted that the decline in percentages for all-Irish schools is smaller than in the case of ordinary schools for six of the eight objectives (Tables 4.2 and 4.5). The exceptions are *Control of the morphology of verbs in speaking* and *Control of the syntax of statements*.

Table 4.5 **Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in all-Irish schools who attain mastery on each objective on the Irish Speaking Test in 1985 and 2002.**

All-Irish Schools Irish Speaking objectives	Attain Mastery 1985	2002	Difference (2002-1985)
Communication (second grade objective)	99.3% [a] *(0.67)*	94.6% *(3.59)*	-4.7%
Fluency of oral description	95.2% [a] *(2.21)*	87.6% *(5.0)*	-7.6%
Speaking vocabulary	72.0% [b] *(5.17)*	66.4% *(6.44)*	-5.6%
Control of the morphology of verbs	65.0% [b] *(5.73)*	50.2% *(6.32)*	-14.8%
Control of the morphology of prepositions	85.4% [b] *(2.81)*	78.7% *(5.48)*	-6.7%
Control of the morphology of qualifiers	68.2% [b] *(7.95)*	66.5% *(5.25)*	-1.7%
Control of the morphology of nouns	49.0% [b] *(9.87)*	50.3% *(5.48)*	+1.3%
Control of the syntax of statements	93.8% [a] *(2.94)*	59.6% *(4.51)*	**-34.2%**

Significant differences ($p < .05$) are printed in bold. Standard errors are printed in italics. N 1985: a = 145, b = 156, N 2002 = 208.

Two factors must be borne in mind about the decline in performance in relation to *Control of the morphology of verbs in speaking* in all-Irish schools. First, the fall in the percentages of pupils attaining mastery of this (and indeed all other objectives) is from a much higher original 1985 base in the case of all-Irish schools. For example, even though the decline in the percentages attaining mastery of *Control of the morphology of verbs* is only 8.4% in ordinary schools, this must be interpreted in light of the fact that only 3.7% of pupils in ordinary schools attained mastery in 2002. Second, the decline in performance relating to *Control of the morphology of verbs in speaking* in all-Irish schools consist of a relatively small segment of the sixth-grade cohort switching from mastery in 1985 to minimal progress in 2002. There is no general collapse in performance. Of the 14.8% of pupils no longer attaining mastery of this objective in 2002, 13.4% declined to the minimal progress level, while only 1.4% transferred to the fail category (Tables 4.6 and 4.7).

Table 4.6 **Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in all-Irish schools who make at least minimal progress (but not mastery) on each objective on the Irish Speaking Test in 1985 and 2002.**

All-Irish Schools Irish Speaking objectives	At least minimal progress 1985	2002	Difference (2002-1985)
Communication (second grade objective)	0.7% [a] *(0.67)*	5.0% *(3.57)*	+4.3%
Fluency of oral description	2.1% [a] *(1.40)*	4.8% *(2.00)*	+2.7%
Speaking vocabulary	23.6% [b] *(5.05)*	24.2% *(4.00)*	+0.6%
Control of the morphology of verbs	27.4% [b] *(5.10)*	40.8% *(4.96)*	+13.4%
Control of the morphology of prepositions	13.4% [b] *(2.91)*	17.6% *(4.74)*	+4.2%
Control of the morphology of qualifiers	29.9% [b] *(7.69)*	28.8% *(4.52)*	-1.1%
Control of the morphology of nouns	45.2% [b] *(8.08)*	43.0% *(4.89)*	-2.2%
Control of the syntax of statements	6.2% [a] *(2.94)*	33.1% *(3.90)*	**+26.9%**

Significant differences (p <.05) are printed in bold. Standard errors are printed in italics. N 1985: a = 145, b = 156, N 2002 = 208.

Table 4.7 **Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in all-Irish schools who fail each objective on the Irish Speaking Test in 1985 and 2002.**

All-Irish Schools Irish Speaking objectives	Fail 1985	2002	Difference (2002-1985)
Communication (second grade objective)	0% [a]	0.4% *(0.41)*	+0.4%
Fluency of oral description	2.8% [a] *(1.47)*	7.6% *(4.22)*	+4.8%
Speaking vocabulary	4.5% [b] *(1.72)*	9.4% *(3.52)*	+4.9%
Control of the morphology of verbs	7.6% [b] *(1.82)*	9.0% *(3.2)*	+1.4%
Control of the morphology of prepositions	1.3% [b] *(0.84)*	3.7% *(1.94)*	+2.4%
Control of the morphology of qualifiers	1.9% [b] *(1.08)*	4.7% *(1.37)*	+2.8%
Control of the morphology of nouns	5.7% [b] *(3.12)*	6.8% *(2.50)*	+1.1%
Control of the syntax of statements	0% [a]	7.3% *(3.26)*	**+7.3%**

Significant differences (p <.05) are printed in bold. Standard errors are printed in italics. N 1985: a = 145, b = 156, N 2002 = 208.

While the change in performance in all Irish schools in relation to *Control of the morphology of verbs* is not statistically significant, the finding that just half of all-Irish school pupils attained mastery of this objective (Table 4.5) is likely to cause some concern. Because verb morphology has a crucial semantic role in communication, attaining mastery of this objective would probably be considered a more important outcome in an immersion programme for young learners than would mastery of some of the other objectives concerned with precision in the use of language. On the

other hand, this is an objective that has been found in all previous surveys to have posed challenges for learners, even in Gaeltacht schools. We return to a more general examination of this issue in Chapter 8.

One objective, *Control of the morphology of nouns in speaking*, is associated with a non-significant *increase* between the two points in time in the percentage of all-Irish pupils mastering it.

As in the case of ordinary schools, the pattern of results for Irish Speaking objectives for all-Irish schools is broadly similar at the two points in time: objectives which were mastered by relatively high proportions of pupils in 1985 are again the objectives mastered relatively often in 2002.

As noted earlier, the one objective which has been associated with a statistically significant decline in the percentages of all-Irish pupils attaining mastery is *Control of the syntax of statements in speaking*. The decline of 34.2% between 1985 and 2002 (Table 4.5) resolves itself in statistically significant increases in both the percentage making at least minimal progress (26.9%) and in the percentage failing (7.6%) (Tables 4.6 and 4.7). It is notable, however, that the increase in the percentage making at least minimal progress is considerably greater rather than the increase in failure.

Looking at failure more generally in all-Irish schools (Table 4.7), it can be seen that there is no objective, other than the one just mentioned, which is associated with a significant increase since 1985. The failure rates for 2002 do not reach 10% in the case of any objective. The failure rate of less than a half percentage point for *Communication (second grade)* is particularly notable. Nevertheless, failure rates of 7.6% for *Fluency of oral description* and 9.4% for *Speaking vocabulary* in all-Irish schools are less reassuring. Again it must be emphasised that 'failure' here refers to the sixth-grade level version of these objectives; pupils may well have made progress in relation to the objectives at lower grade levels.

Finally, it is worth comparing, for all-Irish and for ordinary schools, the scale of the decline between 1985 and 2002 in the percentages attaining mastery of Irish Speaking objectives and the number of cases in which these changes are statistically significant (Tables 4.2 and 4.5). For example, in ordinary schools seven of the eight Irish Speaking objectives are associated with significant declines in the percentage of pupils attaining mastery. In all-Irish schools, only one objective is associated with a statistically significant decline. A contrasting effect can be seen in the growth in the percentages failing each objective in the two types of school (see Tables 4.4 and 4.7).

It is clear that while there has been a substantial decline in the Irish Speaking performance of pupils in ordinary schools over the seventeen-year period examined, the performance of pupils in all-Irish schools has largely remained stable notwithstanding the fact that, as shown in Chapter 3, the number of pupils attending all-Irish schools increased from 1.1% of the population of primary school pupils to 5%. Figures 4.1 to 4.4 which show the proportions of pupils attaining the three defined levels of performance for four key Irish Speaking objectives in the different school populations illustrate the different outcomes in the two kinds of school.

Irish speaking in Gaeltacht schools

Data on the three defined levels of performance (mastery, minimal progress and failure) on the Irish Speaking Test for pupils in Gaeltacht schools are presented in Tables 4.8, 4.9 and 4.10. Looking at the percentages attaining mastery of each objective in Gaeltacht schools in 2002, the immediate impression is that, as in the case of Irish Listening, results for Gaeltacht schools are intermediate between ordinary and all-Irish schools, though they are considerably closer to all-Irish schools.

This initial impression is confirmed by a more detailed comparison of the 2002 mastery data for all three kinds of schools in Tables 4.8, 4.5 and 4.2. The pattern in which the percentages for Gaeltacht schools fall between those for all-Irish and ordinary schools, but are closer to the former, holds true for seven of the eight speaking objectives. The exception is *Control of the morphology of nouns in speaking*, where the percentage of pupils attaining mastery in Gaeltacht schools (51.1%) is actually marginally higher than in all-Irish schools (50.3%). A more typical example, however, is *Speaking vocabulary* where the percentage of Gaeltacht pupils attaining mastery is 59.2% (Table 4.8), the percentage of all-Irish pupils is somewhat higher at 66.4% (Table 4.5), and the percentage for ordinary schools is only 8.8% (Table 4.2). Another example is *Communication (second grade)* where the percentage attaining mastery in Gaeltacht schools is 85.2% (Table 4.8), while it is 94.6% in all Irish schools (Table 4.5) and 32.9% in ordinary schools (Table 4.2).

Table 4.8 Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in Gaeltacht Schools who attain mastery on each objective on the Irish Speaking Test in 1985 and 2002.

Gaeltacht Schools Irish Speaking objectives	Attain Mastery 1985	Attain Mastery 2002	Difference (2002-1985)
Communication (second grade objective)	89.1% *(2.95)*	85.2% *(3.68)*	-3.9%
Fluency of oral description	86.7% *(3.39)*	72.9% *(5.78)*	**-13.8%**
Speaking vocabulary	73.6% *(4.74)*	59.2% *(6.67)*	-14.4%
Control of the morphology of verbs	61.9% *(6.86)*	44.9% *(5.44)*	-17.0%
Control of the morphology of prepositions	73.8% *(5.76)*	60.0% *(5.64)*	-13.8%
Control of the morphology of qualifiers	77.4% *(5.51)*	55.1% *(5.46)*	**-22.3%**
Control of the morphology of nouns	67.3% *(6.16)*	51.1% *(4.23)*	**-16.2%**
Control of the syntax of statements	75.5% *(4.50)*	58.7% *(6.10)*	**-16.8%**

Significant differences ($p < .05$) are printed in bold. Standard errors are printed in italics. N (1985) = 367, N (2002) = 294.

The two most frequently mastered Irish Speaking objectives in Gaeltacht schools in 2002 are *Communication (second grade)* (85.2%) and *Fluency of oral description* (72.9%) - the same two objectives that were most frequently mastered in all-Irish and ordinary schools. More generally, the relative difficulty of the various Irish

Speaking objectives is broadly similar in the three school populations. The most frequently mastered objectives in ordinary schools also tend to be relatively frequently mastered in all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools. All-Irish and Gaeltacht schools are similar in terms of rankings of objectives according to the percentages of pupils attaining mastery, with five objectives having identical ranks in these two types of school, and two others having ranks which differ only by one.

Only one of the Irish speaking objectives was mastered by less than 50% of pupils in Gaeltacht schools in 2002 - *Control of the morphology of verbs in speaking* (44.9%). This objective was mastered by 50.2% of pupils in all-Irish schools, making it the least frequently mastered Irish Speaking objective in these schools also.

Table 4.8 also shows that all eight Irish Speaking objectives are associated with a fall between 1985 and 2002 in the percentages of pupils in Gaeltacht schools attaining high levels of performance (mastery). The fall is statistically significant in the case of four objectives - *Fluency of oral description* (a drop of 13.8%), *Control of the morphology of qualifiers in speaking* (a drop of 22.3%), *Control of the morphology of nouns in speaking* (a drop of 16.2%), and *Control of the syntax of statements in speaking* (a drop of 16.8%). The fact the one of these declines involves a key objective *Fluency of oral description* is notable. For comparative purposes, it is worth mentioning also that only one Irish Speaking objective in all-Irish schools and seven objectives in the case of ordinary schools manifested a significant decline in the percentage of pupils attaining mastery. For all objectives in Gaeltacht schools, the fall in percentages attaining mastery resolves itself partly in an increase in minimal progress (Table 4.9) and partly in an increase in failure (Table 4.10).

Table 4.9 Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in Gaeltacht schools who make at least minimal progress (but not mastery) on each objective on the Irish Speaking Test in 1985 and 2002.

Gaeltacht Schools Irish Speaking objectives	At least minimal progress 1985	2002	Difference (2002-1985)
Communication (second grade objective)	5.5% *(1.55)*	7.1% *(2.24)*	+1.6%
Fluency of oral description	9.5% *(2.56)*	14.2% *(3.70)*	+4.7%
Speaking vocabulary	17.7% *(3.19)*	24.0% *(4.92)*	+6.3%
Control of the morphology of verbs	20.2% *(3.28)*	27.3% *(4.91)*	+7.1%
Control of the morphology of prepositions	18.8% *(4.11)*	25.8% *(4.61)*	+7.0%
Control of the morphology of qualifiers	20.7% *(4.96)*	36.7% *(5.18)*	**+16.0%**
Control of the morphology of nouns	27.8% *(5.50)*	37.4% *(3.97)*	+9.6%
Control of the syntax of statements	14.7% *(1.87)*	24.3% *(4.75)*	+9.6%

Significant differences ($p < .05$) are printed in bold. Standard errors are printed in italics. N (1985) = 367, N (2002) = 294.

When we examine the other end of the performance spectrum, failure (Table 4.10) rather than mastery, again Gaeltacht schools are more like all-Irish schools than ordinary schools. This is true whether we look at failure rates for each of the eight Irish Speaking objectives in 2002, or *the increase* in failure rates since 1985.

Looking first at Table 4.10, it can be seen that in 2002 the percentages of pupils in Gaeltacht schools who are failing are closer to those of pupils in all-Irish schools (Table 4.7) than to pupils in ordinary schools (Table 4.4). Thus, failure rates for Irish Speaking objectives range from 0.4% to 9.4% in all-Irish schools, from 7.7% to 27.9% in Gaeltacht schools, and from 33.3% to 76.5% in ordinary schools.

Increases in failure rates range from 0.4% to 7.3% in all-Irish schools, from 2.2% to 9.9% in Gaeltacht schools, and from 7.4% to 18.6% in ordinary schools (Tables 4.4, 4.7, 4.10). Consistent with this pattern, increases in failure rates are statistically significant for only one Irish Speaking objective in the case of all-Irish schools, significant for two objectives in the case of Gaeltacht schools, but significant for seven of the eight objectives in the case of ordinary schools.

Table 4.10 Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in Gaeltacht schools who fail each objective on the Irish Speaking Test in 1985 and 2002.

Gaeltacht Schools Irish Speaking objectives	Fail 1985	Fail 2002	Difference (2002-1985)
Communication (second grade objective)	5.5% *(2.08)*	7.7% *(3.08)*	+2.2%
Fluency of oral description	3.8% *(1.94)*	12.9% *(3.87)*	**+9.1%**
Speaking vocabulary	8.7% *(2.62)*	16.8% *(4.67)*	+8.1%
Control of the morphology of verbs	18.0% *(4.43)*	27.9% *(5.80)*	+9.9%
Control of the morphology of prepositions	7.4% *(2.25)*	14.2% *(4.53)*	+6.8%
Control of the morphology of qualifiers	1.9% *(0.93)*	8.2% *(2.92)*	**+6.3%**
Control of the morphology of nouns	4.9% *(2.02)*	11.5% *(3.71)*	+6.6%
Control of the syntax of statements	9.8% *(3.17)*	17.1% *(4.99)*	+7.3%

Significant differences ($p < .05$) are printed in bold. Standard errors are printed in italics. N (1985) = 367, N (2002) = 294.

We can examine overall mean scores on Irish Speaking in 1985 and 2002 only in the case of Gaeltacht schools (because pupils received the whole Irish Speaking Test in 1985). Results show a statistically significant fall of 10.1% in the mean percentage correct for Gaeltacht schools - from 81% in 1985 to 70.9% in 2002. The decline is equivalent to a little less than half the 1985 standard deviation on the Irish Speaking Test for Gaeltacht schools.

In considering the implications of the Gaeltacht results, whether for Irish Listening or Speaking, it is important to bear in mind the linguistically diverse nature of Gaeltacht schools in terms of pupil home language background and the extent of

Irish medium instruction at school (Chapters 6 and 7 of this report; Harris, 1984; Harris & Murtagh, 1987). Thus, comparisons of changes in Irish achievement over time require much more detailed background information about the kind of Gaeltacht schools involved, if data on change is to be informative. We return to an examination of these issues in Chapters 6 and 7 when we relate pupils' Irish Listening and Irish Speaking achievement to factors such as receipt of the *Scéim Labhairt na Gaeilge*[10] (native speaker) grant, use of Irish at home and parental ability in Irish. In Chapter 7 also, we present data on the extent of Irish-medium instruction in Gaeltacht schools when native speakers are in the minority and when they are in the majority.

Pupils with very low levels of achievement in Irish: Definitions and estimates

It is clear from the results already presented that substantial proportions of sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools fail many of the *individual* Irish Listening and Irish Speaking objectives. This outcome gives rise to a number of additional questions that are not easily answered. How many pupils in ordinary schools are *consistently* weak at Irish - over a *range* of listening and or speaking tasks - and how should we define this group? Is there any way of obtaining a more detailed, practical definition of what kind of proficiency in spoken Irish the very weakest pupils have and what kind of topics they can talk about? In this section, we try to provide a preliminary answer to these questions in two main ways. First, we examine the consistency of failure by pupils in ordinary schools on a range of Irish Listening and Irish Speaking objectives. Second, we present data, based on individual items from the *Communication* subtest, on the number of pupils who are unable to speak in a conversational context about *each* of nine specific topics, and how many pupils are unable to converse on *any* of these topics at all. We will compare some of the 2002 data with corresponding data from 1985 and will comment briefly on very low levels of achievement in all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools.

Defining a low-Irish-achievement group

There is no clear way of identifying a distinct group of pupils in ordinary schools who have very low levels of competence in spoken Irish, a group which stands clearly apart from the others. If we take some kind of global measure, such as raw score on the Irish Listening or Irish Speaking Test, what we observe is a fairly smooth decline in performance at the lower end of the achievement scale. If we consider individual objectives, there is the problem of which ones to take account of in defining very low achievement. Some objectives would almost certainly be judged as more important than others. Knowing that someone has made at least minimal progress in relation to, for example, *General comprehension of speech* would be more revealing about what most people would think of as competence in spoken Irish than knowing someone has made minimal progress in relation to *Understanding the morphology of nouns*. In addition, there are problems about accepting at face value any definition based entirely on Irish Listening objectives. This is simply because listening objectives (though not speaking objectives) are tested by multiple-choice items. In multiple-

[10] *Scéim Labhairt na Gaeilge* is a scheme to promote the use of the Irish language among the Gaeltacht population in the home and generally. Under the Scheme the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (CRGA) may pay a grant of €260 per school year to families in the Gaeltacht who satisfy the Department that Irish is their normal spoken language. If a family fails to demonstrate the degree of fluency required under the Scheme the Department of CRGA may pay a reduced grant of 50%, if it is satisfied that the family can reach the appropriate standard within a period of three years.

choice tests, guessing can potentially make a large contribution to the results when (a) the criterion score is very low (as in the case of minimal progress) and (b) when the pupils themselves have very low levels of achievement in the subject in question. Thus, in trying to identify pupils with very low levels of achievement in spoken Irish, we would prefer not to have to rely solely on indices based on listening objectives.

Consistent failure on different groups of listening and speaking objectives

Consequently, we approached the issue by looking at the proportion of sixth-grade pupils with very low levels of achievement in spoken Irish. Obviously, the proportion of pupils who count as 'low-achievement' depends on how we operationally define that notion. We are particularly concerned with consistency of failure over a range of objectives.

We found that no pupil, either in 1985 or 2002, failed to make minimal progress on *all of the listening and all of the speaking* objectives. Looking at Irish Listening and Irish Speaking objectives separately, we found that no pupil failed on *all of the Irish Listening* objectives in 1985; and in 2002, the number of pupils failing all of the Irish Listening objectives was negligible.

One in six (16.6%) pupils in 2002 failed on all the Irish Speaking objectives. This would probably be the narrowest, or most conservative, definition of a low-Irish-achievement group. A disadvantage of the definition, however, is the lack of comparable data for 1985. The difficulty is that in 1985 different pupils took Part A and Part B objectives, so that we cannot say anything about the consistency of failure over all Irish Speaking objectives in that year. Another possible definition of low-achievement would be failure on both of the two most general speaking objectives - the second-grade *Communication* objective and the sixth-grade *Fluency of oral description* objective. Both objectives were described in some detail earlier. One of the points favouring these objectives as a basis for defining low levels of achievement is that they involve a broader combination of linguistic and communicative skills than any other objective. They probably also come closer than other objectives to what most people would consider to be general competence in spoken Irish and indeed to the ultimate goal in teaching Irish at primary level – to equip pupils to communicate in spoken Irish on topics which interest them. The fact that pupils are tested individually on these two Irish Speaking objectives means that the examiner can make a direct assessment of a pupil's speaking proficiency, taking account of motivational, dialectical, and social factors in a way that would not be possible on a group test.

A second advantage is that the *Communication* objective, because it is based on the second-grade curriculum, provides an appropriate basis for defining and measuring very low levels of general conversational ability among sixth-grade pupils. Furthermore, the 5-point rating scale used for this objective provides a more subtle and detailed picture of low levels of performance than the simple right-wrong decision used with other items. Finally, because some of the items used to test the *Communication* objective – the first nine items – consist of real, if brief, conversational exchanges on familiar topics, item-by-item reporting of performance could be informative. This item-by-item reporting, when linked to the usual mastery

and minimal progress data for the objective as a whole, can help to make more transparent the nature and quality of Irish which weaker pupils are capable of using in communication.

Table 4.11 shows the percentages of sixth-grade pupils in 2002 attaining mastery, making minimal progress, and failing in the case of the *Fluency of oral description* and *Communication* objectives. Table 4.12 gives corresponding data for 1985.

Table 4.11 Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools in 2002 attaining mastery, minimal progress, and failing the *Fluency of oral description* and *Communication* objectives, and the percentage of pupils failing both objectives.

2002 Level of performance	Fluency of oral description N = 950	Communication N = 950
Mastery	29.9% *(2.69)*	32.9% *(2.80)*
Minimal Progress without mastery	28.8% *(1.98)*	22.5% *(1.77)*
Failure	41.3% *(3.03)*	44.6% *(2.90)*
Failure on ***both*** objectives	32.4% *(2.79)*	

Standard errors are printed in italics.

Looking first at the 2002 data (Table 4.11), it can be seen that the combined percentages of pupils who either master or make only minimal progress on *Fluency of oral description* is 58.7% (i.e. 29.9% + 28.8%), while the corresponding combined percentage for *Communication* is 55.4% (i.e. 32.9% + 22.5%). In 1985 (Table 4.12), the combined mastery and minimal progress percentages were 72.9% (i.e. 50.3% + 22.6%) for *Fluency of oral description* and 68.3% (i.e. 54% + 14.3%) for *Communication*.

Table 4.12 Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools in 1985 attaining mastery, making minimal progress, and failing the *Fluency of oral description* and *Communication* objectives and the percentage of pupils failing both objectives.

1985 Level of performance	Fluency of oral description N = 1043	Communication N = 1043
Mastery	50.3% *(2.69)*	54.0% *(2.98)*
Minimal Progress without mastery	22.6% *(1.62)*	14.3% *(1.25)*
Failure	27.0% *(2.25)*	31.7% *(2.86)*
Failure on ***both*** objectives	22.7% *(2.28)*	

Standard errors are printed in italics.

Note that in both 2002 and 1985 the lower percentage relates to *Communication* rather than to *Fluency of oral description*, even if the difference is relatively small. This result may at first seem paradoxical, given that the *Communication* objective is based on the linguistically more limited second-grade curriculum, while *Fluency of oral description* is based on the sixth-grade curriculum. We might have expected greater success (mastery plus minimal-progress percentages) on the lower grade level *Communication* objective.

What has to be borne in mind, however, is that the particular sixth-grade objective under consideration does not involve as wide a range of skills as the second-grade one. The method of testing each objective, described earlier, makes that clear. *Fluency of oral description* items only require pupils to generate sentences to conform to the narrative underlying a set of pictures. There is no element of spoken language comprehension and no direct communicative interaction involved. The *Communication* items, in contrast, involve both spoken language comprehension and dynamic communicative interaction. Consequently, the latter items require greater skill of the pupil in the immediate organisation and use of his or her available linguistic resources.

It is also notable that there has been a substantial decrease in the combined percentages of pupils achieving some degree of success (mastery or minimal progress) between 1985 and 2002. This decrease is mirrored in the data showing an *increase* in the percentages *failing* during the same period. Thus, in 1985, 27% of ordinary school pupils failed *Fluency of oral description*, a figure that rose to 41.3% in 2002 (Tables 4.11 and 4.12). In the case of *Communication*, 31.7% of pupils failed in 1985, increasing to 44.6% in 2002 (Table 4.11 and 4.12). As noted earlier, the increases in failure for each of these objectives are statistically significant.

Table 4.13 shows that, to a substantial degree, at each point in time, there was an overlap in the pupils who failed these objectives. Thus, 22.7% of pupils in 1985, and 32.4% of pupils in 2002, failed *both* objectives. These figures can be compared to the failure rates just given for each of the two objectives separately - 27%/31.7% in 1985 and 41.3%/44.6% in 2002 respectively (Tables 4.11 and 4.12).

Table 4.13 Percentage of pupils in ordinary schools in 1985 and 2002 who *fail* both the *Fluency of oral description* and *Communication* objectives.

1985 and 2002 compared	Percentage of pupils failing		
	1985	2002	Difference
Failure on ***both Fluency of oral description*** and ***Communication*** objectives	22.7% *(2.28)*	32.4% *(2.79)*	**9.7%**

Significant differences (p <.05) are printed in bold. Standard errors are printed in italics. N 1985 = 1043, N 2002 = 950.

To summarise, in 2002, 16.6% of pupils failed all speaking objectives, while 32.4% failed both *Fluency of oral description* and *Communication*. Note also that the 32.4% of pupils in this low Irish-Speaking achievement group represents a statistically significant increase in size of 9.7% from less than a quarter of all pupils in ordinary schools in 1985 (Table 4.13).

It may be noted in passing that analyses similar to those reported in Table 4.11 and Table 4.12 for all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools to determine the percentages of pupils who attained mastery, made at least minimal progress, and failed the *Fluency of oral description* and *Communication* objectives, revealed that no all-Irish school pupil failed both objectives, whereas only 7.5% of Gaeltacht school pupils failed both.

Ability of pupils in ordinary schools to converse on specific topics

We turn now to the second approach mentioned earlier to illustrate the kind of competence in spoken Irish acquired by pupils who are weakest at Irish. We will do this in terms of performance on nine topics/items of the *Communication* subtest. Tables 4.14 and 4.15 show the percentage of sixth-grade pupils in ordinary school who received various *Communication* ratings in spoken Irish on the nine topics in 2002 and 1985. The ratings 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 refer to the scale on page 53.

Table 4.14 Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools in 2002 who receive a rating of 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5 on nine topics (first nine items) on the second grade *Communication* objective.

2002	Percentage of sixth-grade pupils who attain a rating of…				
Topic	'1'	'2'	'3'	'4'	'5'
1. Name, age and class	4.1 *(0.78)*	13.8 *(1.45)*	25.0 *(2.11)*	31.1 *(2.44)*	25.9 *(3.12)*
2. People in pupil's home/family	13.6 *(1.65)*	28.8 *(2.49)*	30.0 *(2.18)*	17.8 *(1.91)*	7.9 *(1.53)*
3. Playing outdoors	16.2 *(1.37)*	32.5 *(2.29)*	29.8 *(2.01)*	16.2 *(2.03)*	5.0 *(1.22)*
4. Playing indoors	20.7 *(1.67)*	31.3 *(2.02)*	29.8 *(1.81)*	14.0 *(1.70)*	3.7 *(1.04)*
5. Toys/possessions at home	21.6 *(2.04)*	34.0 *(2.01)*	26.6 *(1.82)*	14.7 *(1.78)*	2.6 *(0.82)*
6. Pupil's school bag & its contents	14.5 *(1.70)*	28.3 *(1.94)*	31.5 *(2.29)*	20.1 *(2.15)*	5.0 *(1.21)*
7. Travelling to school	17.1 *(1.92)*	27.7 *(2.07)*	29.8 *(2.18)*	19.8 *(2.14)*	4.6 *(1.00)*
8. Buying clothes/shoes for pupil	22.6 *(1.96)*	31.1 *(1.66)*	27.6 *(1.86)*	14.8 *(1.84)*	2.6 *(0.69)*
9. A visit to the doctor/dentist	27.6 *(2.03)*	34.0 *(1.99)*	22.5 *(1.68)*	12.9 *(1.63)*	2.1 *(0.66)*

N = 950. Standard errors are printed in italics.

In 2002, a majority of sixth-grade pupils, in a face-to-face conversational setting, could not adequately discuss (ratings of '1', or '2') four of the listed topics - *Playing indoors, Toys/possessions at home, Buying clothes/shoes for the pupil* and *A visit to the doctor/dentist* (Table 4.14). On all other topics, except *Name age and class*, in excess of 40% of pupils failed in 2002. In 1985, the percentage of pupils failing (rating of '1'or '2') never reached 50% for any of these nine items (Table 4.15).

Note also the substantial percentages of pupils in 2002, ranging from 20.7% to 27.6%, who could say little or nothing in Irish (rating of '1') about the four most difficult topics mentioned earlier - *Playing indoors, Toys/possessions at home, Buying clothes/shoes for the pupil*, and *A visit to the doctor/dentist* (Table 4.14). For four other topics, between 13.6 % and 17.1% of pupils could say little or nothing in Irish (rating of '1') – *People in the pupil's home/family, Playing outdoors, Pupil's school bag and its contents*, and *Travelling to school*.

Table 4.15 **Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools in 1985 who receive a rating of 1, 2, 3 or 4 on nine topics (first nine items) on the second grade *Communication* objective.**

1985	Percentage of sixth-grade pupils who attain a rating of…			
Topic	'1'	'2'	'3'	'4'
1. Name, age and class	7.0 *(1.60)*	13.1 *(1.67)*	26.5 *(2.21)*	53.4 *(3.15)*
2. People in pupil's home/family	13.7 *(2.19)*	24.3 *(1.97)*	34.8 *(1.83)*	27.2 *(2.58)*
3. Playing outdoors	11.5 *(2.05)*	26.8 *(2.10)*	35.4 *(2.03)*	26.3 *(2.72)*
4. Playing indoors	15.3 *(2.28)*	23.1 *(1.83)*	35.5 *(1.89)*	26.2 *(2.69)*
5. Toys/possessions at home	16.5 *(2.22)*	23.5 *(2.18)*	35.2 *(2.07)*	24.8 *(2.71)*
6. Pupil's school bag & its contents	11.5 *(1.81)*	21.1 *(1.80)*	35.7 *(1.77)*	31.8 *(2.79)*
7. Travelling to school	12.2 *(2.06)*	18.7 *(1.91)*	31.7 *(2.12)*	37.4 *(3.00)*
8. Buying clothes/shoes for pupil	16.6 *(2.13)*	21.1 *(2.06)*	34.7 *(1.98)*	27.6 *(2.63)*
9. A visit to the doctor/dentist	18.5 *(2.44)*	24.5 *(2.13)*	29.8 *(1.97)*	27.2 *(2.80)*

N = 1043. Standard errors are printed in italics.

Table 4.16 provides data, side by side, on the percentages of pupils who attained a rating of '1' on these nine topics in 2002 and 1985. There is a statistically significant increase in the percentage of pupils in 2002 (compared to 1985) who were unable to say anything meaningful in Irish (rating of '1') about six of the nine topics. Increases for these six topics ranged from 4.7% to 9.1%. The difference in the percentage of pupils who could say nothing in Irish about three topics - *Name, age and class, People in the pupil's home/family*, and *Pupil's school bag and its contents* - is not statistically significant.

Table 4.16 **Comparison of the percentage of sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools achieving a rating of '1' on nine topics (first nine items) on the second grade *Communication* objective.**

Topics	Percentage of sixth-grade pupils who attain a rating of '1'		Difference 2002 -1985
	1985	2002	
1. Name, age and class	7.0 *(1.60)*	4.1 *(0.78)*	-2.9%
2. People in pupil's home/family	13.7 *(2.19)*	13.6 *(1.65)*	-0.1%
3. Playing outdoors	11.5 *(2.05)*	16.2 *(1.37)*	**4.7%**
4. Playing indoors	15.3 *(2.28)*	20.7 *(1.67)*	**5.4%**
5. Toys/possessions at home	16.5 *(2.22)*	21.6 *(2.04)*	**5.1%**
6. Pupil's school bag & its contents	11.5 *(1.81)*	14.5 *(1.70)*	3.0%
7. Travelling to school	12.2 *(2.06)*	17.1 *(1.92)*	**4.9%**
8. Buying clothes/shoes for pupil	16.6 *(2.13)*	22.6 *(1.96)*	**6.0%**
9. A visit to the doctor/dentist	18.5 *(2.44)*	27.6 *(2.03)*	**9.1%**

Significant differences ($p < .05$) are printed in bold. Standard errors are printed in italics. N (1985) = 1043, N (2002) = 950.

Consistent inability to converse on a range of common topics

These figures, of course, give no indication of the extent to which the same individual pupils may be reappearing in the failing group on successive items. In other words, it is conceivable, though perhaps unlikely, that a very different combination of pupils may be failing each item. Table 4.17 gives some information on the consistency of failure across the nine items. The column on the right shows the percentage of sixth-grade pupils in 2002 who fail (ratings of '1' or '2') all nine items and the percentage who fail all except the first item. Data with the first item excluded are reported simply because *Name, age and class* seem so basic as to merit separate consideration. Reading down this column, the percentages are cumulative, with each figure including all pupils in the category immediately above.

It can be seen that about one-fifth (26.1%) of pupils *fail all except the first item*. That is, when attempting to converse on any of the topics except *name, age and class*, these pupils can *either* say nothing relevant at all ('1') or are unable to get across the central elements of their message in Irish ('2'). Included in this are a much smaller group of 5.7% of pupils who consistently can say virtually nothing in Irish (rating of '1') about any of the eight topics.

Table 4.17 Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools in 1985 and 2002 who receive consistently low ratings on the nine topics (first nine items) used to test the second grade *Communication* objective.

Rating achieved on nine topics (items 1-9)*	1985**	2002
Rating '1' on item 1-9	3.8% *(1.32)*	3.1% *(0.66)*
Rating '1' on item 2-9	6.2% *(1.63)*	5.7% *(1.08)*
Rating '1' or '2' on item 1-9	13.3% *(2.10)*	14.4% *(1.78)*
Rating '1' or '2' on item 2-9	20.9% *(2.66)*	26.1% *(2.38)*

* Topics listed in Table 4.16. **N (1985) = 1043, N (2002) = 950. Standard errors are printed in italics.

Looking at the column on the left, it can be seen that in 1985 the corresponding percentage was 20.9% for pupils who failed (rating of '1' or '2') all except the first item, while 6.2% could say little or nothing (rating of '1') about the same topics.

Returning to the 2002 data, we can say that despite the fact that many of the individual topics cannot be attempted at all by a substantial minority of pupils - rating of '1' for individual topics in Table 4.15 - this very low level of performance is not maintained absolutely over all topics except for 5%-6% of pupils (Table 4.17).

To summarise our findings regarding pupils in ordinary schools with low levels of achievement in speaking:

(a) 32.4% of all sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools in 2002 failed both *Fluency of oral description* and *Communication*;
(b) 16.6% of all pupils failed *all* Irish Speaking objectives tested;
(c) 14.4 % of all pupils could not converse successfully about any of the nine specific topics in the *Communication* subtest (achieving ratings of '1' or '2' on all of them);
(d) 5.7% of all pupils could not say anything meaningful in conversation about eight of the nine specific topics (rating of '1'); name, age and class is an exception.

These data leave little doubt that the conversational ability in Irish of a substantial minority of sixth-grade pupils is consistently poor. Despite this, many low-achieving pupils have at least some passive competence in understanding spoken Irish or in Irish reading. It will be recalled, for example, that a negligible number of pupils failed *all* the Irish Listening objectives.

Conclusion

In ordinary schools, there has been a decrease between 1985 and 2002 in the percentages of sixth-grade pupils achieving high levels of performance ('mastery') on all eight Irish Speaking objectives tested. These decreases are statistically significant in all but one case. These are very substantial in the case of two key objectives - a decrease of 20.4% in the case of *Fluency of oral description* and of 21.1% in the case of the *Communication* (second grade) objective. Each of these two objectives were mastered by a little less than a third of pupils in 2002 whereas they had been mastered by a little more than half the pupils in 1985. More generally, five of the eight objectives were mastered by less than 20% of pupils in 2002; in 1985 only two objectives were mastered by such low percentages. The lowest percentages in 2002 are associated with *Control of the morphology of verbs* and *Control of the syntax of statements* - only 3.7% and 7.5% of pupils respectively attaining mastery.

For most objectives, the decreases in the percentages attaining mastery are due to an increase in 'failure' rather than to an increase in the achievement of minimal progress. In fact, for six of the eight objectives, the percentages making minimal progress decreased as well as the decrease in the percentages attaining mastery. Perhaps of particular concern are the very substantial percentages failing in the case of two objectives involving general speaking skills *Fluency of oral description* which 41.3% fail, and *Communication* (second grade) which 44.6% fail. It is important to emphasise also, however, that a pupil who has failed these sixth-grade Irish Speaking objectives may have made progress in relation to objectives at lower grade levels - it does not mean that he or she has no speaking ability in Irish at all.

In all-Irish schools only one Irish Speaking objective, *Control of the syntax of statements in speaking*, is associated with a statistically significant decline since 1985 in the percentage of pupils attaining mastery, in contrast to the position in ordinary schools where seven of the eight objectives manifested such a decline. High percentages of pupils in all-Irish schools attained mastery of each Irish speaking objective, remaining above 50% in all cases. In the case of the two central objectives of *Fluency of oral description* and *Communication* (second grade), for example, the percentages attaining mastery in all-Irish schools in 1985 were 95.2% and 99.3% respectively while in 2002 they were 87.6% and 94.6% respectively. The differences over time are not statistically significant. The relative stability in the performance of pupils in all-Irish schools over the 17 year period is particularly notable given the increase in the population of all-Irish schools from 1.1% to 5% of pupils nationally.

No objective, apart from *Control of the morphology of speaking*, is associated with a significant increase in failure rate in all-Irish schools since 1985, and the failure rates in 2002 do not reach 10% for any objective. The failure rate of less than a half a percentage point for *Communication* (second grade) is particularly notable. The failure rates of 7.6% for *Fluency of oral description* and 9.4% for *Speaking vocabulary* in all-Irish schools, however, are less reassuring.

While the decline in the percentage attaining mastery of *Control of the morphology of verbs in speaking* in all-Irish schools is not statistically significant, it is likely to cause concern when considered in association with the significant decline in the percentage attaining mastery of the corresponding verb morphology objective on the Irish Listening test (Chapter 3). It must be borne in mind, however, that of the 14.8% of all-Irish pupils no longer attaining mastery of *Control of the morphology of verbs in speaking* in 2002, 13.4% had declined to 'at least minimal progress', while only 1.4% had transferred to the 'fail' category. There is no general collapse in performance in all-Irish schools relating to the use of verbs in speaking.

In Gaeltacht schools, the results for Irish Speaking, just as they were in the case of Irish Listening, are intermediate between ordinary and all-Irish schools, though they are considerably closer to all-Irish schools. This generalisation holds true for seven of the eight speaking objectives. The exception is *Control of the morphology of nouns in speaking*, where the percentage attaining mastery in Gaeltacht schools (51.1%) is actually marginally higher than in all-Irish schools (50.3%). More typical is *Speaking vocabulary* where the percentage of Gaeltacht pupils attaining mastery is 59.2%, the percentage of all-Irish pupils is somewhat higher at 66.4%, and the percentage for ordinary schools is only 8.8%. Another example is *Communication* (second grade) where the percentage attaining mastery in Gaeltacht schools is 85.2%, while it is 94.6% in all Irish schools and 32.9% in ordinary schools.

All eight Irish Speaking objectives, in Gaeltacht schools, are also associated with a fall between 1985 and 2002 in the percentages of pupils attaining high levels of performance (mastery). The fall is statistically significant, however, only for four objectives - *Fluency of oral description* (a drop of 13.8%), *Control of the morphology of qualifiers in speaking* (a drop of 22.3%), *Control of the morphology of nouns in speaking*

(a drop of 16.2%), and *Control of the syntax of statements in speaking* (a drop of 16.8%). The fact the one of these declines involves a key objective *Fluency of oral description* is notable. For comparative purposes, it is worth mentioning also that only one Irish Speaking objective in all-Irish schools and seven objectives in the case of ordinary schools manifested a significant decline in the percentage of pupils attaining mastery. These results are also consistent with a significant decline in the overall mean Irish Speaking scores in Gaeltacht schools between 1985 and 2002, a decline which is equivalent to a little less than half of the 1985 standard deviation.

Gaeltacht schools are more like all-Irish schools than ordinary schools in terms of failure rates for 2002 and *increases* in failure rates since 1985. Failure rates in 2002 for Irish-Speaking objectives range from 0.4% to 9.4% in all-Irish schools, from 7.7% to 27.9% in Gaeltacht schools, and from 33.3% to 76.5% in ordinary schools. Increases in failure rates since 1985 are statistically significant for only one Irish Speaking objective in the case of all-Irish schools, significant for two objectives in the case of Gaeltacht schools, but significant for seven of the eight objectives in the case of ordinary schools.

In considering the implications of the Gaeltacht results, whether for Irish Listening or Speaking, it is important to bear in mind the linguistically diverse nature of Gaeltacht schools in terms of pupil home language background and the extent of Irish medium instruction at school. We return to an examination of this issue in chapters 6 and 7.

Two other related questions considered are (i) how many pupils in ordinary schools are *consistently* weak at Irish over a range of listening and/or speaking objectives (since the data summarised above concerns performance on individual objectives only) (ii) what kind of topics can pupils who have the very weakest command of the Irish speak about? Looking first at consistency of failure across objectives, results show that no pupil, either in 1985 or 2002, failed *all* of the listening and all of the speaking objectives. In addition, no pupil failed *all* of the Irish Listening objectives in 1985; and in 2002, the number of pupils failing all the Irish Listening objectives was negligible. But one in six pupils (16.6%) in 2002 failed all the Irish Speaking objectives. This latter would probably be the narrowest, or most conservative, definition of a low-Irish-achievement group.

Another broader definition of low-achievement would be failure on both of the two most general Irish Speaking objectives - the second-grade *Communication* objective and the sixth-grade *Fluency of oral description* objective. In 1985, the proportion of pupils in ordinary schools failing both these objectives was 22.7%, while in 2002 it was 32.4%, a statistically significant increase of 9.7%. In 2002, no all-Irish school pupil was in this low achievement category (i.e. had failed both these key Irish Speaking objectives) and only 7.5% of Gaeltacht school pupils were.

The second issue about low achievement concerned the ability of the weakest pupils to talk about each of nine specific topics/items of the *Communication* subtest. Examples of some of the topics examined are *Pupil's name, age and class, Playing indoors*, and *Travelling to school*. In 2002, a majority of sixth-grade pupils, in a face-

to-face conversational setting with the examiner, could not adequately discuss each one of four topics: *Playing indoors, Toys/possessions at home, Buying clothes/shoes for the pupil* and *A visit to the doctor/dentist*. In 1985, the percentage of pupils failing any of the nine topics never reached 50%. Other results also show that a minority of pupils (14.4%) in ordinary schools cannot adequately discuss *any* of these nine topics at all. Despite this, even among pupils with very low levels of achievement in speaking the language, nearly all have at least some passive competence in understanding spoken Irish or in Irish reading, as indicated by the negligible number of pupils nationally who failed *all* the Irish Listening objectives.

Chapter 5

Irish Reading Achievement

Irish Reading Achievement

As noted in Chapter 2, a new test of Irish reading was developed for use in the survey. Thus, unlike the results of the Listening and Speaking tests described in the previous two chapters, we have no data on reading that can contribute to the dominant theme of the present report (changes over time in achievement). Accordingly, this chapter can be relatively brief. It begins with a description of the test development process. We then present some information on performance on the new test (e.g., averages, distributions, reliability) and, on this basis, outline some benchmarks that could be used for future surveys or in further analyses of data from the present survey. As a way of providing an indication of the kinds of reading tasks that pupils were and were not able to perform successfully, we will present some data on particular items from the test. The chapter concludes with analyses of the percentage of total variance in pupils' reading achievement that lies between schools. The results of these analyses are relevant to questions about the extent to which schools within each of the three types (ordinary, all-Irish, and Gaeltacht) can be regarded as homogeneous (Postlethwaite, 1995), an issue that arises later when the relationships between achievement and other variables are considered.

Test development

The main reason for including an assessment of reading in the survey was to establish levels of achievement of the objectives of the Primary School Curriculum as outlined in the 1971 version of the curriculum. As pointed out in previous chapters, this was the curriculum in place for the primary schooling of our target population (pupils in sixth grade).

In the guidelines for Irish Language in the Primary School Curriculum documents, two separate, though overlapping, curricula are specified. The first is for use in ordinary schools where English is the main medium of instruction (Teanga 2 or T2 schools). The second curriculum applies in Irish-medium of instruction schools (T1 schools). Given these separate curricula and in the expectation that there would be a large achievement gap between T2 and T1 schools, it was decided to develop two separate levels of reading test, one for each group.

The main emphasis of the Primary School Curriculum is on the development of competence in communication. In the reading mode, if a message is to be communicated, the reader must establish and interpret the meaning of the text. Interpretation is of greater importance in the communication involved in reading than in the communication involved in conversation where there are more cues to meaning and where, if communication fails, the source of the message can be directly interrogated. The point is made in curriculum documents that reading as a mode of language is not only receptive but that interaction takes place as the reader brings his/her knowledge to bear in the interpretation of text. Arising out of the analysis of the curriculum, a number of decisions were made.

First, it was decided that the main type of assessment would be reading comprehension whereby pupils would be presented with a series of passages, each of which would be accompanied by a number of questions about the passage. A table of specifications involving a content by process matrix, was designed to guide the selection of passages and questions. The content (or type of text) is of two kinds: text involving a story or narrative and text that conveys information. The latter text-type comprised continuous text in the main, but also some that was non-continuous (e.g., a table of contents). Three processes were targeted in the choice of passage-related questions. These are *retrieval*, where the information required to answer the question is clearly stated (literally or in paraphrase) in the text - often within one sentence; *inference*, where the information necessary to answer the question is not explicitly stated in the text but can be inferred from the passage; and *interpretation*, where the reader's text-based inference needs to be combined with her/his general knowledge.

A second decision that was made at an early stage of planning was that the new test would not consist entirely of multiple-choice items where the pupil is required to choose the correct answer from a number (usually four) of possible answers. It was felt that, while most of the items could be in this format, some constructed-response items should also be included. In such items, the pupil is required to write an answer, which would normally consist of no more than one or two words, to an open-ended question. It was also envisaged that, while most items in both versions of the test would be multiple-choice, the proportion of constructed-response items would be larger in the version for T1 schools (i.e., those where Irish is the medium of instruction).

A third decision was to make provision for linkages to be made between the two versions of the test. This was done by including one subtest (i.e., a passage which was an extract from a dictionary and set of questions) in both versions of the test and by administering a sentence completion test to all pupils in the survey. The sentence completion test (entitled Link25) contained 25 items, each of which consists of a sentence with one word missing. The task for the pupil was to decide and indicate which one of four words was the most appropriate to complete the sentence. As indicated in Chapter 2, the 25 items were selected from various levels of the Drumcondra Irish Attainment Test.

With the help of an advisory committee, a pool of potentially suitable passages and accompanying questions was assembled and tried out in 25 schools. On the basis of this try out, the tests for use in the survey were finalised. The level of the test for use in ordinary schools, which will be referred to as the *Irish Reading Comprehension Test (O)* has five subtests, each of which consists of a passage followed by a set of comprehension questions. Altogether there are 69 such questions (50 in multiple-choice format and 19 in constructed-response format). The level of the test for use in all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools will be referred to here as *Irish Reading Comprehension Test (G)*. It consists of six subtests/passages and 90 questions (66 in multiple-choice format and 24 in constructed-response format). The subtest which was common to the two levels had 16 items.

For both levels of the Reading Comprehension Test (O and G), raw scores (i.e., the total number correct, allocating one point for each correct answer) were computed. The raw score was then converted to a percentage-correct score. The main score scale used for reporting is the Item Response Theory (IRT) scale. A central concept in IRT is the item response model which is a mathematical expression that describes the probability of a correct response to a test item as a function of the respondent's ability or proficiency in the area being measured (Embretson & Reise, 2000). The IRT model allows items and pupils' to be placed on the same scale. Unlike other approaches to test scalings, the estimation of item parameters does not depend on having a representative sample of the population of interest and parameters do not vary across sub groups of that population. Thus, IRT facilitates the replacement of items or blocks of items. This is a useful feature in the context of national assessments where new items can be introduced gradually over time (e.g., to take account of curricular change) without undermining comparability of performance.

The Reading Comprehension Test was scaled using a three-parameter model (difficulty, discrimination, and, because many of the items were in multiple choice format, the probability of a correct answer due to guessing). The model was implemented using the computer application BILOG-MG (Du Toit, 2003), which uses a marginal maximum likelihood method to estimate item parameters. The syntax and code used are available in the ERC. The scale that emerged is a standard score scale, constructed so that weighted scores have a mean of 250 and a standard deviation of 50. Percentage correct scores only are used to describe performance on Link25 (the sentence completion test).

Most of the mean scores and proportions reported are population estimates. In all such cases, the presented data have been weighted so that the sample on which the data is based is representative of population parameters. The uncertainty associated with the estimates of the population parameters is presented as a standard error of the mean (or a standard error of proportion where appropriate). In all cases, this has been computed using the jackknife procedure, which takes account of the complexity of the sample.

Results

Pupils in ordinary schools

Mean scores for pupils in ordinary schools using the percentage-correct metric, are provided in Table 5.1 for the Irish Reading Comprehension Test (O) and for Link25.

Table 5.1 **Mean percentage correct, standard errors, standard deviations, and Alpha reliability coefficients for the Irish Reading Comprehension Test (O) and Link25 for ordinary schools.**

	No. of Questions	Mean Percentage Correct *(SE)*	SD	Alpha
Irish Reading Comprehension Test (O)	69	46.9 *(0.80)*	18.3	0.92
Multiple-Choice Questions	50	51.7 *(0.68)*	16.5	0.85
Constructed-Response Questions	19	34.3 *(1.15)*	25.5	0.88
Link25	25	38.9 *(0.87)*	15.1	0.68

For the Irish Reading Comprehension Test (O), the mean percentage correct is 46.9 (SD=18.3; SE=0.80). As in analyses in previous chapters, standard errors are calculated using a resampling jacknife technique (Westat, 2000). The level of the mean score demonstrates that the test was more difficult than one would hope for if, for example, one was developing a norm-referenced test to discriminate between individual pupils, in which case the optimal average would be about 60%. However, the purpose of the survey is to estimate the extent to which curricular objectives are being achieved by groups of pupils and by the population as a whole, not to assess individuals. In spite of the test proving difficult, its reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.92) is quite satisfactory and is in the range of reliabilities found with instruments used in national and international surveys.

A feature of Table 5.1 is that it provides data separately for the 50 multiple-choice items and the 19 constructed-response items as well as the entire set of 69 items. The mean for the 50 multiple-choice items is 51.7% (SD = 16.5). The standard error is somewhat smaller than that of the full test. There are 19 constructed-response questions (about one-quarter of the items). As can be seen in Table 5.1, these 19 questions were more difficult on average than the multiple-choice questions. On the constructed-response questions, the average non-response rate was 23%, whereas for the multiple-choice questions it was only 2%. A number of pupils did not respond to any of the constructed-response questions, leading to a relatively large frequency of zero scores on this subset of questions (see Table 5.2 below). This is reflected in the large standard deviation and a somewhat skewed distribution of scores.

The contrasts in the difficulty level of questions in the two formats (multiple-choice and constructed-response) is mediated by gender (Table 5.2). There is a larger score difference between boys and girls on the constructed-response questions than on the multiple-choice questions. It can be seen from the average non-response column that the gap may be due, to a large extent, to the relatively large proportion of boys who did not respond when items were open-ended. In a relatively large number of cases, this non-response extended to all 19 of the constructed-response questions. As all non-responses were scored as incorrect, this resulted in a relatively large percentage (10.9%) scoring zero on the subset of constructed-response questions. Although not apparent from Table 5.2, it may be worth noting that a further 8% of pupils answered only one constructed-response question correctly. Boys were about six times more likely than girls to score a zero or one on these items.

As can be seen in Table 5.1, the mean percentage correct score on the 25 questions used in Link25 was 38.9 (SD = 15.1; SE = 0.87). The test reliability is quite high for such a short test (Cronbach's alpha = 0.68). It can also be seen from the table that the Link25 test is markedly more difficult than the 50 multiple-choice questions in the main reading comprehension test. This was to be expected as Link25 was designed to measure a much wider range of achievement (i.e., the achievement of all three of the specified populations) while this level of the reading comprehension test (O) was based on an analysis of the curricular objectives for sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools.

Table 5.2 **Mean percentage correct, average non-response rate, and percentage scoring zero on Irish Reading Comprehension Test (O) in ordinary schools by question format and by pupil gender.**

Questions	Gender	Mean *(SE)*	SD	Average non-response rate %	Zero score %
Multiple Choice (50/69)	Boys	47.0 *(0.94)*	16.0	2.2	0.0
	Girls	56.9 *(0.64)*	15.4	1.8	0.0
	Total	51.7 *(0.68)*	16.5	2.0	0.0
Constructed Response (19/69)	Boys	26.6 *(1.55)*	23.9	31.2	18.1
	Girls	42.9 *(1.24)*	24.4	17.4	2.9
	Total	34.3 *(1.15)*	25.5	23.0	10.9

As already noted, the weighted mean score of the IRT Scale Score was set at 250 points and the standard deviation at 50. The level of accuracy of the mean score is reflected in a standard error of 2.28 score points. The 95% confidence interval for the mean score (derived from the standard error) is 245.3 to 254.5. IRT Scale Scores on the main reading test are approximately normally distributed. They range from a scale score of 119.0 to 392.0.

To provide further information about the range of reading achievement scores, five points were identified on the weighted scale for use as benchmarks in future studies. These points correspond to the 10th, 25th, 50th, 75th, and 90th percentiles of reading achievement. The weighted IRT scale scores and percentage correct at each of the benchmarks are presented in Table 5.3.

Table 5.3 **Scores in two metrics at five benchmarks on the Irish Reading Comprehension Test (O) for ordinary schools.**

	Scores at Percentiles *(SE)*				
	10th	25th	50th	75th	90th
% Correct	22.7 *(0.85)*	32.6 *(1.00)*	44.7 *(0.88)*	58.6 *(1.30)*	71.7 *(1.37)*
Scale Score	181.5 *(5.26)*	219.5 *(3.28)*	253.9 *(2.44)*	283.4 *(1.96)*	310.7 *(3.59)*

The percentage correct benchmarks are revealing in a number of respects. For, example, it is worth noting that the average percentage correct for the lowest 10%

of achievers is, at 22.7, about the value that could be obtained by a pupil who guessed the answers to all of the multiple-choice questions, given that any such pupil would have a one in four chance of guessing the correct answer. On the other hand, almost half of the items (44.7%) were answered correctly by half of the pupils and the best 10% of pupils have an average percentage correct of 71.7.

Pupils in all-Irish schools and Gaeltacht schools

Table 5.4 contains information on the performance of pupils in all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools on the reading tests using percentage-correct scales. Scores are provided for the sentence completion test (Link25) and for the Irish Reading Comprehension Test (G) together with mean scores for its multiple-choice and constructed-response components.

Table 5.4 Mean percentage correct, standard errors, and standard deviations for the Irish Reading Comprehension Test (G) and Link25 for all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools.

	No. Questions	All-Irish schools		Gaeltacht	
		Mean *(SE)*	SD	Mean *(SE)*	SD
Irish Reading Comprehension Test (G)	90	72.8 *(1.32)*	16.5	58.1 *(2.41)*	20.3
Multiple-Choice Questions	66	70.9 *(1.19)*	15.5	57.8 *(2.10)*	18.3
Constructed-Response Questions	24	77.9 *(1.73)*	21.0	59.0 *(3.29)*	27.6
Link25	25	85.0 *(1.24)*	14.7	70.9 *(2.86)*	23.3

The mean percentage correct scores for all-Irish school pupils (72.8%) is a good deal higher than that for Gaeltacht school pupils (58.1%), which is in line with observed differences in chapters 3 and 4. Unlike the position in ordinary schools, the difficulty levels of the multiple-choice and constructed-response questions are similar in both samples. The standard deviation is larger (in both samples) for the constructed-response question scores than for the multiple-choice question scores. The reliability of the Reading Comprehension Test (G), as measured by Cronbach's alpha, is high for both samples (0.94 in all-Irish schools; 0.90 in Gaeltacht schools).

Link25 proved to be quite an easy test for all-Irish school and Gaeltacht pupils with means of 85% and 70.9% respectively which contrasts sharply with the performance of pupils in ordinary schools who scored 38.9% (Table 5.1). Scores on Link25 are less widely distributed among all-Irish school pupils (SD = 14.7) than among pupils in Gaeltacht schools (SD = 23.3). The reliability of the test (Cronbach's alpha) is 0.82 for all-Irish and 0.90 for Gaeltacht schools.

Table 5.5 **Mean percentage correct, standard errors, and standard deviations for the Irish Reading Comprehension Test (G) using the IRT scale score metric for all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools.**

	No. Questions	All-Irish schools		Gaeltacht	
		Mean *(SE)*	SD	Mean *(SE)*	SD
Irish Reading Comprehension Test (G)	90	263.8 *(3.42)*	43.4	225.9 *(6.02)*	51.7

As has been explained, the mean and standard deviation of the scores of the joint populations have been set at 250 and 50. The scores here are on a scale that is similar to that used with the ordinary sample but this scale has been constructed based on a much more difficult set of passages and questions than those for the ordinary school sample. Therefore, IRT scores on the Irish Reading Comprehension Test (O) cannot be compared with IRT scores on the Irish Reading Comprehension Test (G). Any comparisons of ordinary school pupils with pupils in the other two samples would have to rely on Link25 or, perhaps in the future, on the one passage/set of questions that are common to the two versions of the Reading Comprehension Test.

The estimated mean scores for the all-Irish school and Gaeltacht populations on the Irish Reading Comprehension Test (G) are 263.8 and 225.9 respectively (Table 5.5). The level of accuracy of the estimates in each population is indicated by the standard errors of 3.42 and 6.02, with associated confidence intervals of 257.1 to 270.5 (in all-Irish schools) and 214.1 to 237.7 (in Gaeltacht schools). These values, especially that for the Gaeltacht schools lessen the precision with which it is possible to estimate population parameters from sample statistics and make it difficult to detect significant differences in achievement between sub-groups or changes in levels of achievement over time. This lack of precision arises because the absolute numbers in the samples are small and because, as will be shown below, a large percentage of total variance in the test scores lies between schools, especially in the case of the Gaeltacht sample.

The standard deviation of the scale-scores is 50 score points for the joint population (43.4 for all-Irish schools and 51.7 for Gaeltacht schools). Scores are approximately normally distributed. In all-Irish schools they range from a scale score of 74.1 to 358.6, while in Gaeltacht schools they range from 77.3 to 360.1.

To provide further information about the range of reading achievement scores, five points have been identified on the weighted IRT scale for use as benchmarks. The points correspond to the 10th, 25th, 50th, 75th, and 90th percentiles of reading achievement for all-Irish schools and Gaeltacht schools separately (Table 5.6).

Table 5.6 Scale scores at five benchmarks for all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools on the Irish Reading Comprehension Test (G).

	Scale Scores at Percentiles *(SE)*				
	10th	25th	50th	75th	90th
All-Irish	209.2 *(10.33)*	240.9 *(4.79)*	270.0 *(3.02)*	295.0 *(2.02)*	312.9 *(1.81)*
Gaeltacht	153.8 *(8.83)*	188.5 *(9.12)*	230.3 *(8.62)*	266.1 *(5.14)*	286.3 *(5.04)*

The performance of pupils in all-Irish schools is superior to that of pupils in Gaeltacht schools at each of the benchmarks. Differences are more pronounced at the lower benchmarks than at the higher ones. For example, the gap between the two groups is smaller at the 90th percentile (26.6) than at the 10th percentile (55.4).

Description of achievement

So far, in this chapter, reading achievement has been reported either in terms of percentage-correct or on an IRT scale (mean of 250 and standard deviation of 50). To make these scores more meaningful, the texts of one of the subtests from each of the two levels of the reading comprehension test (O and G), together with examples of their accompanying questions, are reproduced and discussed below. It should be noted that the selected subtest from the ordinary school version (O) was more difficult than other subtests and the selected subtest for the other version (G) was relatively easy. When, in future research, the reading comprehension test is being used, these particular subtests will be replaced by other subtests.

The same scoring method was used for both levels of the test. All questions, including all of the constructed-response questions, were scored '1' for right or '0' for wrong. If constructed response questions were skipped (i.e., if no attempt at all was made to answer), a score of '0' was assigned. As the test is designed to measure reading comprehension, the writing competence of the pupil was disregarded in scoring. Thus, the correctness of spelling and/or of grammar was ignored. Furthermore, credit was given even if the correct answer was written in English which occurred in a small number of cases.

Ordinary schools population

In the Irish Reading Comprehension Test (O), there were five subtests, each comprising a passage of text (most frequently continuous or prose text), on a single page followed by between 13 and 18 questions about the passage. The first page of the subtest selected as an example is reproduced (not to scale) in Figure 5.1. The subtest starts (as did other subtests) with a rubric in Irish and in English, which was read to the pupils by the test administrator to ensure that the instructions would be fully understood. As the text was adjudged difficult, measures were taken at the design stage to enhance its readability. The story is divided into four clearly marked very short paragraphs so that the answering of the accompanying questions would be facilitated as the questions were grouped according to the paragraph where the answer was to be found. Furthermore, an Irish/English glossary immediately follows the story to give assistance on five words or phrases (marked in the text by appearing in italics) which

may not be in the reading vocabulary of many of the pupils. The text is short and is of the narrative/story genre, comprising 438 words and 25 sentences with an average word length of 4.2 letters and an average sentence length of 9.2 words.

There were 13 questions in the subtest, one of which was not scaled. Of the remaining 12 items, seven were in multiple-choice format and five in constructed-response format. The three processes described earlier (retrieval, inference, and interpretation) are each measured by four questions. The subtest was found to be the most difficult of those taken by pupils in the ordinary school sample. The average weighted percentage correct was 37.0. Another subtest was only marginally less difficult with an average percentage correct of 37.3. The average percentage correct for the remaining three subtests were 48.8, 50.8, and 58.0. There was a spread of difficulty among the items in the subtest under consideration and not all of the items were particularly difficult. For example, one item was answered correctly by just over 68% of pupils, while five items were answered correctly by about half of the pupils.

Figure 5.1 Text from a sample subtest of the Irish Reading Comprehension Test (O).

LEABHRAN 1: MÍR 3 — LEABHRAN 1: MÍR 3

Plumaí

Seven of the 12 items about the above passage are presented in Figure 5.2. Both the structure and layout of the presentation of the questions in the original subtest are maintained.

Figure 5.2 Seven questions from the sample subtest of the Irish Reading Comprehension Test (O).

LEABHRÁN 1: MÍR 3 Triail 6 **LEABHRÁN 1: MÍR 3**

Ceisteannna ar alt 1

1. Cé mhéad duine a bhí ina gcónaí sa teach?

_____

Ceisteannna ar alt 2

3. Cé thug na plumaí do Hoi?

(A) a athair
(B) a mháthair
(C) an bhean shaibhir
(D) an bhean déirce

4. Cé a d'ith na plumaí?

(A) an fear céile
(B) Hoi
(C) an bhean shaibhir
(D) an bhean déirce

Ceisteannna ar alt 3

7. Cad leis a bhris Hoi na clocha?

_____

8. Cén dath atá ar phéarlaí, de ghnáth?

(A) glas
(B) bán
(C) dearg
(D) buí

Ceisteannna ar alt 4

9. Cé mhéad péarla ar fad a fuair Hoi agus a mháthair?

(A) ní bhfuair siad péarla ar bith
(B) péarla amháin
(C) dhá phéarla
(D) a lán péarlaí

11. Ag deireadh an scéil bhí Hoi agus a mháthair saibhir mar …

(A) thug an bhean shaibhir airgead dóibh.
(B) thug an bhean déirce airgead dóibh.
(C) dhíol siad na péarlaí.
(D) ní raibh focal le rá acu

Two of the sample questions are in the constructed-response format (Question 1 and 7). The heading immediately above Question 1 signals that the answer is to be found in Paragraph 1. If meaning can be extracted from the question, the answer can be found in the first sentence and/or in the illustration. Although the wording of the question appears easy to read, only half of pupils answered it correctly. Just under 10% of pupils skipped the question (81% of these were boys). It is unlikely that any difficulty with writing caused this level of skipping as the pupils had been instructed that a numeral would be acceptable and that an answer given in English would also be credited. Question 7 is another constructed-response item. The vocabulary and construction of the question appears relatively easy and it is noted in the heading that the answer is to be found in paragraph 3. The answer is provided literally there (though there is a slight paraphrase in the stem of the question) within one short sentence. In the scoring of answers to the question, credit was given for 'le n-a

fhiacla' or for the full sentence which contains the answer. Question 7 was answered correctly by 33.0% of pupils; 43.2% of pupils provided an incorrect answer, while 23.9% (about two thirds of whom were boys) skipped the question.

Three of the sample questions measure the process or skill of retrieval. These are the two constructed response questions (1 and 7) that have been described already and Question 3. The answer to Question 3 is given in a slight paraphrase in the first line of the second paragraph to which the pupil is directed. This question is the easiest in this subtest and was answered correctly by just over two-thirds of pupils (68.1%). The percentages choosing each of the incorrect options were similar (7.8% for A; 11.8% for B; 11.5% for D).

Questions 4 and 9 were classified as assessing inference since both required an understanding of referents such as 'sí', 'siad', 'díobh' and (in the case of Question 9) possibly 'go léir'. Question 4 was answered correctly by 51.9% of pupils while a large minority (34.0%) selected Option B (Hoi). Less than one-fifth of pupils (19.5%) selected the correct answer to Question 9, with almost half (49.7%) choosing Option B (péarla amháin).

Question 8 is one of two examples of items of the process of interpretation which was described earlier as involving a combination of text-based inference and general knowledge. In this question, the vocabulary of the question-stem and of the options is simple, apart, possibly, from the word 'péarlaí' which is very similar in form to its English equivalent and is also cued, to an extent, in a number of the sentences in Paragraphs 3 and 4. To answer correctly, the word must be understood and related to background knowledge about pearls, which would be available to most pupils at this level. The question was answered correctly by 50% of pupils. To answer Question 11, the pupil again needs to go beyond, albeit to a very limited extent, inferences that can be made directly from the text to realise that the pearls must have been sold. A little over a third of pupils (36.8%) did so successfully.

All-Irish and Gaeltacht Schools

The Irish Reading Comprehension Test (G), which was administered to the all-Irish and Gaeltacht samples, contained subtests somewhat similar in form to those in the Irish Reading Comprehension Test (O) although the texts and questions were more complex or challenging. The six texts ranged in length from 140 to 440 words, and four were accompanied by one or more illustrations. Each of the six subtests included an average of 15 questions in both multiple-choice (66 questions) and constructed-response formats (24 questions).

One of the subtests was selected for presentation here to describe the achievement of the two populations of pupils. The passage from this subtest is reproduced (not to scale) in Figure 5.3.

Figure 5.3 **Text from a sample subtest of the Irish Reading Comprehension Test (G).**

Méara Mine Coirce

Léigh an t-oideas thíos go tapa. Ansin tabhair freagra ar na ceisteanna a leanann é.
Read quickly through the recipe below. Then answer the questions which follow it.

Comhábhair

225 gram (8 n-unsa) de *mhin choirce*
150 gram (6 unsa) margairin
75 gram (3 unsa) de shiúcra mín
25 gram (1 unsa) plúr
1 spúnóg shloróipe

Modh

1. Measc an margairin, an siúcra agus an tsioróip le chéile go mbeidh siad go deas bog.
2. Cuir isteach an plúr agus measc an t-iomlán le chéile.
3. Cuir isteach an mhin choirce agus measc leis na lámha i chun an t-ábhar go léir a cheangal le chéile.
4. Leath an *meascán* ar *stán greáscthe* agus cothromaigh go maith é.
5. Bácáil in oigheann *measartha* te é go ceann tríocha nóiméad nó mar sin go mbeidh dath órga air.
6. Gearr é ina mhéara agus é te, agus fág sa stán iad go mbeidh siad fuar.

NOD: *Go deas i gcomhair lóin sceile!*

GLUAIS

min choirce:	oatmeal
meascán:	mixture
stán greáscthe:	greased tin
measartha:	moderate

The genre of the text of this subtest is informational. It is in standard 'recipe' format with the addition of a glossary immediately underneath providing a translation of five difficult terms. The difficult words were included so that the text would be more authentic. In the text, including the glossary, there are 141 words in all. The use of this particular text might raise questions of bias in favour of girls. However, the difference in the average percentage-correct score between boys and girls is similar to the gender difference on other subtests.

This subtest was found to be one of the easiest of the six subtests in both all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools. In all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools, the average percentage-correct for the 15 questions was 78.0 and 65.5 respectively, compared to 72.8 and 58.1 respectively for the 90 questions of the full test.

In this subtest as in the others, the questions are not in order of difficulty but approximate the same order as in the text to which they refer. The question formats are intermingled. Over half of the questions (8 of 15) are in multiple-choice format. In all-Irish schools and in Gaeltacht schools the weighted percentages correct for these questions are 76.2 and 65.4 respectively. The rest of the questions (7 of 15) are in constructed-response format with weighted percentages correct of 80.0 for all-Irish schools and 65.5 for Gaeltacht schools. The difficulty levels of the constructed-response questions are much the same as those for the multiple-choice questions, quite unlike the case in the ordinary school population.

The 15 questions measure the processes of retrieval, inference, and interpretation in the ratio of 7:5:3. Because of the explicitness and narrow formal structure of the text, there are fewer requirements for inference and interpretation. Moreover, there are fewer retrieval questions in Irish that are answerable by word-to-word matching than there would be in an equivalent test of English reading. In Irish, the question stem and the correct option are frequently in paraphrase because of changes brought about by aspiration, plurals, case of verb, etc.

Six of the 15 questions about the recipe are presented in Figure 5.4.

Figure 5.4 Six questions from the sample subtest of the Irish Reading Comprehension Test (G).

LEABHRÁN 1: MÍR 3	Triail 6	**LEABHRÁN 1: MÍR 3**
1. Tógadh an píosa seo as … (A) leabhar staire. (B) leabhar Béarla. (C) leabhar cócaireachta. (D) leabhar matamaitice.		9. Ag deireadh céim 2, cé mhéad comhábhar atá sa mheascán? (A) 1 (B) 2 (C) 3 (D) 4
2. Cad é an comhábhar is mó san oideas? (A) plúr (B) min choirce (C) margairín (D) síoróip		12. Cé mhéad ama ba cheart an meascán a fhágáil san oigheann? _____
6. Cuireann tú dhá chomhábhar isteach chun an t-oideas a dhéanamh milis. Scríobh comhábhar amháin. _____		14. Ba cheart é a ghearradh ina mhéara, nuair atá sé ... _____

There are three examples of multiple-choice questions in Figure 5.4 and three examples of constructed-response questions. One of the latter is Question 6. On this question, even though the pupils were directed to write only one of the ingredients, credit was given if either or both of the ingredients were written. Another such example is Question 14. Here it can be seen how little writing is required of the pupils; the acceptable answers were 'te' and 'an-te'.

Questions 9 and 12 in Figure 5.4 measure the process or skill of retrieval. Question 9 (an example of a multiple-choice question) required the pupil to count all the ingredients in the mixture to retrieve the necessary information. This was done successfully by 60.7% and 42.2% of all-Irish and Gaeltacht pupils respectively, making it the most difficult item in the subtest for both groups of pupils. Question 12 is an example of a constructed-response question which required the pupil to go to the sentence where the oven is mentioned and to read off the amount of time literally stated there. It was answered correctly by 82.8% of all-Irish and 61.4% of Gaeltacht school pupils.

Questions 1 and 14 are classified as inference questions because the information required to answer them correctly was not explicitly stated in the text, but could be inferred from the passage. For Question 1, the pupil needed to make the inference that this recipe was taken from a cook book, rather than a history, English or mathematics book. This was done successfully by 95.3% of all-Irish pupils and 93.4% of Gaeltacht pupils, making it the easiest item in the subtest. For Question 14, the inference required to answer correctly is a relatively simple one which involves the reader understanding the referents 'é' and 'sé' within the relevant sentence. This inference was made successfully by 71.0% of all-Irish pupils, and 50.4% of Gaeltacht pupils.

Questions 2 and 6, are examples of items measuring the process of interpretation. Question 2, is a multiple-choice question, and in order to answer correctly, the pupil must identify the main ingredient in the recipe. This was done successfully by 82.7% and 67.0% of all-Irish and Gaeltacht pupils, respectively. For Question 6, the simple background knowledge that sugar or syrup is sweet is required to make the required inference. The inference was made by 66.8% of all-Irish pupils, and 57.7% of Gaeltacht pupils. A relatively large (16.0% and 18.6%) percentage of pupils failed to attempt the question.

Distribution of school scores

A measure of the heterogeneity of schools within the three samples is the percentage of total variance in the achievement measure that lies between schools (see Postlethwaite, 1995). Table 5.7 contains these percentages for the three types of schools on the Reading Comprehension Test.

Table 5.7 Percentage of total variance in the Irish Reading Comprehension Test that lies between schools in each of the three samples.

	Between-School Variance (%)
Ordinary schools	40
All-Irish schools	26
Gaeltacht schools	50

It is worth noting that, in other datasets for national samples available in the Educational Research Centre when English reading and mathematics were the focus and at various levels between fourth and sixth grade in primary school, the estimates of between-school variance ranged from 12% to 22% which are a good deal lower than those in Table 5.7. Data relating to the Irish Listening and Irish Speaking tests, not presented here, also reveal relatively large between-school variance in performance. This suggests that schools differ to a greater extent in terms of Irish reading than they do in terms of English reading and mathematics. This could be because achievement in Irish is more sensitive to variations in policy and practice in schools than achievement in other areas. Alternatively, the greater differences might be the result of the existence of distinctive groups of schools within any or all of the three populations. There is already some evidence in previous ITÉ research that this may be the case in the Gaeltacht where some schools cater mainly for pupils from homes in which Irish is spoken, and others mainly for pupils from homes where relatively little Irish is spoken.

Conclusion

Two levels of a new test of Irish Reading Comprehension were developed for the present survey. Both were based on an analysis of the separate but overlapping curricula outlined for schools in which English is the medium of instruction and for schools in which Irish is the medium of instruction. One level of the test was used in ordinary schools (O), and the other level was used in all-Irish schools and schools in the Gaeltacht (G). Both levels of the test were scaled using Item Response Theory which facilitates the use of the test in future surveys to monitor changes in standards while maintaining flexibility with regard to the replacement of items or blocks of items. Both levels of the Reading Comprehension Test consist of passages accompanied by questions about the passage. Most of the questions are in multiple-choice but some constructed-response items are also included. All pupils took a 25 item multiple-choice sentence completion test.

Pupils in ordinary schools found the constructed-response questions much more difficult than the multiple-choice items. Girls performed better than boys on both types of item but the gender difference was much more marked in the case of the constructed-response items.

As was the case with the Listening and Speaking Tests, there is evidence that the standard of reading by pupils in all-Irish schools is far higher than the standard of reading by pupils in ordinary schools, with pupils in the Gaeltacht achieving an

intermediate level but closer to pupils in all-Irish schools. On the sentence completion test taken by all pupils, the average percentage correct are 85.0 for all-Irish school pupils compared with 38.9 for ordinary school pupils. The corresponding figure for pupils in schools in the Gaeltacht is 70.9%.

Analysis of the percentage of total variance that lies between schools suggests that schools may differ to a greater extent in terms of Irish reading than they do in terms of English reading and mathematics. This could be because achievement in Irish is more sensitive to variations in school policy and practice or because of the existence of distinctive groups of schools within any or all of the three populations.

Chapter 6

Relationships Between Key variables and Achievement in Irish

Relationships Between Key Variables and Achievement in Irish

This chapter presents an overview of analyses of the relationship between achievement in Irish (Listening, Speaking, and Reading) among sixth-grade pupils and a number of key linguistic, educational, and socio-demographic variables which previous research, reviewed in Chapter 1, has indicated are related to achievement in Irish or other school subjects. The analyses will help locate the findings of the present survey in the context of previous national surveys. It will also help us to interpret the results in relation to more indepth studies of Irish achievement and classroom processes which were based on more restricted samples (e.g. Harris & Murtagh, 1999). This, in turn, will help to provide a broader information base from which to make recommendations for action and future research in the final chapter.

The variables to be examined can be divided into two broad groups: those at the pupil level, and those at the school/class level.

Five pupil-level variables are examined:

a) pupil gender;
b) parents' level of education;
c) receipt of a medical card by the family;
d) parents' ability to speak Irish;
e) parents' frequency of use of Irish with their child.

With the exception of gender, these are all based on data from the Parent Questionnaire.

Five school-level variables are examined:

a) region;
b) school size;
c) gender composition of school;
d) location (urban-rural);
e) disadvantaged status.

In the case of the pupil-level variables, we present data on relationships of interest in all three populations of schools (ordinary, all-Irish, and Gaeltacht). Our analyses of school-level variables, however, are confined to ordinary schools. This is because most of the socio-demographic and educational variables are either not appropriate or relevant in the case of all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools or the numbers of pupils and schools involved are too small to be able to draw any useful conclusions. For example, there are Gaeltacht schools in only some regions and very few all-Irish schools are classified as serving pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The key variables

Pupil-level variables

While individual pupil gender and gender composition of the school (i.e., whether the school serves boys only, girls only, or both genders) are self-explanatory, the other variables, and how they were measured in this survey, require some comment. In the Parent Questionnaire, respondents were asked to indicate the highest level of education they had achieved, together with the highest level of education achieved by their spouse or partner (if applicable). The categories of the variable were (i) end of primary education; (ii) Group certificate; (iii) Intermediate Certificate; (iv) Leaving Certificate; (v) third-level certificate or diploma and (vi) third-level degree. There was also a category for 'other' types of education. In examining relationships involving parents' education, where parental levels were discrepant, the higher level was accepted. If the response was missing for one parent, or if the 'other' category was chosen for one parent, the response of the remaining parent was used.

Whether or not a pupil's family holds a medical card has been used in previous national assessments as an indicator of socioeconomic background since most families that hold medical cards do so because of low income. Socioeconomic background has been found in previous research to be strongly associated with achievement in, and attitudes to, Irish (Harris & Murtagh, 1999). Accordingly, in the present survey, the Parent's Questionnaire included an item where parents were asked to indicate whether or not they had a medical card.

The more exposure to the Irish language that children have in their homes has been found, not surprisingly, to be strongly associated with better achievement in Irish (Harris, 1984; Harris & Murtagh, 1988a, 1999). In this chapter, the association is examined using two variables from the Parent Questionnaire. The first is based on a question which yielded a self-assessed measure of parental ability to speak Irish. The response categories were (i) no Irish; (ii) only the odd word; (iii) a few simple sentences; (iv) parts of conversations; (v) most conversations; and (vi) native speaker ability. The second variable was frequency of use of Irish. Parents were asked to indicate how often they spoke Irish to their child by choosing one option from (i) always; (ii) very often; (iii) often; (iv) occasionally; (v) seldom and (vi) never.

School-level variables

Region refers to the location of the school in one of four areas of the country: (a) the province of Connacht plus county Donegal; (b) the province of Munster; (c) Dublin; and (d) the province of Leinster (excluding Dublin) but including counties Cavan and Monaghan. These were the regions used by Harris (1983) who reported that pupils in Dublin generally had significantly lower levels of achievement in Irish than pupils in other regions.

In selecting samples, schools were allocated to strata based on the number of pupils in sixth grade (see Chapter 2). In the case of ordinary and all-Irish schools, three strata were used: large (more than 27 pupils in sixth grade); medium (from 15 to 27 pupils); and small (between 6 and 14 pupils). This categorisation was used in examining the relationship between school size and Irish achievement.

Schools were assigned to the variable 'school location' based on the responses that principal teachers gave to an item on the School Questionnaire. The response categories were: (i) the city or suburbs of Dublin, Dun Laoghaire, Cork, Galway, Waterford or Limerick; (ii) a large town or city (population of 10,000 or more); (iii) a town (population between 5000 and 9,999); (iv) a town (population between 1,500 and 4,999); (v) a town or village (population between 1,000 and 1,499) and (vi) a village or rural community (population less than 1,000). In the analyses, the six categories were collapsed into three: locations with a population greater than 10,000; locations with a population between 1,500 and 10,000; and locations with a population less than 1,500.

The final school-level variable was whether or not the school was in the Disadvantaged Areas Scheme operated by the Department of Education and Science, whereby primary schools receive additional resources and support because they are attended by large proportions of pupils from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

For the pupil-level variables, we will examine whether girls perform better than boys; pupils whose parents have attained higher levels of education perform better than pupils whose parents have attained lower levels of education; whether parental ability in Irish and/or use of Irish in the home are reflected in pupil achievement; and whether children from families that do not have a medical card perform better than pupils from families with medical cards.

For the school-level variables, the performance of pupils in ordinary schools in Dublin will be compared with the performance of pupils in three other regions; pupils in schools located in more rural areas (small town, villages, and rural) compared to those in schools in medium-sized towns and larger towns/cities; pupils in small schools compared with pupils in other schools; boys in single sex schools compared with girls in single sex schools, and with pupils in mixed schools; and pupils in schools that have been designated as disadvantaged with pupils in other schools.

Our primary interest in carrying out the analyses described in the present chapter was to examine relationships between achievement in Irish and key variables. Of course, it would also be of interest to know what proportion of pupils nationally are associated with the categories represented by these variables (e.g., parental ability to speak Irish or possession of a medical card) and indeed how these proportions vary in different types of school. Differences between school types is of particular interest in the case of the linguistic variables (such as parental frequency of use of Irish with the child) where we can expect substantial differences between school types in the proportion of parents/pupils falling into various categories. While we will refer to some of the differences that exist between school types in passing in the context of reporting relationships with Irish achievement, we will leave a fuller discussion of the linguistic variables and the way in which they differ across school types until Chapter 7.

It should also be noted that while the relationship between achievement and each of the key variables are reported separately here, multivariate analysis such as multilevel regression models (Goldstein, 1987; Hox, 2002; Longford, 1993) are not included. It is important to recognise the limitations of using separate analyses only.

Many of the key variables are interrelated (Harris, 1983; Harris & Murtagh, 1999) and, without multivariate analysis, it is not possible to establish the amount of variance in achievement that is unique to each key variable.

Method of analysis

Each of the key variables (at pupil and school-level) is categorical in the sense that each participating pupil is, for example, either a boy or a girl or is attending a large, medium, or small school. Therefore, the relationship between them and achievement can be examined in terms of mean achievement scores. To examine whether the difference between groups was statistically significant, the standard error of the difference was computed and the relevant critical values (*t* scores) were adjusted for multiple comparisons. Most of the key variables have more than two categories and, in these cases, multiple comparisons are involved (i.e., it is necessary to compare more than two pairs of mean scores at the same time). To minimize the number of comparisons, one category of the variable (the reference category) was selected against which all other categories were compared. To further reduce the possibility of incorrectly inferring a significant difference, the Bonferroni procedure for taking account of multiple comparisons was applied and appropriately adjusted critical (*t*) values, corresponding to the 5% level of statistical significance, were obtained.

Results

Before outlining results of comparisons, a number of aspects of the analyses and their presentation merit attention. The first issue concerns the large number of relationships to be explored. With three measures of Irish achievement (Listening, Speaking and Reading), three populations of schools, and with even just the first group of pupil-level variables, there are a total of 45 relationships (3x3x5). If we were simply to present results variable by variable for each aspect of Irish achievement and for each population of schools it would be difficult to maintain a perspective on the overall pattern of results. If, in addition, we were to present for each variable the kind of objective by objective data that we did for Irish Listening and Irish Speaking in Chapters 3 and 4, the complexity of the results would be excessive. A similar though somewhat less complex situation arises in the case of the school-level variables.

The solution that we have adopted to this problem of presentation involves two decisions. One is that for the purposes of this chapter we will largely confine our measure of achievement in the case of each of the three areas of Irish to mean scores (IRT scale scores in the case of the Reading Test and percentage correct for the other two tests)[11]. The second decision is that we will initially present two tables, one for pupil-level variables and the other for school-level variables, which summarise the main outcome of the significance tests conducted in relation to each group of variables. These summary tables are intended to provide us with an opportunity to draw attention to the pattern of results across the various aspects of Irish

[11] In the case of three variables, gender, parental ability to speak Irish and parental frequency of use of Irish with the child, we also present data on some individual objectives. This is in order to illustrate the scale of the differences in pupil achievement in relation to these variables.

achievement in the three types of school. It will also provide us with a perspective for discussing a number of other issues related to the interpretation of the results. This overview of the results is followed by a series of tables, accompanied by brief commentaries, containing the more detailed variable by variable findings, separately for the three populations.

One other issue needs to be mentioned here. While the same questionnaire items are used to provide the data on the ten variables irrespective of which population of schools is under consideration, response categories from the original items are sometimes combined in somewhat different ways in making comparisons in each population. For example, while we used the same question to elicit information on parental ability to speak Irish in each of the three populations, very few parents of pupils in ordinary schools would have high levels of ability compared to those in Gaeltacht schools. In such cases, we combined adjacent categories of response in different ways in each population to achieve numbers which would make comparisons viable. Nevertheless, the fact that the variable is essentially the same, and measured by the same item, means that it is of interest to examine general patterns of results across the three populations of schools.

Some data are missing for many of the variables. For example, the Parent Questionnaire was not completed by some parents and, even when it was, some questions were not answered. The missing category is included, where appropriate, in the analyses reported here (i.e., the test scores of pupils for whom the value on the variable being considered is missing are compared with the scores of pupils in the reference category).

Table 6.1 provides a summary of the outcomes of the statistical comparisons of mean achievement scores for each combination of key pupil-level variables for the three school populations. Table 6.2 contains a similar summary for the key school-level variables but, in this case for the ordinary school population only.

The entries in each cell of the two tables takes one of three forms: **Sig,** *Some sig* and NS. The abbreviation **Sig** refers to the situation where all comparisons, or the sole comparison, involving this combination of variables resulted in a difference or differences which are statistically significant. Thus, for example, where **Sig** appears in a cell relating to gender, the relevant finding is that girls performed better than boys and that the difference in mean scores was statistically significant. **Sig** is also used to describe the situation where all the comparisons except those involving the "missing" category are significant (e.g., all of the comparisons relating to the medical card variable).

The second type of cell entry (*Some sig*) arises because many of the key variables have more than two categories, one of which is the reference category. The label *Some sig* is used to describe the situation in which the reference category differs significantly from some but not all of the other categories. For example, when parents' level of education was the focus of comparison in ordinary schools, pupils in the reference category (i.e., possession of a Leaving Certificate) were found to have significantly higher levels of achievement in Irish than pupils whose parents

had lower levels of education and significantly lower achievement than pupils whose parents had a third-level degree. However, the difference between the reference category and pupils whose parents had a third-level certificate or diploma was not significant.

If none of the comparisons involving a particular variable resulted in a statistically significant difference, NS is entered in the appropriate cell.

Table 6.1 Summary of outcomes of significance tests on differences in mean achievement in Irish Listening, Speaking, and Reading in relation to five variables in three populations (ordinary, all-Irish, and Gaeltacht schools).

	Ordinary Schools			All-Irish Schools			Gaeltacht Schools		
Variable	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Listening	Speaking	Reading
Gender	**Sig**[12]	**Sig**	**Sig**	**Sig**	NS[13]	**Sig**	NS	NS	**Sig**
Parents' level of education	*Some sig*[14]	*Some sig*	*Some sig*	*Some sig*	NS	*Some sig*	NS	NS	NS
Medical Card	**Sig**	**Sig**	**Sig**	**Sig**	NS	**Sig**	NS	NS	NS
Parents' ability to speak Irish	**Sig**	*Some sig*	**Sig**	*Some sig*	NS	*Some sig*	**Sig**	**Sig**	**Sig**
Parents' frequency of use of Irish	**Sig**	*Some sig*	**Sig**	**Sig**	NS	NS	**Sig**	*Some sig*	*Some sig*

[12] *All* comparisons, or the sole comparison, involving this combination of variables result in statistically significant differences.
[13] *None* of the comparisons involving this combination of variables results in a statistically significant difference.
[14] *Some* of the comparisons made involving this combination of variables result in statistically significant differences.

Table 6.2 **Summary of the outcomes of significance tests on differences in mean percentage correct score on Irish achievement measures (Listening, Speaking, and Reading) associated with five key school-level variables in ordinary schools.**

	Ordinary Schools		
School-level variables	**Irish Listening**	**Irish Speaking**	**Irish Reading**
Region	**Sig**[1]	*Some*[2] *sig*	NS[3]
School size	*Some sig*	NS	*Some sig*
Gender composition of school	*Some sig*	NS	**Sig**
School location	*Some sig*	*Some sig*	**Sig**
Disadvantage status	**Sig**	**Sig**	**Sig**

1. *All* comparisons, or the sole comparison, involving this combination of variables result in statistically significant differences.
2. *Some* of the comparisons made involving this combination of variables result in statistically significant differences.
3. *None* of the comparisons involving this combination of variables results in a statistically significant difference.

A feature of the summary of results in Table 6.1 is that the five pupil-level variables tend to be significantly related to Irish achievement - Listening, Speaking or Reading - more often in the case of ordinary schools than in either all-Irish or Gaeltacht schools. Thus, for example, while the comparisons listed in five of the twelve cells concerning all-Irish schools, and five cells concerning Gaeltacht schools, result in entirely non-significant outcomes (NS), none of the cells representing ordinary schools fail to yield some significant comparisons (i.e., the comparisons in each cell in ordinary schools is categorised as either '**Sig**' or '*Some sig*').

Two other points are notable. One is that comparisons involving Irish Speaking as one of the variables result in fewer significant outcomes than comparisons involving Irish Listening and Irish Reading. A second is that comparisons involving all five individual-pupil variables result in non-significant outcomes in the case of Irish Speaking in all-Irish schools.

In the case of the school-level variables (Table 6.2), only three of the 15 cells contain NS (indicating the absence of a statistically significant difference). The remaining twelve comparisons yielded a statistical difference between the reference category and at least one other category.

In relation to patterns of results evident in Tables 6.1 and 6.2, it is important to bear in mind that standard errors associated with test scores in the all-Irish and Gaeltacht samples (especially the latter) tend to be much larger than the corresponding standard errors in the ordinary school sample (Table 6.3). There is the further fact in the case of Irish Speaking that because this was an individually administered test, we had to test considerably fewer pupils than we could in the case of the Irish Listening and Irish Reading.

Table 6.3 Means*, standard deviations, and standard errors for the Irish Listening, Irish Speaking, and Irish Reading tests in ordinary, all-Irish, and Gaeltacht schools.

	Listening			Speaking			Reading		
	Mean	SD	SE	Mean	SD	SE	Mean	SD	SE
Ordinary Schools	45.4	12.5	0.62	33.4	25.0	1.62	250.0	50.0	2.28
All-Irish Schools	84.9	8.8	0.95	78.3	14.9	2.57	263.8	43.4	3.42
Gaeltacht Schools	74.8	18.3	2.40	70.9	25.9	3.37	225.9	51.7	6.02

* Percentage correct for Listening and Speaking, IRT scale score for Reading. Note that the mean percentage correct scores for Irish Listening, rather than mean *raw* scores as in Table 3.12, are given here.

A final important point is that while the same test was used in all three types of school to assess Irish Listening and Irish Speaking, this was not so in the case of Irish Reading. Thus, while means, standard deviations, and standard errors are comparable across the three samples in the case of Irish Listening and Irish Speaking, this is not so in the case of Irish Reading. This should be borne in mind, in particular, when examining the more detailed data for each key variable below.

Comparisons of Irish achievement for individual key variables

We turn now to the detailed analyses of the relationships between key variables and Irish achievement from which the overview just presented was derived. Each of the tables that follow combines the results for the three tests for each key variable. For pupil-level variables, separate tables are provided for ordinary, all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools. However, because of the decision to confine our examination of school-level variables to ordinary schools, only one table is required to present results for these variables.

Each table is divided into two parts. The top part contains, for each variable category on each Irish achievement test (Listening, Speaking, and Reading), the percentage of the total sample and the mean score and standard error for that category. The mean scores are percentage correct for Listening and Speaking and IRT scores for Reading. The bottom part of the table contains the difference between the mean for the reference category and the mean for other categories (diff), the standard error of the difference, and the 95% Bonferroni-adjusted confidence interval. Where a difference is statistically significant, the confidence intervals are printed in bold.

Pupil-level variables

Gender

Comparisons between boys and girls are relatively uncomplicated in the sense that only two groups of approximately equal size are involved and there are no missing data. Tables 6.4, 6.5, and 6.6 contain results for the three types of school.

Table 6.4 **Mean scores for Listening, Speaking, and Reading for sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools and mean score difference by gender.**

	Listening			*Speaking*			*Reading*		
Gender	*%T*	*Mean*	*SE*	*%T*	*Mean*	*SE*	*%T*	*Mean*	*SE*
Boys	52.1	43.1	0.78	52.2	29.4	2.17	52.5	233.7	3.46
Girls	47.9	47.9	0.66	47.8	37.8	1.80	47.5	268.0	1.97
Total	100.0	45.4	0.62	100.0	33.4	1.62	100.0	250.0	2.28
	Mean Score Differences (Reference Category: Girls)								
	Listening			*Speaking*			*Reading*		
	Diff	*SED*	*BCI95%*	*Diff*	*SED*	*BCI95%*	*Diff*	*SED*	*BCI95%*
Boys-Girls	-4.8	1.02	**-7.2** **-2.5**	-8.4	2.82	**-14.0** **-2.8**	-34.3	3.45	**-41.2** **-27.5**

Notes: N for Listening = 2728, N Speaking = 950, Reading = 2726; %T = percentage of total number of pupils; Diff = mean difference (each category minus the reference category); SED = standard error of difference; BCI95% = Bonferroni-adjusted confidence interval. Differences that are statistically significant (p<.05) are in bold.

Table 6.5 **Mean scores for Listening, Speaking, and Reading for sixth-grade pupils in all-Irish schools and mean score difference by gender.**

	Listening			*Speaking*			*Reading*		
Gender	*%T*	*Mean*	*SE*	*%T*	*Mean*	*SE*	*%T*	*Mean*	*SE*
Boys	54.1	83.2	1.31	57.9	75.9	3.15	54.4	254.0	4.70
Girls	45.9	86.8	0.72	42.1	81.7	2.26	45.6	275.4	2.92
Total	100.0	84.9	0.95	100.0	78.3	2.57	100.0	263.8	3.42
	Mean Score Differences (Reference Category: Girls)								
	Listening			*Speaking*			*Reading*		
	Diff	*SED*	*BCI95%*	*Diff*	*SED*	*BCI95%*	*Diff*	*SED*	*BCI95%*
Boys-Girls	-3.6	1.13	**-6.0** **-1.2**	-5.9	3.87	-14.1 2.4	-21.4	4.75	**-31.6** **-11.3**

Notes: N for Listening = 640, N Speaking = 208, Reading = 624; %T = percentage of total number of pupils; Diff = mean difference (each category minus the reference category); SED = standard error of difference; BCI95% = Bonferroni-adjusted confidence interval. Differences that are statistically significant (p<.05) are in bold.

Table 6.6 **Mean scores for Listening, Speaking, and Reading for sixth-grade pupils in Gaeltacht schools and mean score differences by gender.**

	Listening			*Speaking*			*Reading*		
Gender	*%T*	*Mean*	*SE*	*%T*	*Mean*	*SE*	*%T*	*Mean*	*SE*
Boys	51.6	72.6	2.63	49.0	67.0	4.02	50.6	215.0	6.68
Girls	48.4	77.2	2.64	51.0	74.6	3.37	49.4	237.0	6.46
Total	100.0	74.8	2.40	100.0	70.9	3.37	100.0	225.9	6.02
	Mean Score Differences (Reference Category: Boys)								
	Listening			*Speaking*			*Reading*		
	Diff	*SED*	*BCI95%*	*Diff*	*SED*	*BCI95%*	*Diff*	*SED*	*BCI95%*
Girls-Boys	4.6	3.73	-3.1 12.3	7.6	5.24	-3.2 18.5	21.9	9.30	**3.4** **40.4**

Notes: N for Listening = 550, N Speaking = 294, Reading = 547; %T = percentage of total number of pupils; Diff = mean difference (each category minus the reference category); SED = standard error of difference; BCI95% = Bonferroni-adjusted confidence interval. Differences that are statistically significant (p<.05) are in bold.

Scanning the tables, it is clear that in every comparison there is what appears to be a difference in favour of girls, although the difference does not reach statistical significance in three cases (the Speaking test in all-Irish schools and the Listening and Speaking tests in Gaeltacht schools).

An indication of the scale of the differences can be obtained by dividing the difference between boys and girls by the appropriate standard deviation (i.e., the entry in Table 6.4, 6.5 or 6.6 under *diff* as a fraction of the appropriate entry in the middle column of Table 6.3). Using this approach reveals what appears to be a strong tendency for gender differences to be much more pronounced in reading than in the other two areas. For example, in the ordinary school sample, the difference is equivalent to over two-thirds of a standard deviation for Reading compared to about two-fifths and one-third of a standard deviation for Listening and Speaking respectively. Gender differences in reading were already discussed briefly in Chapter 5, where it was noted that there was a particularly wide gap between boys and girls (favouring girls) on constructed-response items.

Another way of illustrating the scale of gender differences in Listening and Speaking is provided by the percentages of boys and girls in ordinary schools who attain the various defined levels of performance on particular objectives. Significantly more girls than boys attained mastery of two of the Listening objectives and two of the Speaking objectives. The differences in the case of the other objectives are not statistically significant. Taking Speaking as an example, the percentages of girls who attained mastery of *Fluency of oral description* was 35.5% (SE=3.77) compared to 24.8% (SE=3.16) in the case of boys, a difference of 10.7%. In the case of *Communication*, the corresponding percentages attaining mastery were 40.2% (SE=4.24) and 26.6% (SE=3.34) for girls and boys respectively, a difference of 14%.

Significant differences between the performance of boys and girls extend to a greater number of objectives when we look at failure rates. Thus, significantly more boys than girls failed four Listening objectives and five Speaking objectives. The percentage of boys who failed *Listening vocabulary* was 50% (SE=2.81) while it was only 33.9% (SE=2.18) for girls, a difference of 16.1%. The corresponding failure rates for *General comprehension of speech* were 44.6% (SE=2.67) and 27.2% (SE=2.06) for boys and girls respectively, a difference of 17.4%.

Parents' level of education

As noted earlier, respondents were given seven options, ranging from primary school to third-level, by which they could describe the highest level of education that they and their spouse/partner, if appropriate, had received. For the purposes of analysis, the first three categories were combined and are labelled 'Primary to Inter Cert' in Tables 6.7, 6.8 and 6.9. In these tables also, the very small number of respondents who selected 'other' for themselves and their spouse/partner are combined with those who did not provide an answer in a "missing/other" category.

Table 6.7 **Mean scores for Listening, Speaking, and Reading for sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools and mean score difference by parents' level of education.**

Parents' level of education	*Listening*			*Speaking*			*Reading*		
	%T	*Mean*	*SE*	*%T*	*Mean*	*SE*	*%T*	*Mean*	*SE*
Primary/Group /Inter Cert	27.6	41.9	0.67	26.0	26.7	1.94	28.5	234.3	3.57
Leaving Cert	27.6	46.7	0.89	29.9	35.5	2.13	27.1	256.3	2.59
Third-level Cert/Dip	18.8	47.8	0.77	18.1	37.2	2.29	18.8	259.3	2.41
Third-level Degree	13.0	51.3	1.04	12.8	47.4	2.17	13.2	277.2	3.33
Missing/Other	13.1	40.8	0.92	13.3	23.3	2.68	12.3	228.9	4.19
Total	100.0	45.4	0.62	100.0	33.4	1.62	100.0	250.0	2.28

	Mean Score Differences (Reference Category: Leaving Cert)											
Diff between ref category and	*Listening*				*Speaking*				*Reading*			
	Diff	*SED*	*BCI95%*		*Diff*	*SED*	*BCI95%*		*Diff*	*SED*	*BCI95%*	
Primary/Group /Inter Cert	-4.8	0.89	**-7.1**	**-2.5**	-8.8	2.01	**-14.0**	**-3.7**	-22.0	5.10	**-35.1**	**-8.9**
Third-level Cert/Dip	1.1	0.76	-0.9	3.0	1.6	2.37	-4.5	7.7	3.0	5.60	-11.3	17.3
Third-level Degree	4.6	1.14	**1.7**	**7.5**	11.9	2.51	**5.4**	**18.3**	20.9	5.80	**6.0**	**35.8**
Missing/Other	-5.9	1.03	**-8.5**	**-3.2**	-12.23	2.77	**-19.3**	**-5.1**	-27.4	7.90	**-47.5**	**-7.2**

Notes: N for Listening = 2728, N Speaking = 950, Reading = 2726; %T = percentage of total number of pupils; Diff = mean difference (each category minus the reference category); SED = standard error of difference; BCI95% = Bonferroni-adjusted confidence interval. Differences that are statistically significant ($p<.05$) are in bold.

Table 6.8 **Mean scale scores for Listening, Speaking, and Reading for sixth-grade pupils in all-Irish schools and mean score difference by parents' level of education.**

Parents' level of education	Listening			Speaking			Reading		
	%T	Mean	SE	%T	Mean	SE	%T	Mean	SE
Primary/Group /Inter Cert	13.0	78.7	1.67	13.6	73.1	3.92	12.2	231.0	7.19
Leaving Cert	25.7	85.1	0.76	26.8	79.7	2.05	24.9	261.1	2.95
Third level Cert/Dip	19.5	85.0	1.03	23.4	79.8	3.34	18.8	267.3	3.90
Third level Degree	28.9	87.8	0.74	27.1	79.0	3.66	29.1	279.7	2.55
Missing/Other	13.0	83.9	1.84	9.1	76.2	5.30	15.1	259.5	9.00
Total	100.0	84.9	0.95	100.0	78.3	2.57	100.0	263.8	3.42

	Mean Score Differences (Reference Category: Leaving Cert)											
Diff between ref category and	Listening				Speaking				Reading			
	Diff	SED	BCI95%		Diff	SED	BCI95%		Diff	SED	BCI95%	
Primary/Group /Inter Cert	-6.4	1.83	**-11.5**	**-1.2**	-6.6	4.42	-19.2	5.9	-30.1	5.87	**-46.7**	**-13.5**
Third level Cert/Dip	-0.1	1.28	-3.7	3.5	0.1	3.91	-11.0	11.2	6.2	4.16	-5.7	18.0
Third level Degree	2.7	1.06	-0.3	5.7	-0.8	4.20	-12.7	11.1	18.6	3.16	**9.6**	**27.5**
Missing/Other	-1.2	1.99	-6.8	4.4	-3.6	5.68	-19.7	12.5	-1.6	8.82	-26.6	23.4

Notes: N for Listening = 640, N Speaking = 208, Reading = 624; %T = percentage of total number of pupils; Diff = mean difference (each category minus the reference category); SED = standard error of difference; BCI95% = Bonferroni-adjusted confidence interval. Differences that are statistically significant ($p<.05$) are in bold.

Table 6.9 **Mean scores for Listening, Speaking, and Reading for sixth grade pupils in Gaeltacht schools and mean score difference by parents' level of education.**

Parents' level of education	Listening			Speaking			Reading		
	%T	Mean	SE	%T	Mean	SE	%T	Mean	SE
Primary/Group /Inter Cert	31.7	71.2	3.17	34.1	65.6	5.18	32.4	214.5	7.95
Leaving Cert	31.3	77.0	2.30	29.4	74.4	2.54	29.9	230.5	5.87
Third-level Cert/Dip	14.4	72.2	3.10	15.8	71.8	4.15	15.4	223.2	8.16
Third-level Degree	13.4	81.5	2.65	11.8	80.0	4.07	13.3	254.0	7.08
Missing	9.2	74.2	4.10	8.9	65.9	7.35	9.0	214.4	9.20
Total	100.0	74.8	2.40	100.0	70.9	3.37	100.0	225.9	6.02

	Mean Score Differences (Reference Category: Leaving Cert)											
	Listening				Speaking				Reading			
Diff between ref category and	Diff	SED	BCI95%		Diff	SED	BCI95%		Diff	SED	BCI95%	
Primary/Group /Inter Cert	-5.8	2.49	-12.5	0.9	-8.8	4.67	-21.3	3.8	-16.0	10.70	-44.9	12.8
Third-level Cert	-4.8	2.35	-11.2	1.5	-2.6	3.67	-12.5	7.3	-7.2	11.10	-37.2	22.7
Third-level Degree	4.4	2.81	-3.1	12.0	5.7	4.44	-6.3	17.6	23.5	11.90	-8.5	55.5
Missing	-2.8	3.55	-12.4	6.8	-8.4	6.25	-25.2	8.4	-16.1	12.00	-48.3	16.1

Notes: N for Listening = 550, N Speaking = 294, Reading = 547; %T = percentage of total number of pupils; Diff = mean difference (each category minus the reference category); SED = standard error of difference; BCI95% = Bonferroni-adjusted confidence interval. None of the differences are statistically significant (p<.05).

Before examining the achievement differences, it is worth noting that parents in the three types of schools are quite different from each other in terms of their levels of education. Parents in the all-Irish group have the highest level.

Pupils whose parents' highest level of education is the Leaving Certificate (the reference category) obtained significantly higher mean scores than pupils whose parents had lower levels of education on all three measures in the ordinary school sample and on Listening and Reading in the all-Irish sample. They performed significantly less well than of pupils whose parents had a third-level degree on all three tests in the ordinary school sample and on the Reading test in the all-Irish sample. No significant differences were observed in the Gaeltacht sample.

Pupils whose parents' highest level of education was categorised as third-level certificate or diploma merit some comment. In no case does the performance of this group differ significantly from parents in the Leaving Certificate group. It should be noted, of course, that the use of a reference category means that we are not in a position to examine the statistical significance of differences between the

performance of pupils in the third-level certificate/diploma group and, for example, those in the primary to Intermediate Certificate or the third-level degree group.

The low mean scores of pupils in the missing/other group, especially in the ordinary school sample where these means are the lowest of all the categories for each of the three tests, are also noteworthy. Indeed the mean for the missing/other groups is significantly below that of the reference group on all three tests.

Medical card possession

The performance of pupils whose parents reported having a medical card (the reference category) was compared with the performance of pupils who reported not having a medical card and the performance of pupils whose parents did not respond to the questionnaire item (Tables 6.10 to 6.12). The results are fairly clear-cut. In all nine comparisons (three Irish achievement tests in three samples), the performance of medical card holders is below that of non-medical card holders, although in only five cases is the difference statistically significant: the three tests in the ordinary school sample and the Listening and Reading Tests in the all-Irish sample.

Table 6.10 **Mean scores for Listening, Speaking, and Reading for sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools and mean score difference by medical card posession.**

Medical card	*Listening*			*Speaking*			*Reading*		
	%T	*Mean*	*SE*	*%T*	*Mean*	*SE*	*%T*	*Mean*	*SE*
'Yes'	19.5	41.4	0.72	19.4	27.5	2.60	19.8	229.2	4.15
'No'	70.2	47.1	0.66	70.4	36.5	1.75	70.6	258.9	2.00
Missing	10.3	41.0	1.09	10.2	23.6	2.85	9.6	227.4	4.74
Total	100.0	45.4	0.62	100.0	33.4	1.62	100.0	250.0	2.28
	Mean Score Differences (Reference Category: Yes)								
	Listening			*Speaking*			*Reading*		
	Diff	*SED*	*BCI95%*	*Diff*	*SED*	*BCI95%*	*Diff*	*SED*	*BCI95%*
No-Yes	5.8	0.72	**4.1** **7.4**	9.0	2.58	**3.1** **14.9**	29.7	4.60	**19.2** **40.3**
Missing-Yes	-0.4	1.03	-2.8 2.0	-3.9	3.15	-11.1 3.3	-1.8	6.30	-16.3 12.6

Notes: N for Listening = 2728, N Speaking = 950, Reading = 2726; %T = percentage of total number of pupils; Diff = mean difference (each category minus the reference category); SED = standard error of difference; BCI95% = Bonferroni-adjusted confidence interval. Differences that are statistically significant (p<.05) are in bold.

Table 6.11 **Mean scores for Listening, Speaking, and Reading for sixth-grade pupils in all-Irish schools and mean score differences by medical card possession.**

Medical card	Listening			Speaking			Reading		
	%T	Mean	SE	%T	Mean	SE	%T	Mean	SE
'Yes'	12.8	80.6	1.42	13.1	75.7	4.05	11.9	241.0	5.71
'No'	75.6	85.9	0.87	78.2	79.5	2.74	77.1	269.4	2.88
Missing	11.6	82.7	1.60	8.7	72.2	4.97	11.0	248.8	7.92
Total	100.0	84.9	0.95	100.0	78.3	2.57	100.0	263.8	3.42
	Mean Score Differences (Reference Category: Yes)								
	Listening			Speaking			Reading		
	Diff	SED	BCI95%	Diff	SED	BCI95%	Diff	SED	BCI95%
No-Yes	5.3	1.11	**2.5** **8.0**	3.8	3.94	-6.0 13.6	28.5	6.40	**12.5** **44.4**
Missing-Yes	2.1	1.12	-0.7 4.9	-3.5	6.02	-18.5 11.5	7.8	9.80	-16.5 32.1

Notes: N for Listening = 640, N Speaking = 208, Reading = 624; %T = percentage of total number of pupils; Diff = mean difference (each category minus the reference category); SED = standard error of difference; BCI95% = Bonferroni-adjusted confidence interval. Differences that are statistically significant (p<.05) are in bold.

Table 6.12 **Mean scores for Listening, Speaking, and Reading for sixth-grade pupils in Gaeltacht schools and mean score difference by medical card possession.**

Medical card	Listening			Speaking			Reading		
	%T	Mean	SE	%T	Mean	SE	%T	Mean	SE
'Yes'	35.6	72.8	3.23	38.5	65.5	4.86	36.7	219.9	7.72
'No'	58.6	76.4	2.54	56.5	74.5	3.00	57.6	231.7	6.37
Missing	5.8	71.7	3.32	5.0	71.7	7.05	5.7	205.0	9.39
Total	100.0	74.8	2.40	100.0	70.9	3.37	100.0	225.9	6.02
	Mean Score Differences (Reference Category: Yes)								
	Listening			Speaking			Reading		
	Diff	SED	BCI95%	Diff	SED	BCI95%	Diff	SED	BCI95%
No-Yes	3.7	2.90	-3.3 10.6	9.0	4.32	-1.3 19.3	11.8	10.0	-12.1 35.7
Missing-Yes	-1.1	3.86	-10.3 8.2	6.2	6.83	-10.1 22.5	-14.9	12.2	-43.9 14.1

Notes: N for Listening = 550, N Speaking = 294, Reading = 547; %T = percentage of total number of pupils; Diff = mean difference (each category minus the reference category); SED = standard error of difference; BCI95% = Bonferroni-adjusted confidence interval. None of the differences are statistically significant (p<.05).

The consistency of results across the three groups is notable given that the rates of medical card possession differ so much between them (19.5% in the ordinary school group; 12.8% in the all-Irish group; and 35.6% in the Gaeltacht). None of the Irish achievement comparisons related to medical card possession is significant in Gaeltacht schools.

It will be noted that the means for the missing group are also lower than those of non-medical card holders and, in some cases, lower than those for medical card holders. However none of the differences between the missing and the "Yes" groups is statistically significant.

Parents' ability to speak Irish (self-report)

Parents' ability to speak Irish is the first of two variables from the Parent Questionnaire which were designed to provide data on the kind of exposure to the Irish language that pupils were experiencing in their homes. It is also one of the variables where it was necessary to collapse the categories differently for the three groups of schools and to vary the reference category.

This highlights, as did the previous two variables, the extent to which the family circumstances of pupils in the three groups differ (in socioeconomic terms in the case of the previous two variables and linguistically in the case of this variable and the one to be considered next). We will return to the differences between parental ability and use in the next chapter, confining ourselves here to the Irish achievement differences which are related to these variables.

Table 6.13 Mean scores for Listening, Speaking, and Reading for sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools and mean score difference by parents' ability to speak Irish.

Parents' ability to speak Irish	*Listening*			*Speaking*			*Reading*		
	%T	*Mean*	*SE*	*%T*	*Mean*	*SE*	*%T*	*Mean*	*SE*
No Irish	9.3	41.1	1.31	7.1	20.8	3.46	10.1	226.3	6.96
Only odd word	19.0	42.5	0.70	17.7	29.1	2.93	19.0	236.0	3.17
A few simple sentences	35.7	45.5	0.63	40.0	33.7	2.48	35.2	253.2	2.30
Parts of conversation	21.2	49.3	0.90	20.9	40.1	2.00	21.3	266.8	2.72
Most conversations/ Native speaker	6.7	52.6	1.32	5.9	49.9	2.28	6.8	281.2	3.75
Missing	8.1	40.5	1.21	8.3	23.8	3.48	7.6	226.3	5.00
Total	100.0	45.4	0.62	100.0	33.4	1.62	100.0	250.0	2.28

	Mean Score Differences (Reference Category: A few simple sentences)											
Diff between ref category and	*Listening*				*Speaking*				*Reading*			
	Diff	*SED*	*BCI95%*		*Diff*	*SED*	*BCI95%*		*Diff*	*SED*	*BCI95%*	
No Irish	-4.5	1.45	**-8.3**	**-0.6**	-12.9	3.55	**-22.3**	**-3.5**	-26.7	7.30	**-46.0**	**-7.3**
Only odd word	-3.0	0.94	**-5.5**	**-0.5**	-4.6	3.18	-13.0	3.8	-17.2	2.69	**-24.3**	**-10.1**
Parts of conversation	3.8	1.10	**0.8**	**6.7**	6.4	3.03	-1.6	14.4	13.6	2.97	**5.8**	**21.5**
Most conversations/ Native speaker	7.1	1.47	**3.2**	**7.1**	16.2	4.01	**5.6**	**26.8**	28.0	4.21	**16.9**	**39.1**
Missing	-5.0	1.36	**-8.6**	**-1.4**	-9.9	3.99	-20.4	0.7	-26.9	5.03	**-40.2**	**-13.6**

Notes: N for Listening = 2728, N Speaking = 950, Reading = 2726; %T = percentage of total number of pupils; Diff = mean difference (each category minus the reference category); SED = standard error of difference; BCI95% = Bonferroni-adjusted confidence interval. Differences that are statistically significant (p<.05) are in bold.

Table 6.14 **Mean scores for Listening, Speaking, and Reading for sixth-grade pupils in all-Irish schools and mean score difference by parents' ability to speak Irish.**

Parents' ability to speak Irish	Listening			Speaking			Reading		
	%T	Mean	SE	%T	Mean	SE	%T	Mean	SE
No Irish/ Only odd word/ Few simple sentences	32.6	83.1	1.22	37.6	78.1	2.82	32.1	254.2	8.43
Parts of conversation	34.8	84.9	0.91	34.1	76.8	3.69	34.7	266.5	5.11
Most conversations/ Native speaker	22.6	88.3	0.74	20.3	83.1	2.52	23.3	278.5	3.86
Missing	10.0	82.9	1.66	8.0	74.0	6.02	9.9	250.3	2.91
Total	100.0	84.9	0.95	100.0	78.3	2.57	100.0	263.8	3.42

	Mean Score Differences (Reference Category: No Irish/Odd word/Few simple sentences)											
Diff between ref category and	Listening				Speaking				Reading			
	Diff	SED	BCI95%		Diff	SED	BCI95%		Diff	SED	BCI95%	
Parts of conversation	1.8	1.52	-2.3	5.8	-1.3	3.10	-9.7	7.0	12.4	5.36	-2.1	26.8
Most conversations/ Native speaker	5.1	1.42	**1.3**	**9.0**	5.1	3.54	-4.5	14.6	24.4	4.68	**11.8**	**37.0**
Missing	-0.3	2.06	-5.8	5.3	-4.1	6.36	-21.2	13.0	-3.9	6.79	-22.2	14.4

Notes: N for Listening = 640, N Speaking = 208, Reading = 624; %T = percentage of total number of pupils; Diff = mean difference (each category minus the reference category); SED = standard error of difference; BCI95% = Bonferroni-adjusted confidence interval. Differences that are statistically significant ($p<.05$) are in bold.

Table 6.15 **Mean scores for Listening, Speaking, and Reading for sixth-grade pupils in Gaeltacht schools and mean score difference by parents' ability to speak Irish.**

Parents' ability to speak Irish	Listening			Speaking			Reading		
	%T	Mean	SE	%T	Mean	SE	%T	Mean	SE
No Irish/ Only odd word	11.0	58.2	3.68	12.1	47.4	5.85	11.0	179.9	8.71
A few simple sentences	14.8	65.3	2.79	13.7	57.3	6.94	14.2	200.6	6.42
Parts of conversation	19.9	73.1	3.54	22.4	68.9	4.03	18.7	230.0	8.49
Most conversations	12.9	73.7	2.93	11.3	72.0	3.91	12.6	224.1	8.57
Native speaker	35.1	85.4	1.60	35.0	84.8	2.00	32.2	248.9	4.49
Missing	6.5	75.1	3.78	5.6	73.4	6.80	11.3	232.4	9.37
Total	100.0	74.8	2.40	100.0	70.9	3.37	100.0	225.9	6.02

	Mean Score Differences (Reference Category: Native Speaker)											
Diff between ref category and	Listening				Speaking				Reading			
	Diff	SED	BCI95%		Diff	SED	BCI95%		Diff	SED	BCI95%	
No Irish/Only odd word	-27.1	4.01	**-38.3**	**-15.9**	-37.4	6.18	**-54.7**	**-20.1**	-69.0	7.69	**-90.4**	**-47.6**
A few simple sentences	-20.1	3.22	**-29.1**	**-11.1**	-27.5	7.22	**-47.7**	**-7.3**	-48.3	5.89	**-64.7**	**-31.9**
Parts of conversation	-12.3	3.89	**-23.1**	**-1.4**	-16.0	4.50	**-28.6**	**-3.4**	-18.9	7.49	**-37.5**	**-0.3**
Most conversations	-11.6	3.34	**-20.9**	**-2.3**	-12.8	4.39	**-25.1**	**-0.6**	-24.8	7.82	**-46.6**	**-3.0**
Missing	-10.3	4.11	-21.7	1.1	-11.4	7.09	-31.2	8.5	-16.5	9.07	-41.8	8.8

Notes: N for Listening = 550, N Speaking = 294, Reading = 547; %T = percentage of total number of pupils; Diff = mean difference (each category minus the reference category); SED = standard error of difference; BCI95% = Bonferroni-adjusted confidence interval. Differences that are statistically significant ($p<.05$) are in bold.

For ordinary schools (Table 6.13), the only categories combined were 'Most conversations' and 'Native speaker'. Pupils in the reference category ('A few simple sentences') were found to differ significantly from pupils in each of the other categories, including 'Missing', in Listening and Reading. They also differed significantly from pupils in the 'No Irish' and 'Most conversations/Native speaker' categories on the Speaking Test. Indeed, these two differences are particularly large (the former is about half a standard deviation, the latter almost two-thirds of a standard deviation).

In all-Irish schools, the original six categories were reduced to three (Table 6.14). The lowest level ('No Irish/Only the odd word/A few simple sentences') was chosen as the reference category and pupils in it were compared with pupils in the other categories and in the missing group. Two of the differences are statistically

significant: those between the reference category and 'Most conversations/Native speaker' for Listening and Reading. The difference in the case of Listening is more than half a standard deviation and in the case of Reading just under half a standard deviation.

Very few parents in the Gaeltacht reported having no Irish so this group was combined with those who indicated that they spoke 'Only the odd word'. The other categories were left intact for the purposes of comparison (Table 6.15). The 'Native speaker' category, which was chosen by over a third of the sample of parents, is the reference category. Pupils in this group performed much better than pupils in other groups. The only differences that are not significant are those involving the group for whom data are missing. The differences tend to be very large. Even the differences between the children of native speakers and the next most able group ('Most conversations') are about half a standard deviation for each of the aspects of Irish achievement. The difference between the highest and lowest parental ability groups on the Irish Speaking Test is almost 1.5 standard deviations.

Parental frequency of use of Irish with the child

The variable based on the Parent Questionnaire item about how frequently parents speak Irish to the child also presented complications necessitating the collapse of adjacent categories in different ways in the three samples. Results of the comparisons are presented in Tables 6.16 to 6.18.

Table 6.16 **Mean scores for Listening, Speaking, and Reading for sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools and mean score difference by frequency of use of Irish with the child.**

Frequency of use of Irish	*Listening*			*Speaking*			*Reading*		
	%T	*Mean*	*SE*	*%T*	*Mean*	*SE*	*%T*	*Mean*	*SE*
Occasionally or more often	22.6	49.5	0.87	21.9	39.9	2.06	22.8	266.6	5.13
Seldom	30.9	46.2	0.67	31.8	35.7	1.95	30.9	256.7	2.15
Never	38.3	43.3	0.70	38.1	29.9	2.09	38.6	239.3	3.07
Missing	8.2	40.8	1.20	8.3	23.7	3.29	7.6	227.2	2.28
Total	100.0	45.4	0.62	100.0	33.4	1.62	100.0	250.0	2.28
	Mean Score Differences (Reference Category: Seldom)								
Diff between ref category and	*Listening*				*Speaking*				*Reading*			
	Diff	*SED*	*BCI95%*		*Diff*	*SED*	*BCI95%*		*Diff*	*SED*	*BCI95%*	
Occasionally or more often	3.3	1.1	**0.6**	**5.9**	4.1	2.1	-0.9	9.2	9.9	2.2	**4.4**	**15.4**
Never	-2.9	1.0	**-2.9**	**-5.3**	-5.9	2.0	**-10.8**	**-0.9**	-17.4	2.6	**-23.8**	**-11.1**
Missing	-5.5	1.2	**-5.5**	**-8.4**	-12.0	3.6	**-20.8**	**-3.2**	-29.5	5.0	**-41.8**	**-17.2**

Note. N Reading = 2726, N Listening = 2728, N Speaking = 950. %T = percentage all; Diff = mean difference of category minus reference category; SED = standard error of difference; CI95L, CI95U = Bonferroni-adjusted 95% confidence intervals. Differences that are statistically significant (p<.05) are in bold.

Table 6.17 Mean scores for Listening, Speaking, and Reading for sixth-grade pupils in all-Irish schools and mean score difference by frequency of use of Irish with the child.

Frequency of use of Irish	Listening			Speaking			Reading		
	%T	Mean	SE	%T	Mean	SE	%T	Mean	SE
Always/Very often/Often	20.3	87.1	0.83	17.4	79.4	3.24	21.2	269.4	3.19
Occasionally	39.7	85.0	1.02	44.6	79.4	3.21	40.2	267.7	3.43
Seldom/Never	29.6	83.9	0.96	29.6	77.2	2.32	28.6	259.8	4.53
Missing	10.4	82.6	1.88	8.5	74.6	5.82	10.1	247.4	9.47
Total	100.0	84.9	0.95	100.0	78.3	2.57	100.0	263.8	3.42
	Mean Score Differences (Reference Category: always/very often/often)								
Diff between ref category and	Listening			Speaking			Reading		
	Diff	SED	BCI95%	Diff	SED	BCI95%	Diff	SED	BCI95%
Occasionally	-2.0	0.74	**-4.0** **-0.1**	-0.1	4.56	-12.4 12.2	-1.7	3.15	-10.2 6.8
Seldom	-3.2	0.70	**-5.1** **-1.3**	-2.2	3.98	-13.0 8.5	-9.6	4.03	-20.5 1.2
Missing	-4.5	1.64	**-8.9** **-0.1**	-4.8	6.66	-22.7 13.1	-22.1	9.66	-48.1 3.9

Notes: N for Listening = 640, N Speaking = 208, Reading = 624; %T = percentage of total number of pupils; Diff = mean difference (each category minus the reference category); SED = standard error of difference; BCI95% = Bonferroni-adjusted confidence interval. Differences that are statistically significant (p<.05) are in bold.

Table 6.18 Mean scores for Listening, Speaking, and Reading for sixth-grade pupils in Gaeltacht schools and mean score difference by frequency of use of Irish with the child.

Frequency of use of Irish	Listening			Speaking			Reading		
	%T	Mean	SE	%T	Mean	SE	%T	Mean	SE
Always	21.6	89.7	0.99	22.1	88.8	1.33	21.5	260.9	4.35
Very Often/Often	21.1	80.3	2.28	20.4	79.3	2.70	21.3	238.3	6.57
Occasionally	25.1	71.9	3.07	26.1	70.5	4.39	25.0	223.6	7.31
Seldom/Never	27.1	61.6	3.05	27.3	50.3	5.83	27.2	193.5	7.49
Missing	5.0	74.0	3.93	4.2	72.3	8.40	4.9	209.7	11.46
Total	100.0	74.8	2.40	100.0	70.9	3.37	100.0	225.9	6.02
	Mean Score Differences (Reference Category: Occasionally)								
Diff between ref category and	Listening			Speaking			Reading		
	Diff	SED	BCI95%	Diff	SED	BCI95%	Diff	SED	BCI95%
Always	17.9	3.10	**9.5** **26.2**	18.3	4.70	**5.7** **31.0**	37.4	8.50	**14.5** **60.2**
Very Often/Often	8.4	2.74	**1.1** **15.8**	8.8	4.33	-2.8 20.5	14.7	8.50	-8.3 37.7
Seldom/Never	-10.3	2.44	**-16.8** **-3.7**	-20.2	6.60	**-37.9** **-2.4**	-30.1	8.60	**-53.2** **-7.0**
Missing	2.2	4.23	-9.2 13.6	1.8	8.97	-22.3 26.0	-13.9	13.60	-50.5 22.7

Notes: N for Listening = 550, N Speaking = 294, Reading = 547; %T = percentage of total number of pupils; Diff = mean difference (each category minus the reference category); SED = standard error of difference; BCI95% = Bonferroni-adjusted confidence interval. Differences that are statistically significant (p<.05) are in bold.

For ordinary schools (Table 6.16), the four highest categories ('Always', 'Very Often', 'Often', and 'Occasionally') accounted for only 22.6% of responses and these categories were combined. This meant that the middle category was 'seldom', and this became the reference category. All three comparisons of these categories for Listening and Reading yield statistically significant differences, including the comparisons of the reference category with the 'Missing' category. In the case of Speaking, the performance of pupils in the reference category is not significantly different from the performance of pupils in the category above it ('Occasionally or more often') but is significantly different from the performance of pupils in the category below it ('Never') and in the 'Missing' category.

For all-Irish schools (Table 6.17), the top three 'frequency of use' categories were combined and served as the reference category. Only in the case of the Listening Test did any significant differences emerge for this variable in all-Irish schools.

Table 6.18 contains results for Gaeltacht schools, in which the six categories were combined to make four categories. The category 'Occasionally' was chosen as the reference category and was compared with the other three categories and with the missing group. The difference between the groups where Irish is spoken 'Occasionally' and where Irish is 'Always' spoken are statistically significant for all three tests, and are equivalent to almost one standard deviation for Listening, and over two thirds of a standard deviation for Reading and Speaking. Similarly, the differences between the 'Occasionally' category and the 'Seldom/never' category are statistically significant for all three tests and are also quite substantial, over half a standard deviation for Listening and Reading, and over three quarters of a standard deviation for Speaking. Further analyses of the relationship between parental ability to speak Irish, frequency of use of Irish with the child and receipt of the *Scéim Labhairt na Gaeilge* grant are presented in Chapter 7.

Before we leave the issue of parental speaking ability in Irish and frequency of use of the language with the child, it may be useful to illustrate briefly for ordinary schools the scale of the differences in achievement in Irish Listening and Irish Speaking associated with these categories. We will do this by comparing the percentage of pupils mastering a number of Irish Listening and Speaking objectives in these categories. We will select three categories of parental ability that were associated with statistically significant differences in achievement in both Irish Listening and Irish Speaking: 'No Irish', 'Simple sentences' and 'Most conversations/Native speaker'. The corresponding percentages of pupils in these categories in ordinary schools who attained mastery of *Sound discrimination*, for example, were 67.8% (SE=4.09) (No Irish), 88.5% (SE=1.49) (Simple sentences), and 93.9% (SE=1.83) (Most conversations/Native speaker). The percentages attaining mastery of *General comprehension of speech* in each of the categories were 6.7% (SE=2.98) (No Irish), 7.3% (SE=1.23) (Simple sentences), and 20.3% (SE=3.93) (Most conversations/Native speaker). For *Communication* (second grade) the percentages were 13.7% (SE=4.52) (No Irish), 31.3% (SE=3.50) (Simple sentences) and 55.5% (SE=6.96) (Most conversations/Native speaker). Large differences between these parental ability categories in the percentage of pupils failing objectives can also be seen. For example, the percentages failing *General*

comprehension of speech were 49.8% (SE=4.05) (No Irish), 32.7% (SE=1.99) (Simple sentences) and 20% (SE=3.06) (Most conversations/Native speaker).

In the case of frequency of use of Irish with the child, we can take three categories for illustration: 'Never', 'Seldom' and 'Occasionally or more often'. In the case of *General comprehension of speech*, for example, the percentages of pupils in ordinary schools attaining mastery in each parental frequency of use category were 6.7% (SE=1.43) ('Never'), 7.5% (SE=1.21) ('Seldom') and 11.6% (SE=2.31) ('Occasionally or more often'). The percentages *failing* the same objective in the same parental use categories were 42.3% (SE=2.40), 33.4% (SE=2.02), and 24.4% (SE=1.94) respectively.

School-level variables

Region

The mean scores of Dublin pupils are the lowest of all the regions examined on all three tests (Table 6.19). In the case of the Irish Listening Test, the comparisons between Dublin and each of the other three regions are all statistically significant. In the case of Irish Speaking the difference between Dublin and Munster is statistically significant. None of the comparisons on the Reading Test is significant.

In terms of standard deviation units, the difference between pupils in Dublin and pupils in Munster on both the Irish Listening Test and the Irish Speaking Test is substantial: about two thirds of the relevant standard deviation in each case. The findings relating to region replicate similar ones reported by Harris (1983).

Table 6.19 Mean scores for Listening, Speaking, and Reading for sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools and mean score difference by region.

	Listening			Speaking			Reading		
Region	%T	Mean	SE	%T	Mean	SE	%T	Mean	SE
Dublin	23.6	40.9	1.11	23.3	24.4	3.78	23.5	237.9	6.20
Leinster/Cavan Monaghan	36.5	44.6	0.77	36.6	33.4	2.16	36.5	250.1	3.35
Connacht/ Donegal	12.6	47.6	2.29	12.7	34.4	4.27	12.6	258.1	6.79
Munster	27.3	49.3	1.58	27.4	40.7	3.23	27.3	256.5	6.19
Total	100.0	45.4	0.62	100.0	33.4	1.62	100.0	250.0	2.28

	Mean Score Differences (Reference Category: Dublin)											
Diff between ref category and	Listening				Speaking				Reading			
	Diff	SED	BCI95%		Diff	SED	BCI95%		Diff	SED	BCI95%	
Leinster/Cavan /Monaghan	3.7	1.35	**0.4**	**7.1**	9.0	4.35	-1.7	19.7	12.2	7.00	-5.1	29.5
Connacht/ Donegal	6.8	2.55	**0.5**	**13.0**	10.0	5.70	-3.9	24.0	20.2	9.20	-2.4	42.7
Munster	8.4	1.93	**3.7**	**13.2**	16.4	4.97	**4.2**	**28.6**	18.6	8.80	-2.9	40.0

Notes: N for Listening = 2728, N Speaking = 950, Reading = 2726; %T = percentage of total number of pupils; Diff = mean difference (each category minus the reference category); SED = standard error of difference; BCI95% = Bonferroni-adjusted confidence interval. Differences that are statistically significant (p<.05) are in bold.

School size

In Table 6.20, the performance of pupils in small schools (between 6 and 14 pupils in sixth-grade) are compared with the performance of pupils in medium-sized schools (between 15 and 27 pupils in sixth-grade) and with that of pupils in large schools (more than 27 pupils in sixth-grade). Pupils in smaller schools recorded the highest mean scores on all three tests. However, differences are statistically significant only in the case of the comparison of small and large schools on the Listening Test (two-fifths of a standard deviation) and on the Reading Test (three-tenths of a standard deviation).

Table 6.20 **Mean scores for Listening, Speaking, and Reading for sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools and mean score difference by school size.**

	Listening				Speaking				Reading			
School size	%T	Mean	SE		%T	Mean	SE		%T	Mean	SE	
Small	21.2	49.1	1.86		21.3	39.3	3.32		21.2	261.3	4.83	
Medium	24.4	45.2	1.11		24.5	31.1	3.33		24.4	248.4	3.70	
Large	54.5	44.0	0.74		54.1	32.2	2.24		54.5	246.3	3.33	
Total	100.0	45.4	0.62		100.0	33.4	1.62		100.0	250.0	2.28	
	Mean Score Differences (Reference Category: Small)											
	Listening				Speaking				Reading			
	Diff	SED	BCI95%		Diff	SED	BCI95%		Diff	SED	BCI95%	
Medium-Small	-3.8	2.17	-8.8	1.1	-8.2	4.71	-19.0	2.6	-12.9	6.10	-26.9	1.0
Large-Small	-5.1	2.00	**-9.6**	**-0.5**	-7.1	4.00	-10.3	2.0	-15.0	5.90	**-28.4**	**-1.6**

Notes: N for Listening = 2728, N Speaking = 950, Reading = 2726; %T = percentage of total number of pupils; Diff = mean difference (each category minus the reference category); SED = standard error of difference; BCI95% = Bonferroni-adjusted confidence interval. Differences that are statistically significant (p<.05) are in bold.

Gender composition

We have already seen strong gender-related differences in Irish achievement at the individual pupil level. We now turn to gender in relation to the composition of schools. Table 6.21 provides comparative data for three types of school: schools catering for boys only, schools catering for girls only, and mixed schools.

Table 6.21 **Mean scores for Listening, Speaking, and Reading for sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools and mean score difference by gender composition of school.**

	Listening			Speaking			Reading		
Gender composition of school	*%T*	*Mean*	*SE*	*%T*	*Mean*	*SE*	*%T*	*Mean*	*SE*
All Boys	18.9	40.6	1.42	18.9	27.2	4.15	18.9	221.3	8.01
Mixed	63.5	46.3	0.86	63.5	35.6	2.00	63.5	254.2	2.55
All Girls	17.6	47.4	1.02	17.6	32.0	3.32	17.6	265.6	3.66
Total	100.0	45.4	0.62	100.0	33.4	1.62	100.0	250.0	2.28
	Mean Score Differences (Reference Category: Mixed)								
	Listening			*Speaking*			*Reading*		
	Diff	*SED*	*BCI95%*	*Diff*	*SED*	*BCI95%*	*Diff*	*SED*	*BCI95%*
All-Boys - Mixed	-5.7	1.62	**-9.4** **-2.0**	-8.4	4.50	-18.7 1.9	-33.0	8.24	**-51.8** **-14.1**
All-Girls - Mixed	1.1	1.37	-2.0 4.2	-3.6	3.88	-12.5 5.3	11.4	4.60	**0.9** **21.9**

Notes: N for Listening = 2728, N Speaking = 950, Reading = 2726; %T = percentage of total number of pupils; Diff = mean difference (each category minus the reference category); SED = standard error of difference; BCI95% = Bonferroni-adjusted confidence interval. Differences that are statistically significant (p<.05) are in bold.

Not surprisingly, the scores of pupils in all-boys schools are the lowest on all three tests. Boys in single-sex schools perform significantly less well than pupils in mixed schools (the reference category) on the Listening and Reading tests. There is also a significant difference between the performance of pupils in mixed schools and pupils in all girls' schools in favour of the latter.

Location

The performance of pupils in three types of school location are contrasted in Table 6.22: cities and large towns (with populations of more than 10,000), medium-sized towns (population between 1,500 and 9,999) and small town, villages and rural (populations less than 1,500).

The mean score of pupils in the more rural category is the highest on all three tests, and differs significantly from the mean scores of pupils in the city/large town category on the three tests (about half a standard deviation in each case). In the case of Reading, the difference between pupils in medium-sized towns and those in more rural settings is also statistically significant (about a quarter of a standard deviation).

Table 6.22 **Mean scores for Listening, Speaking, and Reading for sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools and mean score difference by school location.**

	Listening			Speaking			Reading		
School location	%T	Mean	SE	%T	Mean	SE	%T	Mean	SE
Small towns, villages and rural	38.5	48.9	1.18	38.8	40.3	2.50	38.5	263.5	3.09
Medium-sized towns	14.0	45.0	1.30	14.1	33.6	4.20	14.0	251.6	3.40
Cities/large towns	47.5	42.7	0.85	47.2	27.7	2.48	47.5	238.6	4.08
Total	100.0	45.4	0.62	100.0	33.4	1.62	100.0	250.0	2.28
	Mean Score Differences (Reference Category: Small town, villages and rural)								
Diff between ref category and	Listening			Speaking			Reading		
	Diff	SED	BCI95%	Diff	SED	BCI95%	Diff	SED	BCI95%
Medium-sized towns	-3.9	1.83	-8.1 0.3	-6.7	4.91	-17.9 4.6	-11.8	4.60	**-22.4** **-1.3**
Cities/large towns	-6.2	1.44	**-9.5** **-2.9**	-12.6	3.60	**-20.8** **-4.3**	-24.9	5.10	**-36.6** **-13.1**

Notes: N for Listening = 2728, N Speaking = 950, Reading = 2726; %T = percentage of total number of pupils; Diff = mean difference (each category minus the reference category); SED = standard error of difference; BCI95% = Bonferroni-adjusted confidence interval. Differences that are statistically significant (p<.05) are in bold.

Disadvantaged status

The final variable to be considered here relates to whether or not a school has been designated as disadvantaged under the Scheme for Schools in Disadvantaged Areas. The results of analyses are reported in Table 6.23. Differences in all three comparisons are statistically significant and very large in terms of standard deviation units. The difference in the case of Reading is very close to a standard deviation. In the other two tests, (Listening and Speaking), the difference is about two-thirds of a standard deviation.

Table 6.23 **Mean scores for Listening, Speaking, and Reading for sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools and mean score differences by disadvantage designation of school.**

Disadvantage designation of school	*Listening*			*Speaking*			*Reading*		
	%T	*Mean*	*SE*	*%T*	*Mean*	*SE*	*%T*	*Mean*	*SE*
Designated	17.9	38.5	1.46	17.9	19.9	3.36	17.9	210.9	7.04
Non-designated	82.1	46.9	0.69	82.1	36.4	1.84	82.1	258.5	2.06
Total	100.0	45.4	0.62	100.0	33.4	1.62	100.0	250.0	2.28
	Mean Score Differences (Reference Category: Designated)								
Diff between ref category and	*Listening*			*Speaking*			*Reading*		
	Diff	*SED*	*BCI95%*	*Diff*	*SED*	*BCI95%*	*Diff*	*SED*	*BCI95%*
Non-designated	8.4	1.67	**5.1** **11.7**	16.5	3.83	**8.8** **24.1**	47.6	7.30	**33.0** **62.2**

Notes: N for Listening = 2728, N Speaking = 950, Reading = 2726; %T = percentage of total number of pupils; Diff = mean difference (each category minus the reference category); SED = standard error of difference; BCI95% = Bonferroni-adjusted confidence interval. Differences that are statistically significant (p<.05) are in bold.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we examined relationships between achievement in Irish (Listening, Speaking, and Reading) and a series of key pupil- and school-level variables. In the case of the pupil-level variables, relationships with Irish achievement were examined separately for each of the three populations (ordinary, all-Irish, and Gaeltacht). In the case of school-level variables, relationships with achievement were examined using data from ordinary schools only.

The findings are generally consistent with previous research, either on Irish or on other subject areas. Furthermore, they extend to a national level, to additional categories of schools, or to additional aspects of Irish achievement, findings regarding statistically significant relationships that had previously only been established in smaller scale studies. For example, this is the first time that we have information on parental ability to speak Irish and parental use of Irish with the child for all three samples of pupils linked to achievement in all three aspects of Irish. The fact that the data on parental speaking ability and use were obtained directly from parents in all three kinds of schools, using the same questionnaire items, increases the value of the information.

Some of the individual findings are noteworthy. For example, the size and consistency of gender differences (in favour of girls) across the three aspects of Irish achievement are striking, though the differences are not statistically significant for some of the tests in the case of all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools.

The finding that two socioeconomic variables (parents' level of education and medical card possession) are related to achievement in all three aspects of Irish in ordinary schools is consistent with evidence concerning these variables in other subject areas. It is notable, that the achievement difference linked to possession of a medical card also emerges for Irish Listening and Irish Reading in the case of all-Irish schools, even though the proportion of pupils in such schools whose parents are medical card holders is lower than in the other two types of schools.

Parental ability to speak Irish and parental frequency of use of Irish to the child are strongly related to achievement in Irish. These variables are associated with the fewest non-significant outcomes in the summary of mean comparisons related to the key variables for the three aspects of achievement and three populations of schools (Table 6.1). However, in the case of Irish Speaking in all-Irish schools, none of the differences in achievement related to these two parental variables (or indeed the other individual pupil variables) is statistically significant. Perhaps parental ability and use are less powerfully related to the Irish speaking proficiency achieved by English speaking children generally where the exposure to Irish at school is extensive. Other aspects of the findings related to these two parental variables are examined in more detail in Chapter 7.

Given the findings on gender and socioeconomic factors at the pupil level, it is not surprising that achievement in some aspects of Irish was also found to be significantly related to the gender composition of schools (boys', girls', and mixed)

and the designated status of schools (for disadvantage). The size of the difference in the case of designated disadvantage is substantial: almost one standard deviation in the case of Irish Reading and about two-thirds of a standard deviation in the case of Irish Listening and Irish Speaking. Substantial regional differences in achievement were also found. In the case of both Irish Listening and Irish Speaking, pupils in Munster schools had mean percentage correct scores which exceeded Dublin schools by two-thirds of a standard deviation.

Our main goal in this chapter has been to identify a number of key pupil and school-level characteristics that are associated with achievement in Irish Listening, Speaking, and Reading. The existence of such associations does not allow us to make strong inferences about cause and effect on the basis of the statistical tests alone. As noted earlier in the chapter, previous research (Harris, 1983; Harris & Murtagh, 1999) indicates that many of these variables are themselves interrelated, and additional analyses would be needed to establish to what extent each makes a unique contribution to variance in achievement. Linked to the findings of previous smaller scale but more indepth studies (e.g., Harris and Murtagh, 1999), as well as to the results of some further analyses reported in the next chapter, they provide a framework for the more general analysis of issues relating to Irish in primary school which is set out in Chapter 8.

Chapter 7

Views and Practices of Teachers and Parents

Views and Practices of Teachers and Parents

In this chapter, we will report the views and practices of teachers and parents in relation both to the Irish language in general and to the teaching and learning of Irish in particular. The data are based on responses to the Teacher and Parent Questionnaires. The first part of the chapter deals with teachers' data and the second with parents' data, although we will also frequently compare teachers' and parents' views on the same issue. A number of questions, with either identical or nearly-identical wording, were included in the two questionnaires where we felt the perspectives of each group might be useful to compare.

A number of themes underlie our presentation and discussion. One relates to differences in the patterns of attitudes, practices, and speaking proficiency levels of parents and teachers in the three kinds of schools (ordinary, all-Irish, and Gaeltacht). A second theme concerns key points of difference between parents and teachers in relation to attitudes, practices and Irish proficiency levels. This will involve a consideration of parents' and teachers' views of each other, and the extent to which their roles complement each other in promoting pupil progress in learning Irish. A third theme relates to changes in teachers' attitudes and practices on a number of key variables between 1985 and 2002. Finally, we examine the relationship between pupil achievement in Irish Listening, Speaking, and Reading, on the one hand, and a small number of teacher variables on the other (e.g., the extent of Irish-medium instruction outside the Irish lesson, the kind of factors which most determine the time the teacher spends on Irish, and the emphasis he/she places on the language in school). We also amplify our interpretation of the relationships between achievement in Irish and key variables initially discussed in Chapter 6, such as parents' ability to speak Irish and the frequency with which they speak Irish to the child.

In exploring these themes and data, we draw attention to those aspects of parents' and teachers' attitudes and practices which may help to throw light on the decline in achievement in Irish Listening and Irish Speaking in ordinary schools. The information in this chapter and previous ones, combined with information from other research, will be used in Chapter 8 to provide a broad analysis of the factors which are likely to have contributed to that decline. An attempt to define the response needed will also be made.

Teachers' views and practices

Teachers' own attitudes to and proficiency in Irish

Data in Table 7.1 show that the vast majority of sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools had teachers whose attitudes to Irish were either very favourable (36.2%) or favourable (51.4%). Only 5% of pupils were taught by teachers whose attitudes were unfavourable or very unfavourable. As we will see later (Table 7.12), parents had in general less favourable attitudes than teachers. The percentages of pupils in all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools whose teachers had favourable attitudes exceeds the percentage in ordinary schools. Thus, no pupil in a Gaeltacht or all-Irish school had a teacher whose attitude was either neutral or unfavourable, while the percentage of pupils in these schools who judged themselves to be 'very favourable' are much higher than in ordinary schools.

Table 7.1 Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in ordinary, all-Irish, and Gaeltacht schools according to their teachers' own attitude to Irish [15].

Teachers' own attitude to Irish	Percentage *(SE)* of pupils		
	Ordinary	All-Irish	Gaeltacht
Very Favourable	36.2% *(3.30)*	88.2% *(6.94)*	74.8% *(7.18)*
Favourable	51.4% *(3.74)*	11.8% *(6.94)*	25.2% *(7.18)*
Neutral	6.6% *(2.23)*	0%	0%
Unfavourable	4.4% *(1.68)*	0%	0%
Very unfavourable	0.6% *(0.62)*	0%	0%
Missing	0.7% *(0.72)*	0%	0%

Standard error printed in italics. N Ordinary = 3037, N All-Irish = 683, N Gaeltacht = 583.

Table 7.2 provides data on teachers' self-assessments of their own standard of spoken Irish. While a total of 73.8% of pupils in ordinary schools were taught by teachers who were fluent in Irish (2% native speakers; 12.8% very fluent; and 59% fluent second-language speakers of Irish), a substantial minority were not. 'Weak second-language speaker' is the description chosen by the teachers of 24.8% of pupils in ordinary schools (and 'very weak' in the case of a further negligible percentage - 0.7%) [16].

All pupils in both Gaeltacht and all-Irish schools had teachers who regarded themselves as 'fluent second-language speakers' or better. More than half of pupils in Gaeltacht schools (52.5%) were taught by native speakers; the percentage in all-Irish schools was 30.2.

[15] All percentages reported in this chapter are estimates computed using population weights. The standard errors were computed using a jackknife method of variance estimation, which took the complex sample design into account. Percentages are based on available data. The missing category refers to non-response to a particular question and does not reflect the response rates for the questionnaires. All percentages are reported at pupil level, and in the case of teacher variables, teacher responses are aggregated at the pupil level.

[16] The only previous information on this issue comes from a INTO national survey of teachers (INTO, 1985c). Unfortunately differences between the two surveys in both questions and answer answer options, and the use of teachers as opposed to pupils as the basis for calculating percentages, makes any useful comparison impossible. The INTO survey showed that in ordinary schools the percentages of teachers rating their 'conversational' ability in Irish at various levels was as follows: 'fluent' (23%), 'good'(42 %), 'fair'(30%) and 'weak' (5%).

Table 7.2 **Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in ordinary, all-Irish, and Gaeltacht schools according to their teachers' own standard of spoken Irish.**

Teachers' standard of spoken Irish (self assessment by teacher)	Percentage *(SE)* of pupils		
	Ordinary	All-Irish	Gaeltacht
Native Speaker	2.0% *(1.19)*	30.2% *(9.92)*	52.5% *(9.10)*
Very fluent second-language speaker	12.8% *(2.60)*	59.6% *(9.46)*	27.1% *(6.33)*
Fluent second-language speaker	59.0% *(3.69)*	10.2% *(5.26)*	20.4% *(6.96)*
Weak second-language speaker	24.8% *(3.47)*	0%	0%
Very weak second-language speaker	0.7% *(0.65)*	0%	0%
Missing	0.7% *(0.72)*	0%	0%

Standard error printed in italics. N Ordinary = 3037, N All-Irish = 683, N Gaeltacht = 583.

Another perspective on teacher proficiency in Irish is provided by the data in Table 7.3 which compares teachers' and parents' use of Irish to respond to their respective questionnaires. The data point up the gap between parents and teachers in their use of Irish. The majority of pupils in all-Irish (95.2%) and Gaeltacht (89.3%) schools had teachers who completed the teacher questionnaire in Irish. In ordinary schools the figure was 19.3%. The number of pupils whose parents chose to answer the parent questionnaire through Irish was much fewer in all three populations (15.4% in all-Irish, 44.4% in schools in the Gaeltacht and 0.9% in ordinary schools). We will return to the question of parents' knowledge of Irish and related issues later.

Table 7.3 **Percentage of pupils in ordinary, all-Irish, and Gaeltacht schools, according to the language version of the Parent and Teacher Questionnaires chosen by parents and teachers.**

Parent Questionnaire answered in -	Ordinary	All-Irish	Gaeltacht
Irish	0.9% *(0.21)*	15.4% *(2.10)*	44.4% *(5.83)*
English	99.1% *(0.21)*	84.6% *(2.10)*	55.6% *(5.83)*
Teacher Questionnaire answered in -	**Ordinary**	**All-Irish**	**Gaeltacht**
Irish	19.3% *(3.47)*	95.2% *(4.74)*	89.3% *(5.33)*
English	80.7% *(3.47)*	4.8% *(4.74)*	10.7% *(5.33)*

Standard error printed in italics. Parent Questionnaire; N Ordinary = 2744, N Gaeltacht = 575, N All-Irish = 609. Teacher Questionnaire; N Ordinary = 3037, N Gaeltacht = 583, N All-Irish = 683.

The Teacher Questionnaire contained items relating to opportunities for teachers to practise their Irish and whether they would be interested in taking a course to improve their competence. Teachers of a majority of pupils in ordinary schools felt that they did not have sufficient opportunities to practise their Irish (65.2%) and that they would like to attend a course to improve their Irish (60.7%). Not surprisingly, teachers who consider themselves as 'weak' or 'fluent' were more likely to be interested in taking a course than teachers who were 'very fluent' or native speakers.

It is perhaps surprising that somewhat smaller but still substantial percentages of pupils in Gaeltacht (24.2%) and all-Irish schools (38.6%) were taught by teachers who said that they did not get enough opportunities to practice their Irish. Furthermore, despite the generally higher standard of spoken Irish among Gaeltacht and all-Irish teachers, substantial percentages of pupils in both types of school were taught by teachers who would like to attend a course to improve their proficiency (46.8% of pupils in Gaeltacht schools and 42.3% of pupils in all-Irish schools).

Views on Irish in school, time on Irish, and satisfaction in teaching: 1985 and 2002

Table 7.4 presents data on teachers' attitude to Irish being taught in ordinary schools in 1985 and 2002. Basically, in 2002 large majorities of pupils (81.3%) have teachers who are favourable or very favourable. There has, however, been a statistically significant fall of 8.9% (from 90.2%) since 1985 in the percentage whose teachers were favourable. All pupils in Gaeltacht and all-Irish schools in 2002 had teachers whose attitude to Irish being taught in school was favourable or very favourable.

The percentage of pupils in ordinary schools whose teachers derived satisfaction from teaching Irish, had fallen by a considerable amount (Table 7.5). While 80.3% of pupils had teachers who derived satisfaction or great satisfaction from teaching Irish in 1985, only 55.4% were in 2002. Correspondingly, the percentage whose teachers reported dissatisfaction or great dissatisfaction had risen by 15.6%. The percentage whose teachers represented themselves as 'neutral' on the question of satisfaction had also risen by 7.8%, although this change is not statistically significant. These relatively low levels of satisfaction are almost entirely confined to ordinary schools. In 2002, for example, no pupil in an all-Irish school, and only 6.6% of pupils in Gaeltacht schools, was taught by a teacher who expressed *dissatisfaction* with teaching Irish.

Table 7.4 Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools according to their teachers' attitude to Irish being taught in primary schools: Comparison of 1985 and 2002.

Teachers' attitude to Irish being taught to pupils in primary school	Percentage *(SE)* of pupils		Difference[17]
	1985	2002	(2002-1985)
Very Favourable/Favourable	90.2% *(3.19)*	81.3% *(2.85)*	**-8.9%**
Neutral	6.2% *(2.52)*	12.5% *(2.90)*	+6.3%
Unfavourable/Very unfavourable	3.6% *(2.07)*	5.5% *(1.95)*	+1.9%
Missing	0%	0.7% *(0.72)*	+0.7%

Significant differences (p <.05) are printed in bold. Standard error printed in italics. N (1985) = 2060, N (2002) = 3037.

[17] The percentages were compared referring the difference and its standard error to critical values associated with the *z* distribution, (rather than the *t* distribution), to obtain the 90% and 95% confidence intervals, as this avoids the difficulties involved in calculating the degrees of freedom corresponding to values of *t*. (Agresti & Finlay, 1997, pp. 219-222).

Table 7.5 **Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools according to the satisfaction derived by their teacher from teaching Irish: 1985 and 2002.**

Satisfaction derived by teacher from teaching Irish	Percentage *(SE)* of pupils		Difference
	1985	2002	(2002-1985)
Great satisfaction/Satisfaction	80.3% *(4.90)*	55.4% *(3.81)*	**-24.9%**
Neutral	10.7% *(3.67)*	18.5% *(3.18)*	+7.8%
Dissatisfaction/Great dissatisfaction	9.0% *(3.25)*	24.6% *(3.45)*	**+15.6%**
Missing	0%	1.5% *(1.08)*	+1.5%

Significant differences (p <.05) are printed in bold. Standard error printed in italics. N (1985) = 2060, N (2002) = 3037.

One might expect a teacher's experience of satisfaction in teaching to be related to his/her proficiency in speaking Irish. Cross-tabulations of the data for these two variables showed that of those pupils whose teachers described themselves as 'weak second-language speakers', only 46.3% were taught by teachers who derived satisfaction from teaching Irish. This may be compared to 54.3% of pupils whose teachers were fluent second-language speakers, and the 80.6% whose teachers were very fluent or native speakers. No pupil in an ordinary school had a teacher who was either very fluent or a native speaker and reported *dissatisfaction*.

Other cross-tabulations show that teachers who derived satisfaction or great satisfaction from teaching Irish were much more likely to want to attend a course to improve their Irish than teachers who experienced dissatisfaction or were neutral in relation to teaching Irish. Thus, 71.6% of pupils whose teachers derived satisfaction or great satisfaction, but only 45.3% of pupils whose teachers derived dissatisfaction or great dissatisfaction, and 49.3% of pupils whose teachers were 'neutral' in relation to teaching Irish were taught by teachers who would like to do a course to improve their Irish. Having noted these relationships, it is clear nevertheless that factors other than a teacher's own level of proficiency must also be involved in determining satisfaction since, as we have just seen, many who describe themselves as weak speakers still experience satisfaction in teaching the language.

Table 7.6 **Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools according to their teachers' attitude to the amount of time spent on Irish in their school: 1985 and 2002.**

Teachers' attitude to the amount of time spent on Irish in their school	Percentage *(SE)* of pupils		Difference
	1985	2002	(2002-1985)
Less time should be spent on Irish	21.4% *(4.46)*	34.6% *(4.05)*	**+13.2%**
The amount of time spent on Irish is **just right**	70.0% *(5.69)*	56.7% *(4.24)*	**-13.3%**
More time should be spent on Irish	7.6% *(3.40)*	6.5% *(2.31)*	-1.1%
Missing	1.1% *(1.07)*	2.1% *(1.24)*	+1.0%

Significant differences (p <.05) are printed in bold. Standard error printed in italics. N 1985 = 2060, N 2002 = 3037.

Table 7.6 contains data on another aspect of the teachers' view on Irish - the amount of time spent teaching it. While most pupils in 2002 had teachers who thought that the amount of time is just right (56.7%) or in a minority of cases would like more time (6.5%), there has been an increase from 21.4% in 1985 to 34.6% in 2002 in the percentage of pupils whose teachers believe that *less* time should be spent on it - a statistically significant difference of 13.2%. As we argue in the next chapter, this increase is all the more important given that there is already a strong likelihood - even though it may be difficult to establish conclusively - that the actual core time on Irish in primary schools fell substantially between 1985 and 2002.

Table 7.7 Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools according to their teachers' assessment of most parents' opinion regarding the amount of time spent teaching Irish: 1985 and 2002.

Parents' view of amount of time spent on Irish (teacher assessment)	Percentage *(SE)* of pupils		Difference
	1985	2002	(2002-1985)
Parents want less time spent on Irish	13.4% *(3.97)*	29.8% *(3.91)*	**+16.4%**
Parents are satisfied with the amount of time spent on Irish	85.6% *(4.05)*	63.4% *(4.12)*	**-22.2%**
Parents want more time spent on Irish	0.5% *(0.54)*	0%	-0.5%
Missing	0.4% *(0.44)*	6.8% *(2.28)*	**+6.4%**

Significant differences ($p < .05$) are printed in bold. Standard error printed in italics. N 1985 = 2060, N 2002 = 3037.

Teachers also perceived a change between 1985 and 2002 in parents' attitude to the amount of time spent on Irish (Table 7.7). In 1985, 13.4% of pupils had teachers who believed that parents wanted less time on Irish, a percentage which had more than doubled to 29.8% by 2002. The difference of 16.4% is statistically significant. Correspondingly, there was a substantial decline between 1985 and 2002 in the percentage of pupils whose teachers believed that parents were satisfied with the amount of time spent on Irish. The decline of 22.2%, from 85.6% to 63.4%, is statistically significant. As we will see later, however, teachers' belief about parents' attitude to the time spent on Irish in school is not in agreement with the parents' own views.

Changes in teachers' perspective and teaching through Irish: 1985 and 2002

Table 7.8 presents data on the relative importance of seven factors in influencing the amount of time the teacher spends teaching Irish and the amount of emphasis which he/she places on it generally in the classroom. These data are of interest because previous research, based on the 1985 survey (Harris & Murtagh, 1988a,b), indicated that the teacher's views on this issue were strongly linked both to pupil achievement in spoken Irish and to a number of other teaching variables which are themselves related to pupils' Irish achievement (e.g., the amount of Irish-medium instruction conducted by the teacher outside the Irish class proper). The question on which the data are based asked teachers to rate the factors on a 7-point scale, ranging from 'the factor that affects you most' to the one 'that affects you least'.

Table 7.8 lists the percentages of pupils whose teachers in 1985 and 2002 accorded first rank to each of the seven potentially influencing factors. In both years the greatest percentage of pupils is associated with teachers who say that their own outlook and opinion is the most important determinant of their decisions in relation to Irish. In 1985, 45.6% of pupils had teachers who rated this factor first, but this had fallen to 30.7% in 2002. The decline of 14.9% is statistically significant. The decline is balanced by a significant increase of 13.6% in 2002 in the percentage of pupils whose teachers cited 'official policy (DES) in relation to the teaching of Irish' as the factor which most determined their decisions about time and emphasis on Irish. The increase is from 14.6% in 1985 to 28.2% in 2002. The changes mean that these two factors, teachers' own opinion/outlook and DES policy, are very nearly of equal importance in 2002 - 30.7% of pupils have teachers who place their own outlook and opinion first while 28.2% have teachers who place official DES policy first. No other factor is associated with a statistically significant change over time. The factors associated with the lowest percentages in both 1985 and 2002 are (a) the opinions and outlook of the parents in relation to Irish and (b) the general opinion of other teachers in the school in relation to Irish. One possible explanation for the former is that, since teachers are more positive about Irish than parents generally, the initiative in relation to emphasising or promoting Irish in school may often be seen by teachers as resting almost entirely with them rather than with parents.

Table 7.8 **Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools according to the factors which most affect the emphasis their teacher places on Irish generally in the classroom: 1985 and 2002.**

Factor which most affects the emphasis teacher places on Irish (teacher's own report)	Percentage *(SE)* of pupils		Difference
	1985	2002	(2002-1985)
My own outlook and opinion in relation to Irish	45.6% *(5.37)*	30.7% *(3.88)*	**-14.9%**
Official Policy (DES) in relation to the teaching of Irish	14.6% *(4.04)*	28.2% *(3.61)*	**+13.6%**
Academic ability of the pupils in general	23.9% *(4.73)*	13.9% *(2.68)*	-10.0%
School policy in relation to Irish	6.6% *(2.60)*	13.3% *(3.11)*	+6.7%
Opinions of the pupils themselves in relation to Irish	4.9% *(2.81)*	8.3% *(2.22)*	+3.4%
Opinions/outlook of the parents in relation to Irish in the school	3.3% *(0.49)*	5.7% *(2.04)*	+2.4%
General opinion of the other teachers in the school in relation to Irish	1.2% *(1.20)*	0%	-1.2%

Significant differences ($p < .05$) are printed in bold. Standard error printed in italics. N 1985 = 2060, N 2002 = 3037. Missing data are not included in the calculated percentages.

One other aspect of this change is notable. In 1985, the achievement in spoken Irish of the 45.6% of pupils whose teachers placed their own outlook/opinion on Irish first was substantially higher than the achievement of pupils whose teachers gave greater weight to other factors. The mean percentage correct on the Irish Listening Test, for example, was 67.7% (SE=1.77) for those whose teachers were influenced

most by their own outlook/ opinions while it was 59.5% (SE=2.11) for those whose teachers were influenced most by other factors. On the Irish Speaking Test, the corresponding mean percentages correct were 51.1% (SE=2.47) and 39.7% (SE= 2.98) respectively. These differences in pupil achievement are both statistically significant. In 2002, however, not only has there been a substantial contraction since 1985 in the percentage of pupils whose teachers are primarily motivated by their own outlook/opinion on Irish, but the Irish Listening, Speaking and Reading achievement of this group is no longer significantly different to the achievement of pupils whose teachers are governed by other considerations. It appears that in 2002, the teacher's own outlook and opinion on Irish is no longer as salient a factor in terms of pupil achievement in Irish as it was in 1985.

Table 7.9 provides data on whether or not teachers in ordinary schools spend some time each week teaching subjects other than Irish through Irish. Teaching through Irish outside the core Irish lesson, of course, is one of the key ways that the 'teacher's own outlook/opinion' might have an effect on pupil achievement. Official DES statistics published in *Tuarascáil Staitistiúil* for the years we are concerned with here - cited earlier in Chapter 3 (Table 3.13) - show a substantial decline in Irish-medium teaching between 1985 and 2002. The DES data show 55.1% of pupils in 1985 and 64.65% in 2002 in the 'no-time' category ('all classes taught through English'). In the present study, a somewhat smaller percentage of pupils for both time periods were found to be in classes spending no time on Irish medium instruction- 46.2% for 1985 and 56.4% for 2002. While the increase in the percentage of pupils in ordinary schools whose teachers report no time teaching through Irish is actually marginally greater in the present study (56.4% - 46.2% = 10.2%) than in the corresponding DES figures (64.7% - 55.1%= 9.6%), the change is not significant in the case of the present study. Correspondingly, the decrease of 8.5% in the percentage of pupils whose teachers conduct some Irish-medium instruction - from the 49.5% in 1985 to 41% in 2002 - is also not significant. The DES statistics, based on census-type data from schools, indicated a clear trend, however, and this in turn is supported by the strong trend in the same direction in the present study. It is important to bear in mind too that the DES statistics cover all classes (not just sixth-grade as in our case) and that in all probability the positive effects of Irish-medium instruction observed in any one class actually represent the effects of exposure to such instruction over a number of years.

Table 7.9 Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools who are taught other subjects, excluding Irish, through Irish for some time and for no time each week: 1985 and 2002.

Time devoted to teaching through Irish (teachers' report)	Percentage *(SE)* of pupils		Difference
	1985	2002	(2002-1985)
No time	46.2% *(5.39)*	56.4% *(4.13)*	+10.2%
Some time	49.5% *(5.52)*	41.0% *(4.05)*	-8.5%
Missing	4.3% *(2.31)*	2.7% *(1.34)*	-1.6%

Standard error printed in italics. N (1985) = 2060, N (2002) = 3037.

To examine the relationship between pupil achievement in Irish, on the one hand, and levels of Irish-medium teaching in 1985 and 2002 on the other, we compared pupil achievement (mean percentage correct scores in Irish Listening or Irish Speaking) for two levels of Irish-medium instruction at each point in time. The two levels of Irish-medium instruction used in these comparisons were: (i) pupils receiving low levels of Irish-medium instruction (no time or less than one hour) and (ii) pupils receiving a higher level (one hour or more). In each of the four comparisons (one each for Listening and Speaking in 1985 and 2002) the mean Irish achievement scores were higher for the higher-level Irish-medium instruction. Three of the comparisons are statistically significant ($p<.05$) and the other marginally significant ($p<.10$). The mean percentage correct on Irish Listening for low-level Irish-medium instruction in 1985 was 62.1 (SE=1.53) and for the higher-level 69.5% (SE=2.77), a difference of 7.4% which is significant. For Irish Speaking for that same year, the corresponding means were 61.2% (SE=4.05) and 42.5% (SE=1.98), a statistically significant difference of 18.7%. In 2002, the mean percentage correct on Irish Listening was 44.3% (SE=0.68) for the lower level of Irish-medium instruction and 50.2% (SE=2.18) for the higher level, a difference of 5.9% which is significant. Finally, for Irish Speaking the means were 31.2% (SE=1.68) and 42.7% (SE=4.79), a difference of 11.5% which is marginally significant ($p<.10$).

A few examples from 2002 data will give some indication of what these differences in mean percentage correct might mean in terms of the defined levels of pupil performance (e.g. mastery and failure) on specific objectives described in Chapters 3 and 4. In each case, we present data on significant differences ($p<.05$) between the performances of pupils in the lower and higher-Irish-medium groups on a specific objective. For example, the percentage of pupils attaining mastery of *General comprehension of speech* in the lower and higher Irish-medium teaching groups were 6% and 15.6% respectively, a significant difference of 9.6%. For *Listening vocabulary* the percentages were 4.2% and 13.5% respectively, a difference of 9.3%. The percentages *failing* these two objectives also differ significantly in the lower and higher Irish-medium groups - by 14% for *General comprehension of speech* (38.6% - 24.6%) and by 18.9% for *Listening vocabulary* (45.1% - 26.2%).

In the case of the Irish Speaking objectives, the percentages in the higher and lower Irish-medium groups attaining mastery of the second-grade *Communication* objective differed by 16% (29.8% - 45.8%). Other statistically significant differences in the percentages attaining mastery of particular Irish Speaking objectives in the two groups were 13.9% (*Control of the syntax of statements in speaking*), 11.2% (*Control of the morphology of prepositions*), and 8.5% (*Speaking vocabulary*).

Perceived changes in pupils' standard of Irish between 1985 and 2002

Table 7.10 provides data on teachers' views on standards of speaking proficiency in Irish and in Irish reading over a 15-year period (or since the teacher began teaching). The information, as well as being important in its own right, is of interest because of the substantial changes between 1985 and 2002 in achievement in Irish Listening and Irish Speaking in ordinary schools documented in Chapters 3 and 4. A large majority of pupils in ordinary schools (76.6%) were taught by teachers who believed that the standard of speaking proficiency of pupils had declined, while only

5.3% had teachers who believed standards had improved. These results are in sharp contrast with the results of three national surveys carried out in the 1970s where the proportions of teachers perceiving a decline and an improvement were much more evenly balanced. [18] In one of these, responses to a question regarding the general standard of proficiency in Irish of pupils indicated that 48% of teachers perceived a decline, 13% perceived no change and 39% an improvement (Ó Domhnalláin & Ó Gliasáin, 1976). In a second study, a question on how standards of oral Irish had changed resulted in the following pattern of responses: a decline (42%), unchanged (14%) and improved (36%) (INTO, 1976). In a third survey, standards of oral Irish at senior grades in primary school were judged by 38% of principals to have declined and by 34% to have improved (Fontes & Kellaghan, 1977).

Table 7.10 Percentage of sixth-grade pupils according to their teachers' assessment of the general standard of pupils' speaking proficiency in Irish over a 15-year period: Ordinary, all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools.

Changes in pupil speaking proficiency in Irish (teachers' assessment)	Percentage *(SE)* of pupils		
	Ordinary	All-Irish	Gaeltacht
Standard of speaking proficiency in Irish **has declined**	76.6% *(3.52)*	29.3% *(9.47)*	68.1% *(8.61)*
No change in the standard of speaking proficiency in Irish	15.2% *(3.11)*	34.6% *(11.24)*	21.1% *(7.12)*
Standard of speaking proficiency in Irish **has improved**	5.3% *(1.89)*	27.0% *(9.89)*	10.8% *(4.79)*
Missing	2.9% *(1.47)*	9.1% *(5.83)*	0%

Standard error printed in italics. N (Ordinary) = 3037, N (All-Irish) = 683, N (Gaeltacht) = 583.

It can be seen in Table 7.10 that it is the pattern of change in all-Irish schools which most closely resembles the pattern in the three earlier surveys: in all-Irish schools the percentages of pupils who have teachers perceiving a decline in speaking proficiency and perceiving an improvement are roughly equal. It is also notable that a substantial majority of pupils in Gaeltacht schools (68.1%) have teachers who perceived standards of speaking proficiency to have declined, although this is still lower than the percentage for ordinary schools and the gap between the 'decline' and the 'improve' percentages (68.1% - 10.8% = 57.3%) is much less than in ordinary schools (76.6% - 5.3% = 71.3%). All in all, teachers' perceptions here conform with and reinforce the overall pattern of results revealed by the achievement tests for Irish Speaking and Listening - that there has been a substantial decline in pupil performance in these two areas in ordinary schools, very little change in all-Irish schools, and an intermediate level of decline in Gaeltacht schools.

It is clear that in the case of Irish Reading (Table 7.11) teachers in ordinary schools did not perceive a decline in standards on the same scale. While the percentage of pupils whose teachers perceived a decline in standards of reading (46.0%) considerably exceeds the percentage whose teachers perceived an improvement (6.7%), the 'decline' percentage (46.0%) is still considerably less than in the case of speaking proficiency (76.6%). The perception of teachers that Irish Reading

[18] There is relatively little difference between percentages calculated at the pupil level, as in the present case, and those calculated at the teacher level as in the earlier studies cited here. For example, the percentages of *teachers* who perceived a decline in speaking proficiency are 76.1% for ordinary schools, 29.2% for all-Irish schools and 71.5% for Gaeltacht schools. The corresponding percentages calculated at the pupil level (Table 7.10) are 76.6%, 29.3%, and 68.1%.

standards declined to a lesser extent is perhaps consistent with some changes in methods and materials in the late 1980s and 1990s. During this period, the approach to teaching Irish gradually began to involve greater use of course books. This change, whatever its other merits, might well have had the effect of moderating, in the case of reading, any general decline in standards. Unfortunately, as we do not have achievement-test data for Irish Reading in 1985, we cannot compare test results and teacher perceptions. Given the congruence between achievement test results and teacher' perceptions in the case of Irish Listening and Speaking, however, teachers' perceptions also seem likely to reflect the reality of changes in standards in the case of Irish Reading.

Table 7.11 Percentage of sixth-grade pupils according to their teachers' assessment of the general standard of pupils' Irish reading over a 15 year period: Ordinary, all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools.

Changes in pupils' Irish reading (teachers' assessment)	Percentage *(SE)* of pupils		
	Ordinary	All-Irish	Gaeltacht
Standard of Irish reading has **declined**	46.0% *(4.75)*	8.6% *(4.44)*	42.1% *(7.61)*
No change in the standard of Irish reading	42.4% *(4.53)*	56.6% *(11.40)*	46.4% *(6.35)*
Standard of Irish reading has **improved**	6.7% *(2.30)*	25.7% *(9.89)*	11.6% *(3.71)*
Missing	5.0% *(1.91)*	9.1% *(5.83)*	0%

Standard error printed in italics. N (Ordinary) = 3037, N (All-Irish) = 683, N (Gaeltacht) = 583.

The data on teachers' assessment of changes in standards of Irish Reading in Gaeltacht schools are very similar to those for ordinary schools, although the percentage of pupils whose teachers perceived a decline in Gaeltacht schools (42.1%) is a few points lower, and the percentage whose teachers perceived an improvement a little higher (11.6%), than in the case of ordinary schools. Only in all-Irish schools is the percentage of pupils whose teachers perceived an improvement in the standard of Irish reading (25.7%) greater than the percentage whose teachers perceived a decline (8.6%). This is another example of the intermediate position of Gaeltacht schools between ordinary and all-Irish schools on matters relating to Irish.

The new communicative approach to teaching Irish

Finally, teachers were asked a number of questions about *Curaclam na Bunscoile* (NCCA, 1999a,b). Responses to two questions will be noted briefly here - one concerning the implementation of the new communicative approach to teaching Irish, the other concerning whether teachers believed pupils' attitudes to Irish would change following the implementation of the revised curriculum. As noted previously, it should be borne in mind that the *Primary Curriculum Support Programme* of in-service training and school planning days was still in progress at the time of the 2002 survey. Reponses to the first question indicated that 67.7% of pupils had teachers who had begun implementation of the new approach, while 25.3% had teachers who had not. Regarding the second question, 69.6% of pupils

had teachers who believed pupil enjoyment of Irish would increase following the implementation of the new teaching approach and 24.2% had teachers who believed there would be no change. Only 1.3% of pupils had teachers who thought pupil enjoyment of Irish would decrease. It may be worth mentioning that a series of research and development studies on the communicative teaching of Irish at primary level conducted prior to the introduction of *Curaclam na Bunscoile* revealed very positive pupil attitudes to communicative activities, and that classrooms which had a greater proportion of communicative activities had higher levels of class attention and class interest and higher levels of individual pupil involvement than classrooms with smaller proportions of communicative activities (Harris et al, 1996a,b; Harris & Murtagh, 1999).

Parents' views and practices

Parents and Irish: Attitudes, proficiency and frequency of use

All the data relating to parents are for 2002, as we do not have corresponding data for 1985. In Table 7.12, the answer options on the left relate to a question which asked 'what is your general attitude to Irish now?' In ordinary schools, the most common category of response was 'neutral' (39.6%), followed closely by 'favourable' (34.2%). Smaller percentages were 'very favourable', 'unfavourable' or 'very unfavourable'. The contrast with the attitudes of all-Irish school parents, which are the most favourable in all three populations of school, is striking. For example, 56.5% of all-Irish school parents were very favourable towards Irish, compared to 46.7% of Gaeltacht parents, and 14.5% of ordinary school parents. A further 35.9% of all-Irish parents were favourable. Only 0.7% were unfavourable to any extent.

Table 7.12 Percentage of parents in three populations of schools according to their general attitude to Irish now.

Parents' general attitude to Irish now	Ordinary	All-Irish	Gaeltacht
Very Favourable	14.5% *(0.71)*	56.5% *(3.12)*	46.7% *(3.48)*
Favourable	34.2% *(0.97)*	35.9% *(2.56)*	35.6% *(2.42)*
Neutral	39.6% *(0.96)*	6.6% *(0.98)*	14.7% *(2.03)*
Unfavourable/Very unfavourable	11.2% *(0.67)*	0.7% *(0.35)*	2.6% *(0.80)*
Missing	0.5% *(0.13)*	0.3% *(0.22)*	0.5% *(0.42)*

Standard error printed in italics. N Ordinary = 2744, N All-Irish = 609, N Gaeltacht = 575.

Teachers in ordinary schools were much more favourable towards Irish than parents. Comparing data in Table 7.1 with Table 7.12, it can be seen that while 87.6% of pupils were taught by teachers whose personal attitudes to Irish were either favourable or very favourable, only 48.7% of parents held similarly favourable attitudes. The evidence more generally is that higher levels of ability in Irish - and teachers would tend to have higher levels of ability to speak Irish for professional as well as other reasons - are generally associated with more positive attitudes (Ó Riagáin, 1997).

As we saw in Chapter 6, both parental ability in Irish and frequency of use of Irish were significantly related to achievement in Irish Listening, Irish Speaking, and Irish Reading. In that chapter, data on these two variables, for all three kinds of school separately, were provided incidentally in the context of an analysis of the relationships between parental abilities and frequency of use of Irish on the one hand and pupil achievement in Irish Listening, Speaking and Reading on the other. The aspect we are concerned with here is the pattern of speaking ability and frequency of use among the parents themselves, and how these vary across the three populations of school. We turn first to parents' assessment of their own ability to speak Irish.

Table 7.13 shows that the category with which the greatest percentage of parents associate themselves differs by type of school: 'a few simple sentences' in the case of ordinary school parents (37.7%), 'parts of conversations' for all-Irish school parents (38.3%), and 'native-speaker ability' for Gaeltacht school parents (37.2%). It can be seen also that a combined total of 32% of ordinary school parents assign themselves to one of the two lowest Irish-speaking categories: 'No Irish' and ' the odd word'. It may be noted in passing that ordinary school parents rate their ability in Irish somewhat higher than do the general public outside Gaeltacht areas. For example, the percentages of the general public in 1993 who rated their speaking ability as 'no Irish' was 18% and as ' the odd word' 32% (Ó Riagáin & Ó Gliasáin, 1994). Thus, the combined total of the general public who placed themselves in the two lowest Irish-ability categories is 50%, compared to 32% of ordinary school parents. There are a number of possible reasons for this difference. One may be that parents who have children in primary school represent a relatively young segment of the general population, and so were more likely than older people to have spent more time in education (including studying Irish). Another possibility is that parents with children still at school may be prompted to renew their own Irish during these years of active parenting and thus move out, even temporarily, of these very low categories of Irish ability.

Table 7.13 Percentage of parents in three populations of schools according to their self-assessed ability to speak Irish.

Parents' ability to speak Irish	Ordinary	All-Irish	Gaeltacht
No Irish	10.8% *(0.89)*	1.8% *(0.64)*	3.3% *(0.78)*
Only the odd word	21.2% *(0.97)*	8.2% *(1.30)*	8.1% *(1.39)*
A few simple sentences	37.7% *(1.18)*	26.9% *(1.65)*	15.8% *(2.19)*
Parts of conversation	22.6% *(1.00)*	38.3% *(2.44)*	19.9% *(2.37)*
Most conversations	6.2% *(0.51)*	18.7% *(1.90)*	14.1% *(2.13)*
Native speaker ability	1.0% *(0.18)*	5.8% *(1.17)*	37.2% *(5.21)*
Missing	0.6% *(0.14)*	0.4% *(0.24)*	1.7% *(0.71)*

Standard error printed in italics. N Ordinary = 2744, N All-Irish = 609, N Gaeltacht = 575.

By comparison with ordinary school parents, only 10% of all-Irish parents and 11.4% of Gaeltacht parents rated their speaking ability as low as 'no Irish' or 'only the odd word' (Table 7.13). Bearing in mind that a further 15.8% of Gaeltacht

parents rated their speaking ability as 'simple sentences', these data indicate the very large variability in Irish-language backgrounds encountered by teachers in Gaeltacht schools.

Substantial percentages of parents of pupils in ordinary schools rarely if ever spoke Irish to their children (33.1% 'seldom' and 42.3% 'never') (Table 7.14). The combined percentage for the 'seldom' and 'never' categories of use (75.4%) may be compared with the combined percentage in the three lowest categories of speaking ability among ordinary school parents in Table 7.13 (69.7%). It is much less common in all-Irish schools to have parents speaking Irish with such low frequency to their children: while 25.5% of all-Irish parents 'seldom' speak Irish to the child, only 8.4% 'never' do. Only in the case of Gaeltacht schools, however, do substantial percentages of parents speak Irish to their child as their everyday language of choice - 22.6% 'Always' speak Irish to the child. The most frequently-chosen description of frequency of use of Irish with the child in Gaeltacht schools, however, is 'occasionally' (25.7%), the same frequency-of-use category which is also most often selected by all-Irish parents (43.4%). Once again, while we will not discuss the issue in detail here, it may be noted that, as in the case of Irish ability discussed earlier, ordinary school parents in the 2002 survey record somewhat higher frequencies of use of Irish at home than do the public generally (Ó Riagáin & Ó Gliasáin, 1994).

Table 7.14 Percentage of parents (respondent) in three populations of schools according to the frequency with which they speak Irish to their child.

Parent speaks Irish to child -	Ordinary	All-Irish	Gaeltacht
Always	0.1% *(0.09)*	1.1% *(0.55)*	22.6% *(4.76)*
Very often	1.0% *(0.24)*	5.2% *(1.04)*	8.1% *(1.73)*
Often	2.2% *(0.29)*	15.6% *(1.97)*	14.5% *(2.39)*
Occasionally	20.6% *(0.82)*	43.4% *(1.73)*	25.7% *(2.78)*
Seldom	33.1% *(0.99)*	25.5% *(1.17)*	17.7% *(2.34)*
Never	42.3% *(1.28)*	8.4% *(1.45)*	10.8% *(1.89)*
Missing	0.7% *(0.15)*	0.8% *(0.45)*	0.7% *(0.45)*

Standard error printed in italics. N Ordinary = 2744, N All-Irish = 609, N Gaeltacht = 575.

When asked how often they spoke to their spouse or partner in Irish (data not shown in tabular form), greater percentages of parents gave no answer to this question than to the previous question on frequency of speaking Irish to the child: 15.2% in ordinary schools, 14.8% in all-Irish, and 10.3% in Gaeltacht schools. Apart from these missing data, there was a general and consistent tendency for the responding parent to report speaking Irish more often to the child than to a spouse/partner. For example, the following are the percentages of parents who 'never' speak Irish to their child (with the corresponding percentage who never speak Irish to their spouse/partner in brackets): ordinary schools 42.3% (spouse 52.8%); all-Irish 8.4% (spouse 31%); and Gaeltacht 10.8% (spouse 18.3%). The contrasting percentages suggest that the parent, while sometimes perhaps having little Irish, makes an effort to speak at least some Irish to the child. Note that the

greatest *difference* between the percentage of parents who 'never' speak Irish to their child and 'never' speak it to their spouse/partner occurs in the case of all-Irish schools, indicating perhaps a greater concern among these parents to signal support for their children speaking Irish.

In a follow-up question, parents were asked whether they spoke Irish to the child more often now than when the child was younger. One of the results of interest was that while most Gaeltacht parents said they spoke Irish with the same frequency now as when the child was younger (40.2%), among the remainder of the Gaeltacht parents, a greater percentage reported speaking more often now (24.8%) than when the child was younger (12.3%). In the case of the other two types of school, there was a negligible difference in the percentages speaking Irish more often now than when the child was younger. The tendency of some Gaeltacht parents to speak Irish less often to younger children, though not dramatic, is worthy of note. While one would not be justified in assigning a firm interpretation to an isolated result such as this, the finding is consistent with a distinctive improvement in Gaeltacht children's achievement in spoken Irish between second and sixth grade which was reported by Harris and Murtagh (1987). The improvement did not have a parallel among all-Irish school children. One of a number of possible explanatory factors considered by Harris and Murtagh was that some Gaeltacht parents with a good proficiency in Irish might adopt a strategy of gradually using more Irish at home once the child began to acquire Irish at school.

In summary, we may conclude that all-Irish parents had a 'better' profile than ordinary school parents in terms of their own ability to speak Irish, their attitudes to Irish, and the frequency with which they use Irish at home. All-Irish parents also had a better profile than Gaeltacht parents, at least in so far as attitudes to Irish are concerned. But Gaeltacht parents had a better profile than either all-Irish or ordinary-school parents in terms of ability to speak Irish and frequency of use of Irish. These general patterns are important for a number of reasons. First, differences in parents' ability to speak Irish and in the frequency with which they speak Irish to their children are significantly related, as we saw in Chapter 6, to the pupils' achievement in Irish Listening, Speaking and Reading in *each* of the three populations of schools. Second, because of these significant relationships *within* each population, and because of the major differences *between* the three populations in terms of the Irish ability and use profile of parents, making sense of the relative levels of achievement in Irish in ordinary, all-Irish, and Gaeltacht schools means taking account of parental variables as well as internal school matters, such as the amount of Irish medium instruction. Third, to fully understand the task of the school in teaching Irish, and to appreciate the challenges facing each type of school in achieving high levels of pupil achievement in Irish, it is crucial that due weight be given to differences between parents and teachers both in their ability to speak Irish and in their attitude towards the language.

It is also important to emphasise that while parents in all-Irish schools have a much better speaking-ability and frequency-of-speaking profile than parents in ordinary schools, there is evidence that the superior performance of pupils in all-Irish schools does not depend only or even primarily on these advantages. This conclusion is

based on a comparison of those pupils in all-Irish schools *who have the weakest* parental ability-and-use profile with pupils in ordinary schools *who have the strongest* parental ability-and-use profiles.

The two groups of pupils we compared were

Group 1	'Irish-disadvantaged background'. Pupils in *all-Irish* schools whose parents' ability in Irish is at the level of 'No Irish/the odd word/simple sentences' and who 'seldom or never' speak Irish to their child.
Group 2	'Irish-advantaged background'. Pupils in *ordinary* schools whose parents' ability to speak Irish is at the level of 'most conversations/native speaker' and who speak Irish to their child 'occasionally (or more often)' - the highest category in ordinary schools which will provide enough children to make a worthwhile comparison.

The results show clearly that 'Irish-disadvantaged background' pupils in all-Irish schools have a level of performance on Irish Listening, Irish Speaking, and Irish Reading which greatly exceeds the level of the 'Irish-advantaged background' group in ordinary schools to a statistically significant degree. For example, the mean percentage correct on the Irish Listening Test for the 'Irish-disadvantaged' pupils in all-Irish schools was 83.0% (SE=1.4) while for the 'Irish-advantaged' pupils in ordinary schools it was only 53.6% (SE=1.23). The mean percentage correct on the Irish Speaking Test for the 'Irish-disadvantaged' all-Irish group was 79.5% (SE=3.05) while for the 'Irish advantaged' ordinary-school group it was only 52.8% (SE=3.31).

Neither, however, can the superior Irish achievement of pupils in all-Irish schools be attributed primarily to their parents' *educational* and *socio-economic* background. To show this we compared the Irish achievement of these pupils in all-Irish schools who were least advantaged in terms of parental education and socioeconomic background with the pupils in ordinary schools who were most advantaged in these same terms. The two groups of pupils whose Irish achievement we compared were (1) pupils in all-Irish schools whose parents highest level of education was the Intermediate Certificate and who also were in receipt of a medical card with (2) pupils in ordinary schools whose parents had a third level degree and were not in receipt of a medical card. Again, the all-Irish 'disadvantaged' group had a substantially higher performance than the 'advantaged' ordinary group on all three Irish tests. For example, mean percentage correct on the Irish Reading 25-item Link subtest (the one common to all-Irish and ordinary schools) was 69.1% (SE=3.11) for the all-Irish 'disadvantaged' group but only 45.2% (SE=0.89) for the ordinary 'advantaged' group. For Irish Listening, the means were 77.6% (SE=2.05) and 51.4% (SE= 0.93) respectively. There can be little doubt, therefore, that the all-Irish schools contribution to pupils' proficiency does not depend in any substantial way on the kind of linguistic and socioeconomic advantages just described.

Comparison of parents' and teachers' attitude to Irish being taught in school

Table 7.15 compares parents' and teachers' attitudes to Irish being taught to children in ordinary schools. The data on teachers' attitudes were reported earlier in Table 7.4.

Table 7.15 Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools according to their parents' and teachers' attitude to Irish being taught in primary schools.

Attitudes to Irish being taught in primary school	Percentage *(SE)* of pupils	
	Parents' Attitude	Teachers' Attitude
Very Favourable/Favourable	67.4% *(0.98)*	81.3% *(2.85)*
Neutral	22.4% *(0.80)*	12.5% *(2.90)*
Unfavourable/Very unfavourable	9.8% *(0.58)*	5.5% *(1.95)*
Missing	0.5% *(0.18)*	0.7% *(0.72)*

Standard error printed in italics. Parents N = 2744, Teachers N = 3037.

It is clear that while a strong majority of *parents* (67.4%) are either favourable or very favourable to Irish being taught, an even greater majority of their children (81.3%) have *teachers* whose attitude is favourable - and this despite the earlier-mentioned significant decline since 1985 in the percentage of pupils in ordinary schools whose teachers are favourable to Irish being taught (see Table 7.4).

In Table 7.16, data on parents' own views on the *amount of time spent on Irish* in school is compared with two other sets of data (a) the teacher's personal view on this question and (b) his/her *perception* of the parents' view. The comparison is not without complications, since the form of the question has to be slightly different when the teacher is evaluating the parents' position. The teacher is asked to assess 'the opinion of most of the parents of your sixth-class pupils' on the issue of time spent on Irish. The majority of parents in reporting their own feeling say the amount of time is 'just right' (72.5%). A further 14.5% feel that less time should be spent on Irish, while only 10.4% feel that more time should be spent on it.

Table 7.16 Percentage of sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools (2002) according to their teachers' and parents' view of the amount of time spent on Irish in the school.

View on the amount of time spent on Irish	Percentage *(SE)* of pupils		
	Parents' attitude	Teachers' own view	Teachers' perception of parents' view
Less time should be spent on Irish	14.5% *(0.58)*	34.6% *(4.05)*	29.8% *(3.91)*
The amount of time spent on Irish is **just right**	72.5% *(0.93)*	56.7% *(4.24)*	63.4% *(4.12)*
More time should be spent on Irish	10.4% *(0.75)*	6.5% *(2.31)*	0%
Missing	2.6% *(0.30)*	2.1% *(1.24)*	6.8% *(2.28)*

Standard error printed in italics. Parents N = 2744, Teachers N = 3037.

Teachers' own views of the time spent on Irish (second column), and their *perceptions* of the parents' view, are more negative than parents' actual views. For example, 34.6% of pupils have teachers whose own view is that less time should be spent on Irish in school and 29.8% have teachers who believe that 'the parents of most' of their sixth-class pupils want less time spent on Irish. But the reality is that only half that percentage (14.5% of parents) are actually of this view themselves.

While we know from data presented earlier that teachers' views on the amount of time spent on Irish in school have become more negative we do not have data on changes over time in parents' views on this same question. We do have data however, from Kellaghan, McGee, Millar & Perkins (2004) on changes over time in the opinions of the general population on the emphasis placed on Irish language and culture as an educational goal. The study involved a comparison of opinions in 1974 and 2004. While the comparison is complicated by differences in the wording of items and the educational level to which they refer (primary and post-primary), it is notable that the percentage who in 1974 judged that the emphasis on the Irish language at that time was too much (38%) had reduced by 2004 to 8% for primary and 9% for post-primary. Correspondingly, the percentage judging the emphasis on the Irish language to be too little had increased from 18% to 35%/34% during the same period. The very least that can be said is that there is no evidence of a negative change in parents' view on Irish in school corresponding to the change in teachers' views recorded here.

Parental praise and encouragement and the child's feelings about Irish

In this section we examine data relating to a number of questions which explore the relationship between the child's attitude to studying Irish in school (as perceived by the parent) and the extent to which the learning enterprise itself is supported by parental praise for the child's progress and an affirmation by parents that Irish is important. The parents who reported the most positive attitude to studying Irish among their children (Table 7.17) were associated with all-Irish schools: 71.9% said that their child liked it, compared to 59.9% of Gaeltacht parents and only 27.2% of ordinary school parents. Most parents of children in ordinary schools said that their child either had 'no particular feelings about studying Irish' (40.6%) or disliked it (30.8%).

Table 7.17 Percentage of parents in three populations of schools according to how their child generally feels about studying Irish in school.

Child's feelings about studying Irish	Ordinary	All-Irish	Gaeltacht
Likes studying Irish	27.2% *(1.12)*	71.9% *(2.75)*	59.9% *(3.36)*
Has no particular feelings about studying Irish	40.6% *(1.07)*	24.8% *(2.51)*	30.6% *(2.58)*
Dislikes studying Irish	30.8% *(1.10)*	3.0% *(0.76)*	8.4% *(1.69)*
Missing	1.4% *(0.22)*	0.3% *(0.02)*	1.1% *(0.65)*

Standard error printed in italics. N Ordinary = 2744, N All-Irish = 609, N Gaeltacht = 575.

These figures would seem to indicate that parents see their children's attitude to studying Irish as more negative than their own general attitude to the language. It may be recalled from Table 7.12 that fewer parents (11.2%) claimed that their own attitudes were 'unfavourable or 'very unfavourable' than reported that their children disliked studying Irish (30.8%). There is very little difference between the parents and children in what might be termed 'neutral' attitudes. The percentage of parents reporting their own general attitude as 'neutral' (39.6%) is almost the same as the percentage saying their children had 'no particular feelings' about studying Irish (40.6%).

In the case of Gaeltacht and all-Irish schools, very small percentages of parents said that their children disliked studying Irish (8.4% and 3% respectively) but substantial minorities said that children had 'no particular feelings' about it (30.6% in Gaeltacht schools and 24.8% in all-Irish schools). Once again for purposes of comparison, note that fewer Gaeltacht parents had attitudes to Irish which were 'neutral' (14.7%) (Table 7.12) compared to the 30.6% associated with the roughly equivalent 'no particular feelings' category just mentioned (Table 7.17). Only 6.6% of all-Irish parents characterised their own attitude to Irish as neutral (Table 7.12) compared to the 24.8% who felt their children had no particular feelings about learning the language (Table 7.17).

Table 7.18 summarises parents' response to a question about the general attitude to Irish which they try to encourage in their child. Gaeltacht parents were most affirmative in this regard, with 64.2% choosing the option 'I let my child know that Irish is important'. The proportion of all-Irish parents emphasising the importance of Irish is somewhat smaller but still represents a majority (55%). Just under a third of ordinary school parents (32.5%) promoted this attitude. Negligible proportions of parents in all three kinds of school said that they discouraged their child from taking Irish seriously. Two-thirds of ordinary school parents, however, left it up to the child to develop his/her own attitude to Irish. Arguably, this 'hands-off' attitude by the majority of ordinary school parents is of considerable significance precisely because their children are attending ordinary as opposed to all-Irish or Gaeltacht schools. Gaeltacht children are likely to encounter Irish as a living language outside school, while the decision to send a child to an all-Irish school could in itself perhaps be read by the child as an affirmation by the parent of the importance of Irish. In ordinary schools, however, since neither of these factors is present, the dominant attitude to Irish of leaving it up to the child may be more significant in determining the child's overall perspective on the language.

Table 7.18 **Percentage of parents in three populations of schools according to the general attitude towards Irish which they try to encourage in their child.**

General attitude to Irish encouraged by parent	Ordinary	All-Irish	Gaeltacht
I let my child know that Irish is important	32.5% *(1.04)*	55.0% *(2.13)*	64.2% *(2.66)*
I leave it up to my child to develop his/her own attitude to Irish	66.2% *(1.02)*	44.3% *(2.09)*	34.3% *(2.73)*
I discourage my child from taking Irish seriously	0.7% *(0.20)*	0.1% *(0.12)*	0.4% *(0.27)*
Missing	0.6% *(0.14)*	0.6% *(0.40)*	1.2% *(0.52)*

Standard error printed in italics. N Ordinary = 2744, N All-Irish = 609, N Gaeltacht = 575.

Another element of parental support for Irish, and one that has a more personal dimension for the child, is praise for school achievements. Table 7.19 shows, for each of eight aspects of English, Irish, Mathematics, and Project work, how often parents praise the achievements of children in ordinary primary schools. The school achievements which the greatest percentage of parents said they 'often' praise relate to English reading (73.1%) and Mathematics (72.9%). Substantial majorities of parents said that school achievements in three other subjects 'often' attracted their praise - English writing (69.8%), Project work (62.6%), and Spoken English (58.2%). Only in the case of the three aspects of Irish do the percentages of parents 'often' offering praise fall below 50%: 49.8% in the case of Irish reading, 48.2% for Irish writing, and 38.4% in the case of Spoken/oral Irish.

Table 7.19 **Percentage of parents in ordinary schools according to how often they praise their child's school achievements in different subjects.**

Ordinary schools. Subjects:	Parent praises child's achievements			
	Often	Occasionally	Hardly ever	Missing
English reading	73.1% *(0.97)*	22.8% *(0.86)*	2.3% *(0.29)*	1.8% *(0.24)*
English writing	69.8% *(0.88)*	24.9% *(0.91)*	2.6% *(0.30)*	2.7% *(0.32)*
Spoken/oral English	58.2% *(1.00)*	27.9% *(0.91)*	8.8% *(0.60)*	5.1% *(0.40)*
Mathematics	72.9% *(0.87)*	22.5% *(0.86)*	2.0% *(0.30)*	2.6% *(0.32)*
Project work	62.6% *(1.22)*	26.0% *(1.03)*	5.0% *(0.49)*	6.5% *(0.55)*
Irish reading	49.8% *(1.18)*	33.2% *(1.01)*	12.4% *(0.77)*	4.6% *(0.42)*
Irish writing	48.2% *(1.09)*	34.3% *(1.00)*	12.8% *(0.80)*	4.7% *(0.44)*
Spoken/oral Irish	38.4% *(1.14)*	31.4% *(0.89)*	25.0% *(0.92)*	5.3% *(0.44)*

Standard error printed in italics.

Data in the third column concerning the percentage of parents who 'hardly ever' praise their child's school achievements indicate how little direct parental support there is for Spoken/oral Irish in a substantial minority of cases. While only 2.3% of parents said that they 'hardly ever' praised the English reading achievements of their children, and only 2% hardly ever praised their mathematics achievements, 25% hardly ever praised Spoken/oral Irish.

Parents of children in Gaeltacht and all-Irish schools provided similar data (not presented in tabular form). Both in the case of Gaeltacht and all-Irish schools, the two subjects associated with the highest percentage of parents 'often' praising pupils' school achievements were again Mathematics and English reading. For all-Irish schools, the percentages were 72.2% (Mathematics) and 68% (English reading), while for Gaeltacht schools they were 65.4% and 60.5% respectively. The percentages for Gaeltacht schools reflect a more general pattern which, while not very strong, is consistent: for all eight subjects, smaller percentages of Gaeltacht parents than of all-Irish parents report that they 'often' praise their children's achievements. This is also true, except in the case of Irish, for Gaeltacht versus ordinary schools: smaller percentages of Gaeltacht parents than of ordinary school parents 'often' praise school achievements in the various aspects of English, Mathematics, and Project work. For example, the percentages 'often' praising English writing were 69.8% for ordinary schools, 64.2% for all-Irish schools, and 56.3% for Gaeltacht schools. The range of percentages for praising 'often' in the case of the three aspects of Irish ranged from 62.1% to 65.8%% for all-Irish and 51.9% to 59.9% for Gaeltacht schools. The corresponding percentages praising in ordinary schools, it will be recalled, ranged from 38.4% to 49.8%. Spoken/oral English was the subject with the smallest percentage of parents praising 'often' in both all-Irish (54.7%) and Gaeltacht (47.9%) schools.

We will now look briefly at the relationships in ordinary schools between some of parental attitude and support factors we have just been describing - children's attitude to learning Irish at school, the general attitude to Irish encouraged by parents, and the frequency with which parents praise the child for achievements in Irish. It would be a reasonable expectation that these factors might be related. We first cross-tabulated data on the child's feelings about studying Irish (as reported by the parent) with data on how often the parent praised achievements in spoken Irish. We found that when children were described as liking Irish at school, parents were much more likely to report that they 'often' praised the child's achievements in Spoken/oral Irish. For example, 59.6% of those children who are reported as liking Irish at school had parents who 'often' praise their achievements in Spoken/oral Irish. In contrast, among pupils who disliked Irish, less than half that percentage (27.4%) had parents who 'often' praised their achievements in spoken Irish. Similarly, while only 9.5% of parents whose children liked studying Irish 'hardly ever' praised their child's achievements in spoken Irish, 42.6% of parents whose children disliked studying Irish said they 'hardly ever' praised the child's achievements in spoken Irish.

In light of these findings, it is perhaps not surprising that the emphasis the parent places on the importance of Irish is also related to reported pupil attitude to learning

Irish. Cross tabulations of the data for these variables show that where pupils in ordinary schools are reported to like studying Irish, 46.2% of them have parents who let them know 'that Irish is very important'. Where pupils are reported to dislike Irish, only 23.9% have parents who communicate that Irish is important.

In this context it is of interest to recall a previous study (Harris & Murtagh, 1999) which examined directly the question of whether parental attitudes/behaviours such as these are significantly related to pupil achievement in Irish and to pupil attitude/motivation in learning Irish. The evidence is that they are. Both parental 'emphasis on the importance of Irish' and 'praise for pupil achievements in Spoken/oral Irish' were found to be significantly and positively related to pupil attitude/motivation in learning Irish and pupil achievement in spoken Irish. The frequency of use of Irish at home was also significantly correlated with both pupil achievement in Irish (as in the present survey) and with pupil attitude/motivation in relation to Irish.

Child's experience of difficulty with Irish and efforts by parent and school

Table 7.20 shows, for each of the three kinds of school, the percentages of parents who reported that their children experienced difficulty with different school subjects. It can be seen that for the three aspects of English listed, there is no substantial difference between results from the three types of school. For example, in the case of English reading, the percentages are 7.8% for ordinary schools, 6.9% for all-Irish schools, and 8.4% for Gaeltacht schools. Mathematics is associated with pupil difficulty more often in each of the three kinds of school and the differences between school types are a little greater - 20.5% for ordinary schools, 22.4% for all-Irish schools, and 17.5% for Gaeltacht schools. In all-Irish schools, Mathematics, by a considerable margin, has the highest percentages of pupils experiencing difficulty in any subject area. In the case of Gaeltacht schools, Mathematics has the second highest percentage of pupils experiencing difficulty in any subject area.

Table 7.20 Percentage of parents in three populations of schools according to their child's experience of difficulty with different subjects.

Child experiences difficulty with -	Ordinary	All-Irish	Gaeltacht
English reading	7.8% *(0.72)*	6.9% *(1.24)*	8.4% *(1.50)*
English writing	5.6% *(0.45)*	6.9% *(1.12)*	6.9% *(1.38)*
Spoken/oral English	1.8% *(0.29)*	2.8% *(0.73)*	1.9% *(0.59)*
Mathematics	20.5% *(0.82)*	22.4% *(2.04)*	17.5% *(1.63)*
Irish reading	21.0% *(1.03)*	3.8% *(0.75)*	11.0% *(1.50)*
Irish writing	25.3% *(1.05)*	4.8% *(0.95)*	18.2% *(2.69)*
Spoken/oral Irish	33.7% *(1.11)*	0.9% *(0.42)*	14.2% *(1.64)*
Missing	0%	0%	0%

Standard error printed in italics. N Ordinary = 2744, N All-Irish = 609, N Gaeltacht = 575.

The three aspects of Irish, however, are the ones associated with the greatest differences between school types and, in the case of ordinary schools, with the highest percentages of pupils experiencing difficulty. Spoken/oral Irish posed difficulties for 33.7% of pupils in ordinary schools, the highest percentage for any area in any of the school types. The corresponding percentages in ordinary schools for Irish reading and writing are 21% and 25.3% respectively. Gaeltacht schools have the second highest percentages of pupils experiencing difficulty with Irish. In particular, note that 18.2% of pupils in Gaeltacht schools were reported to have difficulty with Irish writing - the highest for any of the seven areas for Gaeltacht schools listed in Table 7.20. But it is also notable that 14.2% of Gaeltacht parents reported that their child had difficulty with Spoken/oral Irish, providing evidence once again of the great diversity of backgrounds in Gaeltacht schools.

We also looked at the relationship in ordinary schools between pupil difficulty with Spoken/Oral Irish and the frequency with which parents praised pupils' achievements in this subject area. Again, the pattern is clear. Only 21.4% of pupils whose parents 'often' praise their achievements in Spoken/oral Irish are reported to have difficulty in school with that subject. But 53.3% of pupils whose achievements in Spoken/oral Irish were 'hardly ever' praised experience difficulty with the subject in school.

We turn next to parents' perception of the schools' efforts in relation to Irish and the question of whether the parents themselves could give any additional practical support to the teaching of Irish. In ordinary schools, 75% of parents felt the school was 'doing everything possible' to improve their child's progress in Irish generally, and only 19.8% felt it could do more. On the question of the parents giving the school any practical support as far as the teaching of Irish was concerned (apart from what they were already doing), 91.1% of parents felt they could not and only 6.7% felt they could. Perhaps this suggests that the significance of praise and an emphasis on the importance of Irish, for example, whatever about more demanding contributions such as occasionally using Irish themselves at home, may not be sufficiently well appreciated by many parents. As we suggest in the next chapter, there may be more scope for other kinds of positive intervention in this area than is perhaps generally understood.

The position of parents of children in all-Irish schools on these questions is not very different from the position of parents of children in ordinary schools, although more of the former believed the school was doing everything possible (93.4%) and slightly fewer believe they could not offer any additional support (88%). In Gaeltacht schools, 79.4% of parents felt that the school was doing everything possible to improve their child's progress in Irish, while 88.6% felt they could not offer any additional support to the enterprise themselves.

One other issue worthy of comment in relation to parents of children in ordinary schools is the teaching of subjects apart from Irish through Irish. Results showed that 4.9% of parents reported that the school already taught a subject apart from Irish through Irish. A further 23.7% said they would support the idea of the school teaching another subject through Irish. It is clear, then, that other things being

equal, there is a considerable minority of parental support for some degree of expansion in Irish-medium teaching in ordinary schools.

'Scéim Labhairt na Gaeilge' and parental Irish ability and use

In the case of Gaeltacht schools, a number of issues in addition to those which are common to all three kinds of schools, arise in relation to teaching and the development of pupil proficiency in Irish. These concern the existence of substantial Irish-speaking communities, the fact that children from both Irish and English speaking backgrounds come together in varying proportions in different Gaeltacht schools, and that Gaeltacht schools themselves vary in the amount of Irish-medium instruction they conduct, depending in part on the linguistic background in each class (Harris, 1984; Harris & Murtagh, 1987,1988a,b). In this section, we conduct a brief examination of the relationships between some of these factors - receipt of the *Scéim Labhairt na Gaeilge* grant, parents' report of their own ability to speak Irish and the frequency of use of Irish with the child; distribution of native or near native speakers in different Gaeltacht classes and the amount of Irish medium instruction conducted in these classes. Although we present data on the Irish achievement of pupils whose families are in receipt of the grant and those who are not, our main goal is to describe in general terms some of the relationships between home background and school factors.

Responses to a question on the Parent Questionnaire showed that parents living in (official) Gaeltacht areas were almost exactly evenly divided in terms of the proportions receiving and not receiving the grant: 44.1% received it and 44.4% did not. In addition, 9% of the parents with children attending Gaeltacht schools said they did not live in a Gaeltacht area and another 2.6% did not provide information on the issue.

Among the issues of interest in this context is the speaking proficiency and pattern of home use of Irish in the grant and non-grant group. Table 7.21 provides data on parents' own self-assessed ability to speak Irish (i.e. of the responding parent) in the two groups. It should be borne in mind that the data in this table are based only on the 88.5% of Gaeltacht-school parents who specifically said whether they received the grant or not. The vast majority of those in the grant group (71.3%) reported that they were native speakers and a further 16.5% described their speaking ability as 'most conversations', making a total of 87.8% in the group with high levels of speaking proficiency. In the non-grant group a minority of one-quarter of parents had high levels of proficiency: 11.7% said that they were native speakers with a further 13% rating their speaking proficiency as 'most conversations'. More generally in the Gaeltacht non-grant group (Table 7.21), there is a wider spread of parents across the speaking-proficiency categories than there is in the Gaeltacht grant group.

Table 7.21 Percentage of parents in Gaeltacht schools according to whether they receive a grant under *Scéim Labhairt na Gaeilge* and their own ability to speak Irish.

Parents' ability to speak Irish (self-assessed)	Grant	No grant	Total
No Irish, the odd word	1.0% *(0.77)*	18.7% *(2.49)*	9.9% *(1.70)*
A few simple sentences	3.0% *(1.33)*	26.4% *(2.70)*	14.8% *(2.25)*
Parts of conversation	8.2% *(1.66)*	30.3% *(3.24)*	19.3% *(2.54)*
Most conversations	16.5% *(3.79)*	13.0% *(2.87)*	14.7% *(2.30)*
Native speaker	71.3% *(4.26)*	11.7% *(2.90)*	41.3% *(5.25)*
Total	49.6% *(5.63)*	50.4% *(5.63)*	100%

Standard error printed in italics. N = 485.

For purposes of comparison, it may also be noted that the percentage of the *non-grant* group of parents with high levels of proficiency is almost identical to the corresponding percentage among all-Irish school parents (24.5%) (see Table 7.13). In the *non-grant* Gaeltacht group of parents with high speaking proficiency, however, the percentage of native speakers (11.7%) is twice the percentage of native speakers in the all-Irish group (5.8%). The percentage of ordinary school parents with high levels of proficiency is 7.2% (1% native speakers and 6.2% with a 'most conversations' level) (Table 7.13).

In regard to the frequency with which Gaeltacht parents reported speaking Irish to their children (Table 7.22), it was found that 50.7% of those receiving the grant said that they spoke Irish to their child 'always', while a further 32.4% spoke Irish 'often' or 'very often'. In the non-grant group, 0.6% spoke Irish to their child always and 15.3% spoke it often or very often. It will be recalled (Table 7.14) that in all-Irish schools 1.1% of parents spoke Irish 'always' and a further 20.8% spoke Irish 'often' or 'very-often' to their child. High levels of use of Irish with children are a little more common in all-Irish schools than in the *non-grant* group of parents in Gaeltacht schools. Again it must be borne in mind that this analysis excludes the 9% of Gaeltacht-school parents who said that they lived outside the Gaeltacht and the 2.6% who did not provide an answer.

Table 7.22 Percentage of parents in Gaeltacht schools according to whether they receive a grant under *Scéim Labhairt na Gaeilge* and how frequently they speak Irish to their child.

Parent speaks Irish to child	Grant	No grant	Total
Always	50.7% *(6.19)*	0.6% *(0.44)*	25.5% *(4.98)*
Very often/Often	32.4% *(5.22)*	15.3% *(3.05)*	23.8% *(3.37)*
Occasionally	13.7% *(3.08)*	38.1% *(3.69)*	25.9% *(3.09)*
Seldom/Never	3.3% *(1.06)*	46.0% *(3.98)*	24.8% *(3.46)*
Total	49.7% *(5.59)*	50.3% *(5.59)*	100%

Standard error printed in italics. N = 490.

Irish is spoken to the child 'seldom' or 'never' by 46% of *non-grant* Gaeltacht parents. By comparison, only 33.9% of all-Irish parents reported that they 'seldom' or 'never' spoke Irish to the child (Table 7.14). In ordinary schools, 75.4% of parents seldom or never spoke Irish.

We also compared the achievement in Irish Listening, Irish Speaking and Irish Reading of pupils in the Gaeltacht grant and non-grant groups (Table 7.23). Predictably, pupil achievement on all three tests are significantly higher in the 'grant' group. Mean percentage correct on Irish Listening for the grant group is 86.3% and for the non-grant group 65.5%, a difference of over one standard deviation (see Table 6.3). For Irish Speaking, the means are 85.4% and 57.4%, a difference again of over one standard deviation. In the case of Irish Reading the means, using the IRT scale score, are 253.2 for the grant group and 202.8 for the non-grant group, a difference again of around one standard deviation.

Table 7.23 Mean scores for Irish Listening, Irish Speaking, and Irish Reading for sixth-grade pupils in Gaeltacht schools and mean score difference by receipt of *Scéim Labhairt na Gaeilge* grant.

Irish achievement	Mean Correct Score		Difference (Grant – No grant)
	Grant	No Grant	
Irish Listening Test	86.3% *(1.13)*	65.5% *(3.07)*	**+20.8%**
Irish Speaking Test	85.4% *(1.32)*	57.4% *(5.02)*	**+28.0%**
Irish Reading Test	253.2 *(4.28)*	202.8 *(6.85)*	**+50.4**

Mean percentage correct for Listening and Speaking, mean IRT scale scores for Reading. Significant differences ($p < .05$) are printed in bold. Standard error printed in italics. N Listening = 2728, N Speaking = 950, N Reading = 2726.

When we examined the proportion of pupils who attained mastery of each Irish Listening and Speaking objective in each of the two groups, the grant group had a significantly higher percentage in all but one objective (*Sound discrimination*). To illustrate the scale of these differences, it may be noted, for example, that 95.1% of pupils in the grant group, compared to 53.6% of non-grant pupils, attained mastery of *General comprehension of speech*. Other examples, with the percentage for the grant pupils first followed by the non-grant, are: *Listening vocabulary* 90.7% (44.9%), *Understanding the morphology of verbs* in listening 72.1% (24.4%), *Communication* (second grade) 98.9% (70.4%), and *Fluency of oral description* 93.4% (53.4%).

Medium of instruction in grant minority and grant majority classes

While linguistic home background factors are obviously extremely important determinants of the level of proficiency in Irish achieved by pupils in Gaeltacht schools, school factors are also likely to be important. There is a large range of possible school factors to be considered, just two of which we examine briefly here - the medium of instruction in the school and the balance of native speakers of Irish and English in the class. Following an approach used in a previous analysis (Harris, 1984), we divided Gaeltacht sixth-grade classes into those which had a majority (more than 50%) of native or near native speakers (i.e., pupils in receipt of the *Scéim Labhairt na Gaeilge* grant) and those in which Irish speakers were in the minority.

As Table 7.24 shows, 36.4% of all Gaeltacht pupils were in grant-majority classes and 63.6% were in grant-minority classes. The fact that there is a much higher percentage in grant minority classes should be borne in mind in considering the data on teaching through Irish in the two kinds of classes.

Table 7.24 Percentage of Gaeltacht pupils in grant-majority and grant-minority classes and number and percentage of grant-majority/grant-minority classes.

	Grant-majority classes	Grant-minority classes	Total
Percentage of pupils	36.4%	63.6%	100%
Number of pupils	174	441	615
Number of classes	18	31	49

Table 7.25 and 7.26 show, for each subject, the percentage of Gaeltacht pupils taught entirely through Irish and entirely through English, based on the teachers' reports. (Data on subjects taught through both Irish and English are not shown here). Mathematics is the subject which shows the largest difference (62.9%) between grant-majority and grant-minority classes in the percentage of pupils taught entirely through Irish (Table 7.25). All pupils in grant majority classes were taught Mathematics entirely through Irish, while only 37.1% of those in grant minority classes were taught the subject entirely through Irish. Music and religion are the subjects in which there is the least difference between grant majority and grant minority classes in the percentages taught entirely through Irish (29.2% and 36%). Religion is also the subject that has the smallest percentage of pupils taught through Irish in either grant-majority (60.9%) or grant-minority (24.9%) classes.

Table 7.25 Percentage of Gaeltacht pupils taught entirely through *Irish* in grant-majority and grant-minority classes.

Subjects taught entirely through *Irish*	Grant majority class	Grant minority class	Difference	Total
Mathematics	100%	37.1% *(10.18)*	**+62.9%**	60.8% *(6.98)*
History	88.0% *(6.92)*	35.4% *(10.42)*	**+52.6%**	55.5% *(7.66)*
Geography	88.0% *(6.92)*	35.4% *(10.42)*	**+52.6%**	55.5% *(7.66)*
Science	78.0% *(10.88)*	35.4% *(10.23)*	**+42.6%**	51.7% *(7.63)*
Visual Arts	90.6% *(6.75)*	37.1% *(10.86)*	**+53.5%**	56.1% *(7.86)*
Music	69.1% *(12.51)*	39.9% *(10.59)*	**+29.2%**	51.1% *(7.84)*
Drama	88.0% *(7.07)*	34.4% *(10.16)*	**+53.6%**	54.6% *(7.47)*
Religion	60.9% *(12.95)*	24.9% *(8.08)*	**+36.0%**	38.6% *(7.07)*
Physical Education	92.3% *(1.83)*	45.2% *(10.05)*	**+47.1%**	63.2% *(6.13)*
Social, Personal and Health Education	76.3% *(9.67)*	32.9% *(10.22)*	**+43.4%**	49.4% *(7.99)*

Significant differences ($p < .05$) are printed in bold. Standard error printed in italics. N Grant majority = 174, N Grant minority = 441. Missing data are not included in the calculated percentages.

More generally, in grant-majority classes more than 80% of pupils were taught entirely through Irish for six of the ten subjects. In grant-minority classes, between 32.9% and 39.9% of pupils were taught entirely through Irish for eight of the ten subjects. Looking at pupils in all classes in the 'total' column, it can be seen that between 50% and 60% of Gaeltacht pupils were taught most subjects entirely through Irish.

Turning now to subjects taught entirely through English, it can be seen (Table 7.26) that apart from Religion, no pupil in a grant majority class was taught any subject entirely through English. In other words, Religion excepted, pupils in grant-majority classes not already counted as being taught entirely through Irish (Table 7.25) were taught 'half through Irish and half through English'. In grant-minority classes, it can be seen that, apart from Religion (47.6%) the subjects taught entirely through English to the greatest percentage of pupils were History (37.4%) and Science (35.1%), followed by SPHE (29.4%) and Geography (21.4%).

Table 7.26 Percentage of Gaeltacht pupils taught entirely through *English* in grant-majority and grant-minority classes.

Subjects taught entirely through *English*	Grant majority class	Grant minority class	Difference	Total
Mathematics	0%	4.5% *(3.21)*	-4.5%	2.8% *(1.97)*
History	0%	37.4% *(8.09)*	**-37.4%**	23.1% *(4.92)*
Geography	0%	21.4% *(7.09)*	**-21.4%**	13.3% *(4.53)*
Science	0%	35.1% *(7.89)*	**-35.1%**	21.7% *(4.58)*
Visual Arts	0%	12.9% *(6.72)*	**-12.9%**	8.3% *(4.39)*
Music	0%	15.3% *(8.60)*	**-15.3%**	9.4% *(5.20)*
Drama	0%	4.6% *(3.25)*	-4.6%	2.9% *(2.05)*
Religion	13.0% *(9.28)*	47.6% *(11.88)*	**-34.6%**	34.4% *(7.57)*
Physical Education	0%	0%	0%	0%
Social, Personal and Health Education	0%	29.4% *(10.73)*	**-29.4%**	18.2% *(6.91)*

Significant differences ($p < .05$) are printed in bold. Standard error printed in italics. N Grant majority = 174, N Grant minority = 441. Missing data are not included in the calculated percentages.

Conclusion

It is clear from the evidence presented here and in previous chapters that the sociolinguistic and educational context in which the teaching and learning of Irish proceeds varies in a complex manner both within and between the three populations of schools, ordinary, all-Irish, and Gaeltacht. We have shown that in each kind of school a range of home and school factors are strongly related to achievement in Irish Listening, Irish Speaking, and Irish Reading. These factors, such as the speaking proficiency in Irish of parents or how often they speak Irish at home to the child, also vary across school types. There are also variations across school types in parents' attitudes to Irish, in their willingness to praise the child's achievements in Irish and in the extent to which they are prepared to signal to their

children that Irish is important - all factors which in previous studies have been shown to be significantly related to pupil achievement in spoken Irish (e.g. Harris & Murtagh, 1999). The difference in the analysis conducted in the present study is that, for the first time, we have data on many of these important parental variables based on representative national samples.

Teachers' attitudes to Irish, their speaking proficiency, and satisfaction in teaching Irish are examples of another set of variables which also vary both within and between the three populations of schools. Furthermore, in explaining levels of achievement in Irish, we have to take account of significant changes since 1985 in these and other variables. Apart from changes in the satisfaction which teachers derive from teaching Irish, we must also consider changes in how favourable they are to Irish being taught in primary school and in how much time they feel should be devoted to it. Changes in the factors which influence the time they spend on Irish, the emphasis they place on Irish in school generally, and the amount of Irish medium instruction conducted outside the Irish lesson are also relevant.

The surveys of teachers and parents raise a range of other issues. The fact that a substantial minority of teachers assessed themselves as weak second-language speakers and that a majority felt that they did not have sufficient opportunities to practice their Irish and would like to do a course to improve their proficiency are surely significant. Another important feature of the results is that teachers' own judgements about changes in standards of speaking proficiency and reading in Irish over the preceding decade and a half are in agreement with the results of our comparisons of performance on our Irish Listening and Irish Speaking tests in 1985 and 2002.

It is important not to lose sight of the complexity in the range of factors which may bear on the success of pupils in learning Irish and which may account for the kind of substantial changes over time in the standards of pupil achievement in Irish Listening and Speaking documented here. It is clear that in looking at differences in achievement across schools, we cannot confine our analysis to either teaching variables or home variables. It is particularly important to acknowledge this since much of the discourse on the teaching of Irish, at least in ordinary schools, begins from the assumption that any difficulties being encountered must reside in unsuitable methods and materials. When it comes to finding remedies and solutions, it is worth pointing out that not all of the potential determining factors identified here will be amenable to intervention or change. But some of them certainly are. These factors are considered further in the next chapter.

Chapter 8

Conclusions and Recommendations

(John Harris)

Conclusions and Recommendations *by John Harris*

In this chapter we draw attention to some of the main findings of our 2002 survey of the achievement in Irish of sixth-grade pupils, long-term changes in achievement since 1985, and the views and practices of teachers and parents in relation to Irish. While we will be concerned with the three areas of Irish achievement tested (Listening, Speaking, and Reading), in all three kinds of school (ordinary, all-Irish, and Gaeltacht), the main focus will be on two results which will cause the most general concern. These are the substantial decline in achievement in Irish Listening and Irish Speaking in ordinary schools since 1985 and the evidence of changes in teachers' attitudes during the same period. We will consider the significance of these findings, set out the possible causes, and make recommendations for action.

All-Irish schools

The success of all-Irish schools consists in having increased their pupil numbers from 1.1% to more than 5% nationally in the period between 1985 and 2002 and yet to have maintained generally high standards of pupil achievement in Irish. Overall mean scores on Irish Listening do not differ significantly between the two years. While there was a significant decline in the percentages attaining mastery of some objectives relating to grammar and morphology (which were tested by smaller numbers of items), performance on the main Irish Listening and Irish Speaking objectives remained essentially the same. There was a significant increase in the percentage attaining mastery of one objective.

In the case of Irish Listening, for example, the percentage attaining mastery of *Listening vocabulary* was 90.4% in 1985 and 89.3% in 2002, while the percentages for *General comprehension of speech* were 96.4% in 1985 and 96.3% in 2002. Similarly, the major Irish Speaking objectives of *Fluency of oral description, Communication* (second grade), and *Speaking vocabulary* showed no significant difference between the two points in time. The views of teachers in all-Irish schools about changes in standards of achievement in Irish are consistent with this overall trend: in the present study, 34.6% of pupils in all-Irish schools were taught by teachers who believed that there had been no change in standards of speaking proficiency in Irish in the previous 15 years, while the remainder were almost equally divided between those whose teachers perceived a decline (29.3%) and an improvement (27%). This is in sharp contrast to the perceptions of teachers in ordinary and Gaeltacht schools.

Probably the greatest cause for concern in the results for all-Irish schools is the decrease in the percentage of pupils attaining mastery of the verb-related objective in Irish Listening. The percentage of pupils attaining mastery of the objective *Understanding the morphology of verbs* is down significantly, from 76.1%

in 1985 to 61.3% in 2002. The slippage in performance involved, however, is to a more basic level of achievement ('at least minimal progress') rather than to 'failure'. The percentage failing in 2002 is negligible (0.6%) and does not differ from 1985. While the corresponding objective on the Irish Speaking Test, *Control of the morphology of verbs*, also suffers a fall in the percentage of pupils attaining mastery, the difference in this case is not significant. The change in the failure rate over time for this objective is not significant either.

The importance of verb morphology is that it has a crucial semantic role in communication. Yet this kind of difficulty with certain aspects of grammar has been a feature of immersion programmes in many countries such as Canada where pupils, despite being able to communicate effectively at a high level in the language, appear to have certain 'fossilised' linguistic errors which are difficult to eradicate. The immersion classroom in Canada, which typically might consist of 25 learners of French and one native or near-native speaker of French as the teacher, produces a distinct interlanguage by Grade 8 (Lyster, 1987). As soon as students achieve a level of competence in French which allows them to communicate their intended meaning to one another, there appears to be little impetus for them to be more accurate in their use of the language to convey their message (Kowal & Swain, 1997; Swain, 1985, 1993).

Research in recent years has related these problems to some features of existing teaching practices and this in turn has led to the development of promising approaches to ameliorating the problem. Observational studies of grade 3 and grade 6 immersion classrooms in Canada showed that grammar was taught at particular times of the day and that the rules, paradigms and grammatical categories being learnt tended to be separated from their meaning (Swain & Carroll, 1987). A focus on form-related meaning in the context of content-based activities, which might have reinforced grammatical points studied during language classes, was absent. Swain and Carroll argued that more regularity and systematicity in linguistic analysis and in the handling of error correction were needed in immersion contexts. Subsequent studies showed that focussing teaching on a particular feature of the language within a meaningful communicative context enhanced learning and helped to overcome environmental weaknesses in the programme's setting (Day & Shapson, 1991; Harley, 1989; Lyster, 1993). Other studies showed that collaborative tasks can be used to encourage groups of students to think and talk about the function and application of grammar in specific writing activities. With the inclusion of final corrective feedback as part of this process, existing knowledge of form and function can be consolidated or modified and new knowledge generated (Kowal & Swain, 1997).

Returning to the general results for all-Irish schools, it should be noted that our data show that the success of these schools in producing high levels of pupil achievement in Irish does not depend in any essential way on factors related to parental education, social class, ability in Irish or use of Irish in the home. This is not to deny that there are overall differences in these home-background variables between ordinary and all-Irish schools or that these factors are in turn

linked to real differences in achievement in Irish. We know from the present study, for example, that the 'profile' of parents of children in all-Irish schools, in terms of their own ability to speak Irish, the frequency with which they speak Irish to their child, their level of education, and their socio-economic status, is more favourable than the corresponding profile of parents in ordinary schools. Furthermore, all these home-background variables are significantly linked to at least some aspects of achievement in Irish in all three kinds of school. But what comparisons in Chapters 6 and 7 crucially show is that pupils in all-Irish schools *who have no such linguistic, social, or educational advantages* still succeed in reaching levels of achievement in Irish which are substantially higher (to a statistically significant degree) than the achievements of pupils in ordinary schools *who do have such linguistic social or educational advantages*. This adds weight to the argument that the essential contribution of all-Irish schools derives from the fact that they are Irish-medium, so that extensive and sustained in-school contact with the language is equally available to all pupils.

One important thing we do not know about all-Irish school parents, however, is whether their profile has *changed* between 1985 and 2002. Given that the present study shows that background linguistic, educational, and social factors are significantly related to achievement in Irish, any change in the profile of all-Irish parents would be of interest in relation to, for example, the decline in the percentage of all-Irish pupils attaining mastery of the two verb-related listening and speaking objectives mentioned above [19]. Unfortunately, while we have some information relating to home language in all-Irish schools in 1985 based on questions put to pupils and teachers (Harris & Murtagh, 1987), the data are not comparable to 2002 data which were collected from the parents themselves. Nor do we have comparable information for 1985 and 2002 on other variables such as parental ability to speak Irish, educational level, or social class. It would not be surprising, of course, if the profile of all-Irish parents had indeed changed to some extent over the period in question as these schools became - relatively speaking at least - more mainstream. The expectation would be that their profile had become somewhat more like that of ordinary-school parents. It would be of interest in future surveys, therefore, to collect information on the linguistic, educational and socioeconomic profile of all-Irish and ordinary school parents comparable to the information collected here.

The success of all-Irish schools in becoming a more mainstream option, while at the same time continuing to produce high levels of pupil proficiency in Irish generally, represents a major contribution to strengthening the language nationally. By producing substantial numbers of pupils with high levels of proficiency, all-Irish schools may be crossing a crucial threshold in terms of contributing to the formation of Irish-speaking networks outside Gaeltacht areas. This effect is enhanced in so far as individual all-Irish schools themselves, like all schools, can often provide a focus for the development of social networks. Because all-Irish schools bring together a greater proportion of parents with relatively high levels of ability in Irish, who might otherwise be rather thinly dispersed in the population, the possibility that adult and family Irish-speaking networks will develop is greater (see Ó Riagáin & Ó Gliasáin, 1979).

[19] Arguably, all-Irish school parents who had relatively high levels of speaking proficiency in Irish and who frequently used Irish with their child might be expected to provide exactly the kind of real communicative environment which would help to prevent or correct some of these errors.

Finally, it would be desirable to subject all-Irish education to a comprehensive evaluation. While immersion generally has a strong record of research and evaluation (Swain & Johnson, 1997), evaluation studies of all-Irish schools, comparable to those conducted in Canada, have yet to be carried out. This does not mean that we have no objective information at all on the operation of such schools. The Irish achievement of pupils in all-Irish schools has been compared with that of pupils in ordinary and Gaeltacht schools in the present survey as well as previous surveys (Harris, 1984; Harris & Murtagh, 1987,1988a,b). There have also been a number of very useful studies of particular aspects of such programmes (e.g., O Riagáin & Ó Gliasáin, 1979). Some of the national surveys have also examined aspects of pupil ability and achievement, such as verbal reasoning in English, and have related pupil performance to social and linguistic background variables (Harris & Murtagh, 1987). But this still does not amount to the kind of broad-based evaluation which would be aligned specifically with the needs, characteristics, and processes of all-Irish education and would be driven by the particular theoretical and empirical issues to which immersion gives rise. The availability of high-quality evaluation studies could also make a great contribution to the future growth and improvement of all-Irish education as they have done in the case of immersion elsewhere.

Gaeltacht schools

The results for Gaeltacht schools present a complex picture and are not as amenable to a straightforward interpretation as the results for all-Irish and ordinary schools. We will look at two main aspects of the results: the Irish Listening, Irish Speaking and Irish Reading performance of pupils in Gaeltacht schools in 2002 and its general level compared to the performance of pupils in all-Irish and ordinary schools; and changes in the Irish Listening and Speaking performance of pupils in Gaeltacht schools since 1985.

It is clear that the performance in 2002 in Irish Listening, Irish Speaking, and Irish Reading of pupils in Gaeltacht schools is intermediate between the performance of pupils in ordinary and all-Irish schools, though considerably closer to that in all-Irish schools. For all seven Irish Listening objectives, for example, the percentages attaining mastery in Gaeltacht schools is greater than in ordinary but less than in all-Irish schools, but much closer to all-Irish schools. For example, the percentages attaining mastery of *General comprehension of speech* in Gaeltacht schools was 73.3%, compared to 96.3% in all-Irish schools, and 7.8% in ordinary schools.

A similar pattern across the three populations can be seen for all the Irish Speaking objectives. For example, the percentage of Gaeltacht pupils attaining mastery of *Speaking vocabulary* was 59.2%, whereas the corresponding percentage of all-Irish pupils was somewhat higher at 66.4%, and the percentage for ordinary schools considerably lower at 8.8%. Another example is *Communication* (second grade) for which the percentage attaining mastery in Gaeltacht schools was 85.2%, compared to 94.6% in all-Irish schools and 32.9%

in ordinary schools. Generally the same pattern of results can be found in the case of failure rates for Irish Speaking and Irish Listening objectives in all three types of schools.

In the case of Irish Reading we can compare performance across the three types of school on the sentence completion test (Link 25). Once again it is clear that Irish Reading performance in Gaeltacht schools is intermediate between all-Irish and ordinary schools, but closer to the former: mean percentage correct on Link 25 was 70.9% for Gaeltacht schools, 85% for all-Irish schools and 38.9% for ordinary schools.

We turn now to the second issue - changes in performance since 1985. While there has been some decline in the *overall* mean Irish Listening score in Gaeltacht schools between 1985 and 2002, just as there was in all-Irish schools, the difference once again is not statistically significant. The overall mean percentage correct on the Irish Speaking test in Gaeltacht schools in 2002 (70.9%) did decline significantly since 1985 (81%), however, equivalent to just under half the 1985 standard deviation for Gaeltacht schools. (We cannot compute overall Irish Speaking mean scores in 1985 in the case of all-Irish and ordinary schools[20].)

Turning to individual objectives, we find that in the case of two of the seven listening objectives and four of the eight speaking objectives, the decline in the percentages of Gaeltacht pupils attaining mastery is statistically significant. There are two listening objectives, however, where the percentage of pupils attaining mastery increased, for one of which, *Sound discrimination*, the increase is statistically significant. There were significant increases over the two time periods in the percentage of pupils failing three of the seven listening objectives and two of the eight speaking objectives. Only *Sound discrimination* was associated with a significant *decrease* in the percentages of pupils failing.

While the number of objectives manifesting a significant decline in performance in both Gaeltacht and all-Irish schools is much less than in ordinary schools, the pattern of change over time in all-Irish compared to Gaeltacht schools is less clear cut. Over all speaking and listening objectives, there are fewer objectives involving significant decreases in the percentage of pupils attaining mastery in all-Irish schools (4) than in Gaeltacht schools (6). What is perhaps more important, however, is that in Gaeltacht schools, but not in all-Irish schools, these decreases include two of the major objectives represented by larger numbers of items. Thus, the percentage of Gaeltacht pupils attaining mastery of *Listening vocabulary* decreased from 80.1% in 1985 to 65.3% in 2002, a significant drop of 14.8%; and the percentage mastering the speaking objective *Fluency of oral description* decreased from 86.7% in 1985 to 72.9% in 2002, a significant drop of 13.8%.

These results can be set beside the overall assessment of teachers. The percentage of pupils whose teachers believed that the standard of pupils' speaking proficiency in Irish had declined in the previous 15 years was 76.6% for ordinary schools, 29.3% for all-Irish schools, and 68.1% for Gaeltacht schools.

[20] As was pointed out in Chapter 2, it is only in the case of Gaeltacht schools that the overall mean percentage score for Irish Speaking can be compared for 1985 and 2002. This is because of differences in how the Irish Speaking Test was administered in the two time periods. In the case of Irish Listening, in contrast, it is possible to compare both overall mean scores and data on individual objectives for all three populations of schools and in the two time periods.

In considering these findings, the diversity of the linguistic and educational factors that determine performance on the Irish Listening and Irish Speaking tests in Gaeltacht schools should be borne in mind. Among relevant factors are the fact that children from both Irish and English speaking backgrounds come together in varying proportions in different Gaeltacht schools, and that Gaeltacht schools themselves vary in the amount of Irish-medium instruction they conduct, depending in part on the linguistic background of pupils in a class (Harris, 1984; Harris & Murtagh, 1987, 1988a,b). As the data in Chapter 6 show, for example, there are great differences, entirely to be expected, in Gaeltacht pupils' performance related to variations in parental ability to speak Irish and parental frequency of use of Irish with the child. Predictably also there are differences in pupil performance on all three Irish achievement tests depending on whether or not the family receives the *Scéim Labhairt na Gaeilge* grant. In addition, the data in Chapter 7 describe the mix of native Irish speakers and English speakers in Gaeltacht classes and the variation in the amount of Irish medium teaching in classes where native speakers are in the minority and the majority.

Another factor to be taken into account in the case of the Gaeltacht results generally, as pointed out previously (Harris, 1984), is that our tests, particularly the Irish Listening and Irish Speaking tests, have a relatively limited scope and are primarily geared to measuring the performance of second-language speakers. This means that they do not allow us to measure the high levels of performance, or the full range of linguistic, communicative and expressive skills which are characteristic of native speakers. To some extent, these limitations apply to all-Irish school pupils as well. With more comprehensive tests, the gap between the performance of native speakers of Irish and second language speakers would undoubtedly be considerably greater than that indicated in our study. Despite this, the tests are still very informative for many of our purposes. It is notable in particular that significant increments in Gaeltacht pupils' performance on the tests are associated with even the 'highest' categories of sociolinguistic and home background variables such as parental ability to speak Irish, frequency of parental use of Irish with the child, and receipt of the *Scéim Labhairt na Gaeilge* grant (see Chapters 6 and 7).

Nevertheless, it is crucial that other proficiency tests, more appropriate to pupils who are native speakers of Irish or who have high levels of fluency in the language, are developed for future surveys. Such tests are needed if we are to obtain really detailed information on changes in ability in Irish over time, on the patterns of use of Irish in Gaeltacht areas, and on the contribution of schools to the development of Gaeltacht pupils' speaking proficiency. They are also needed for the evaluation of various educational and linguistic initiatives in Gaeltacht[21] and all-Irish schools. We will return to the issue of the framework for such a test development enterprise later in the chapter in the context of a discussion of the needs of ordinary schools.

Another aspect of monitoring and evaluation in Gaeltacht schools is that in future surveys consideration should be given to the possibility of testing all available Gaeltacht children (rather than just a sample) at particular grade levels,

[21] This issue is also linked to the need for a separate Irish curriculum for pupils who are native speakers of Irish (See Little, 2003; Ní Mhóráin, 2005).

on at least some parts of each test. While we tested 54% of sixth-grade Gaeltacht children in the 2002 survey, the relatively small absolute numbers involved and the diversity in Irish achievement at school-level,[22] often made it difficult to evaluate the true significance of findings. On a number of occasions we had the experience, for example, of observing what appeared to be a major difference in achievement related to a variable, but the result in the Gaeltacht population turned out not to be statistically significant. Converging evidence elsewhere in the Gaeltacht data, however, sometimes strongly suggested that a true difference did exist. A census type approach of the kind suggested would be of benefit in establishing basic parameters in relation to achievement in Irish in Gaeltacht schools. Another possibility would be to use medium of instruction or the proportion of those within a class receiving the *Scéim Labhairt na Gaeilge* grant, if such information could be obtained in advance, as stratification variables[23].

Ordinary schools

Turning to ordinary schools, we will first outline the main results relating to achievement in Irish Listening and Irish Speaking. We also present corroborating evidence from teachers for the trends observed and indicate some of the main factors to be taken in to account in placing the data in context.

While a majority of sixth-grade pupils in ordinary schools are still making worthwhile progress in relation to certain key aspects of Irish Listening and Irish Speaking, their achievements are substantially lower than those of corresponding pupils in the mid 1980s. On the positive side, a majority of pupils *either* attain mastery or make at least minimal progress (i.e., do not fail) in relation to key objectives such as *Listening vocabulary, General Comprehension of speech, Understanding the morphology of verbs, Communication* (second grade) and *Fluency of oral description.*

But the percentage of pupils who now achieve *high levels of performance* (what we call 'mastery') in nearly all aspects of Irish Listening and Speaking has fallen significantly since the mid-1980s. Correspondingly, the percentage of pupils *failing* in 2002 has grown significantly. In the case of a number of Irish Speaking objectives (such as *Speaking vocabulary* and *Control of the morphology of verbs in speaking*), the percentage failing now constitutes a majority. The percentage failing *Speaking vocabulary* in 2002 is 65.9%, while for *Control of the morphology of verbs* it is 76.5%, and for *Control of the syntax of statements* 64.1%.

The change since 1985 is dramatic. In 2002, the percentages of sixth-grade pupils attaining mastery of six of the seven Irish Listening objectives had fallen significantly. For example, there was a fall of 36.1% and 40.5% respectively in the percentages of pupils mastering the *Listening vocabulary* and *General comprehension of speech* objectives. This leaves very small minorities of pupils in ordinary schools (5.9% and 7.8% of pupils respectively) who now achieve high levels of performance (i.e. mastery) on these two objectives. Objectives relating to *Understanding the morphology of verbs in listening* and *Understanding the*

[22] As evidenced by the very high between school variance in Irish Reading, for example, noted in Chapter 5.

[23] A recent major study of Gaeltacht schools (Mac Donnacha, Ní Chualáin, Ní Shéaghdha and Ní Mhainín, 2005) may facilitate this.

morphology of prepositions in listening are associated with falls of 24% and 22.1% respectively, with only 2.9% and 11.8% respectively still mastering these objectives in 2002. For two other objectives, the decline in the percentages achieving mastery is 16.6% and 13.1%. Only in the case of *Sound discrimination* is the decline in performance not statistically significant.

The decline in the percentages attaining *mastery* between 1985 and 2002 does not always translate directly into an exactly corresponding increase in the percentages *failing*. For most of the Irish Listening objectives what is evident is a moderate increase between 1985 and 2002 in the percentages of pupils reaching the lower level of performance defined as 'minimal progress', and a somewhat larger increase in the percentages failing. The end result, nevertheless, is often a substantial increase in the percentages of pupils failing important objectives. In the case of General *comprehension of speech*, for example, an increase of 24.4% was recorded in the percentages failing (from 11.8% in 1985 to 36.2% in 2002).

The trend in achievement in Irish Speaking is also consistently downwards. All eight objectives show decreases since 1985 in the percentages of pupils achieving high levels of performance (mastery), all but one of which are statistically significant. Some of the decreases are very substantial - a difference of 20.4% between 1985 and 2002 in the case of *Fluency of oral description* and of 21.1% in the case of the *Communication* (second grade) objective. The *relative* decline is also very substantial. For example, while each of the objectives *Fluency of oral description* and *Communication* were mastered by a little more than half the pupils in 1985, they were mastered by a little less than a third in 2002.

While the results are obviously a cause for concern, it is important to interpret them correctly. Three factors must be taken in to account. First, the results concern pupil performance on objectives appropriate to pupil's *present grade level*. The latter phrase is critical. Even though a pupil may fail a particular sixth-grade objective, this does not mean that the pupil has made no progress in relation to this aspect of Irish at all. He or she may well have made some progress, either mastery or minimal, in relation to the corresponding speaking or listening objective at a lower grade level. Second, even if a pupil does not attain mastery of a particular objective, he or she may have made some worthwhile progress in relation to that objective - indicated for example by registering at least 'minimal progress' (without however attaining mastery). Third, and most crucially, the corresponding statistic for 1985 must also be considered in looking at the percentage reaching each of the three levels of performance in 2002. We cannot make a sensible assessment of the results by just looking at the percentages for 2002. Examining the 2002 percentages on their own might give an unduly pessimistic picture of achievement in Irish. The significance of the 1985 perspective is that our overall assessment of the results of the survey conducted in that year was that they were at the level that might be expected given the amount of time being spent on the language in ordinary school. We arrived at this conclusion by comparing pupils learning Irish under various conditions - all-Irish schools, Gaeltacht schools, some teaching through Irish in ordinary schools. We cannot then confine our interpretative context to the percentages of pupils

attaining mastery of each objective in 2002. The critical question is how performance has changed since 1985.

The greatest cause for concern, of course, is that performance has changed very substantially and that the decline is sustained across nearly all Irish Listening and Irish Speaking objectives. The more detailed analysis of the conversational ability in Irish of pupils, when talking about a number of specific common topics (Chapter 4), indicates more vividly than perhaps the general mastery and minimal progress data just how poor the speaking proficiency of a substantial minority of pupils is.

In Chapter 3, we specifically considered, and then discounted, two factors that might conceivably have explained the decline in performance. The first was the possibility that the growth in all-Irish schools might have deprived ordinary schools of 'high-Irish-potential' pupils and teachers with high levels of speaking proficiency. Evidence suggests that, when considered in a national context, the *direct* effect of these factors on overall achievement in ordinary schools is marginal. This same evidence of course also means that all-Irish schools, despite their rapid growth, cannot compensate at a national level for the scale of the decline in achievement in ordinary schools.

The second possibility was that the changes we had to make in the tests might have contributed to the measured decline in performance. Evidence presented in Chapter 3 indicates that, if anything, these changes made the test somewhat easier. Other corroborating evidence that the decline is real, and not due to any changes we made in the test, is the fact that performance on the *Communication* subtest has also declined. This is important because *Communication* is tested in a flexible manner and the material can be adapted to the individual child by the examiner.

In addition to the findings regarding pupil achievement in Irish, the present study also provides a description of a range of parental and teachers' views and practices which are central to understanding the context in which the teaching of Irish proceeds. Some of these variables have been shown, either on the basis of the present study or of previous smaller-scale, more indepth studies (Harris & Murtagh, 1999), to be significantly related to pupil achievement in or attitude to Irish. These variables include the amount of Irish medium instruction conducted outside the Irish class, teacher satisfaction in teaching Irish, the extent to which the teacher's own attitudes are brought to bear on his/her emphasis on Irish in school, parental praise for the child's achievements in Irish, and the attitude to learning Irish which the parent encourages.

Significance in educational and language maintenance terms

The decline in achievement in spoken Irish which we have documented is obviously important from an educational point of view. It is essential, for example, that pupils should benefit from studying a subject in which they invest so much time and effort. In this regard, it is notable that Canadian Parents for French, the parents' group that set up the first French-immersion programmes, have now begun to emphasise the need to improve the results produced by core French programmes [24] similar to our Irish-as-a-subject programme in ordinary schools. They point out that one of the greatest problems with existing core programmes is that many students feel they are not learning enough of the language to be able to actually use it for communication (Canadian Parents for French, 2004). They argue that the main goal of renewal and development in core language programmes should be to produce worthwhile levels of proficiency in the language in order to maintain pupil motivation. The decline in achievement in ordinary schools just described obviously prompts similar concerns about pupil motivation to learn Irish, and a failure to address the underlying causes could in the longer term even undermine what is at present a solid consensus about Irish in primary school.

The results are also of concern to teachers. The very fact that the great majority of teachers in ordinary schools believe standards have declined (Chapter 7) has implications for professional self-esteem and motivation. To the extent that the decline is seen to be due to factors which are outside the power of individual teachers to remedy, the effect over a long period could be considerable. Not surprisingly in this context, data in the present study also show a substantial and statistically significant decline since 1985 in the percentage of teachers who derive satisfaction from teaching Irish.

From a national language-maintenance or language-revival [25] point of view, the decline in standards is also serious. As has been pointed out before (Harris, 1991b; Harris, 1997; Ó Riagáin & Harris, 1993) ordinary schools have a particularly important role in reproducing competence in Irish in each new generation. Because the rate of natural transmission of the language outside Gaeltacht areas is low, the renewal function of ordinary primary schools is central to maintaining existing levels of speaking proficiency in Irish nationally. There are a number of reasons for the importance of ordinary schools. First, there is the fact that the overwhelming majority of children learn Irish in these schools (rather than in the considerably smaller number of Gaeltacht or all-Irish schools). Thus, any initiative which enhances, however modestly, the success of such schools has the potential to affect large numbers of pupils and, thereby, make a substantial contribution to the language-revival effort nationally. But the opposite is also true: a decline in achievement in ordinary schools is a matter of great importance to the language because of the number of pupils involved.

[24] The importance of ordinary core second language programmes to the achievement of major national linguistic goals is illustrated by the Canadian Government's *Action Plan for Official Languages* (Government of Canada, 2003). The *Action Plan* has the ambitious goal of doubling the number of functional bilinguals nationally by the year 2014. In this context, the Plan notes that the demand for immersion education levelled off during the 1990s. While it is proposed to promote immersion, the Plan also recognises that a radical reexamination of the potential of core programmes and other related initiatives such as intensive French and extended core programmes (Canadian Parents for French, 2004) must also now be actively pursued. The implications for planning and policy in relation to Irish in ordinary primary schools are clear.

[25] Because the pool of proficiency in Irish which exists nationally at any one time (e.g. as defined by census data) is largely a product of the education system, it could be said that the system has a language maintenance role. The reality of course is that the education system is actually producing proficiency anew all the time which is in one sense a language revival function. (See Ó Riagáin, 1997)

Second, exposure to Irish at primary level is probably both more intense, and more focused on speech and conversation, than it is at post-primary level. The informal use of Irish for school and class communication, and the teaching of one or more other subjects partly or wholly through Irish, are more common in primary than in post-primary schools. At post-primary level, the language tends to be restricted to the Irish lesson, in part because teachers at this level are subject specialists. At primary level, every teacher is an Irish teacher. Thus, for the majority of pupils, primary school provides the most sustained exposure to the spoken language that they will ever have. There are other ways too in which these schools are important: they lay the groundwork for further language learning at post-primary and third level and, to the extent that they provide the first introduction to Irish for most children, they can have a considerable influence, negative or positive, on long-term attitudes towards the language. Again, anything which changes these key features of the Irish programme for the worse is a matter of concern in the context of the maintenance of Irish nationally.

The results we have reported, therefore, indicate the existence of an educational challenge which has major implications for national aims in relation to the Irish language. They reinforce the view of An Coimisinéir Teanga (2004) expressed in his *Inaugural Report* that 'there is an urgent need for a comprehensive and impartial review of every aspect of the learning and teaching of Irish in the educational system'.

What caused the decline in achievement in Irish?

The analyses and recommendations that follow do not grow in any simple or direct way out of the survey results we have reported. The survey itself does, of course, provide an assessment of the scale of the problem which exists, as well as a considerable amount of information on some of the sociolinguistic and educational factors which are related to achievement in Irish. In addition, we have information on other factors, including classroom observation data concerning learning conditions and processes, from a number of studies conducted prior to and during the 17-year period under consideration (Harris, 1983, 1984; Harris & Murtagh, 1987, 1988a, 1988b, 1996, 1997, 1999). One clear message emerging from this work is that a range of factors, both inside and outside the school, combine to determine the eventual level of pupil achievement in Irish. But there is no sure way to retrospectively identify the precise set of factors or their order of importance, contributing to the decline in achievement in ordinary schools since the 1980s. The analysis presented below, therefore, is intended to contribute to a wider discussion on the issues rather than to be a definitive statement of causes and remedies.

A central point will be that a combination of negative and challenging factors affecting pupil achievement in Irish in ordinary schools developed in the late 1980s and through the 1990s. But while the combination of factors was unprecedented, most of them are not temporary in nature and must therefore still be dealt with. They include first of all what might be called front-line issues such

as a lack of a suitable method and materials for teaching Irish, the contraction of the core time for Irish, and a decline in teaching through Irish outside the Irish lesson proper. Second, there has been a general feeling of disillusionment among many teachers for some time now, a feeling that they were carrying a disproportionate share of society's responsibility for the Irish language. The fact that during this same period the growth of all-Irish schools began to overshadow the traditional achievements of ordinary schools may have also taken a toll on morale. The present study documents some of the resulting changes in attitude, practice, and perception among teachers - less favourable views on Irish in primary school, a reduction in satisfaction in teaching Irish, a conviction that standards have fallen, and changes in the amount of teaching through Irish. The lack of official responsiveness in relation to some of these emerging problems probably added to the perception among teachers that the leadership and institutional support traditionally given by the Department of Education and Science (DES) in relation to the language was weakening. This problem of responsiveness may in turn have been related to the major structural changes in education inside and outside the DES which occurred during the period. Each of these issues will now be examined in turn.

Unsuitable teaching materials and methods

Central to the decline in achievement is the fact that the audio-visual curriculum and associated teaching materials, originally developed by the DES and used in the vast majority of schools in the period under consideration, were unsuitable. Despite increasing dissatisfaction among teachers going back to the mid-1980s, they were not finally replaced until after the revised curriculum, *Curaclam na Bunscoile* (NCCA, 1999c) was published. Dissatisfaction with the audiovisual *Nuachúrsaí* had focussed on at least three issues over time: the difficulty level of the materials, the dated and unsuitable content of the teaching materials themselves, and the teaching approach or method (audio-visual) involved. All three of these criticisms have been supported by research findings.

For example, the results of national surveys of Irish Listening and Irish Speaking in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Harris, 1984) suggested that the objectives of the courses were too difficult for many pupils and that courses with more modest aspirations might actually produce better results. Later, in classroom observation and materials development work in the 1990s (Harris, 1996; Harris, Ó Néill, Uí Dhufaigh & Ó Súilleabháin, 1996; Harris & Murtagh, 1999) it turned out that the difficulty of the lessons was a major problem for a significant minority of pupils and that pupils more generally found the material and teaching approach 'boring, old-fashioned, and repetitious'. By the mid-1990s, a survey by the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO, 1996) had shown that, of eleven subject areas, Irish was the one causing most concern, with 'practically four out of every five teachers stating that change is urgently required' (p.52). By comparison, mathematics, the area of concern associated with the next largest percentage, was cited by only 30% of teachers. A subsequent INTO report on Irish (1998a, b) argued again that developing teaching materials for a communicative curriculum was an urgent necessity.

It would be facile, however, to suggest that teaching methods and courses, or curriculum in any narrow sense, is or ever was the only problem. If methods and materials were the only factor responsible, then we could reasonably expect that with the introduction of *Curaclam na Bunscoile* and the subsequent provision of communicative materials, the decline would be halted and reversed in time. Certainly, *Curaclam na Bunscoile* is likely to make a considerable difference and it is notable that the teachers of 69.6% of the pupils in this study believed that pupils would enjoy Irish more following the implementation of the new teaching approach. But the strong evidence that a variety of other factors, a number of them discussed below, contribute to pupil achievement makes it extremely unlikely that a change in methods and materials alone will solve the problem. Unfortunately, public discourse on the standard of Irish achieved by schools often focuses almost exclusively on the question of methods and materials, without taking account of the range of other educational and sociolinguistic factors which determine the standard of proficiency produced by a programme [26].

Contraction of the core time devoted to Irish as a subject

Three separate national surveys between 1976 and 1985 showed that the amount of time per week spent on Irish varied from 5.6 to 5.1 hours. Ó Domhnalláin and Ó Gliasáin (1976) in a national survey of sixth-grade teachers in all kinds of primary schools found that an average of about 5.6 hours was spent on the formal teaching of Irish, about 45% of which was devoted to conversational or spoken Irish. In a national survey of second grade teachers in ordinary schools in 1982, the mean number of hours per week spent on Irish was reported as 5.1, about half of that on conversational or spoken Irish (Harris, 1984). In 1985, a national sample of sixth-grade teachers in ordinary schools reported spending just over 5.4 hours per week on average on Irish (Harris & Murtagh, 1988b). In the introduction to *Curaclam na Bunscoile* (NCCA, 1999c), however, the core ('minimum') time for Irish as a second language is specified as 3.5 hours. While there was some newspaper comment at the time to the effect that this represented a reduction in the amount of time for Irish, there seemed to be an implicit general acceptance that time pressure in the curriculum for a number of years previously had already probably reduced the real time for Irish to something like that level. The substantial drop between 1985 and 2002 in core time for Irish, even if it was a gradual process, is very likely to have contributed to a fall in standards in Irish Listening and Irish Speaking.

Time in contact with the language in a school programme has long been known to be a key factor in determining achievement or proficiency in a second language. Other related factors such as intensity (e.g., number of classes per week) and engaged time (time actually used in teaching and learning) are also important (Bloom, 1974; Collins, Halter, Lightbown & Spada, 1999; Curtain, 2000; Johnstone, 2002). As Johnstone points out, 'in all countries "time" is an important factor, but in some it is vitally important where there is very little exposure to the target language in society…' (p.20). The increased number of

[26] Issues of unrealistic expectations and over¬ambitious objectives for second or foreign-language programmes surface in many countries, often expressed in very similar terms. Twenty five years ago, Merrill Swain, an internationally recognised expert in applied linguistics commented: 'The extent to which program outcomes correspond to expectations is the extent to which a program is considered to have succeeded or failed. Thus, it becomes crucially important that expectations be realistic ... Consider, for example, the expectations held by many people about a second-language program in which the target language is taught for short daily periods. In relation to these programs, it is common to hear such statements as: `I took five years of French in high school, and I still can't speak the language', or `My kids have all taken French in school, but none of them can even read a French newspaper, and they never watch French TV.' One might reasonably ask if the fault lies in the program, or in unrealistic expectations of the program held by the parents and learners' (Swain, 1981: 486).

contact hours is fundamentally the reason why immersion (e.g. all-Irish) education so reliably produces high levels of achievement in the language; the number of in-school language-contact hours is very large compared to ordinary schools, and indeed very large even compared to many Gaeltacht schools. Note that the contraction in core time for Irish is a factor which would have greatly affected the overall amount of language contact time in ordinary schools but would not have altered it at all in all-Irish schools. All-Irish schools and many Gaeltacht schools have such substantial amounts of Irish-medium teaching that a reduction in core time for Irish would not really have any meaning. It may be significant in this regard, therefore, that the pattern of decline in performance in Irish Listening and Irish Speaking across school types in the 2002 survey matches the likely effect of language contact hours, since the decline is most pronounced in ordinary schools.

It is important to emphasise that reduction in core time for Irish, irrespective of how it came about, was a greater loss for Irish than was the corresponding reduction in time for other subjects. This is because the use of Irish does not easily extend beyond the Irish slot without the special effort of the teacher. English reading, writing, and mathematics, for example, extend easily, naturally and by necessity into other areas of the curriculum all the time. So, there is a sense in which these subjects continue to be taught, directly or indirectly, for a great part of the day, outside whatever core slots they may have. Pupils will learn new English vocabulary, for example, in the course of studying a range of other topics; mathematics will be required in the science class, and so on. The consequences of reducing core time for these subjects, therefore, cannot be equated with the consequences for Irish. In many schools, the reduction in core time for Irish will have seriously undermined the only foothold the language had in the curriculum.

Finally, in this regard, it may be noted that focus groups of teachers consulted about the implementation of the Irish curriculum mentioned the difficulty of implementing the new approach in the time available (INTO, 2004).

Reduction in teaching through Irish outside the Irish lesson

As pointed out previously (Harris, 1991a, 1992), some of the most valuable features of the teaching of Irish in primary school in the past probably had very little to do with teaching methods as conventionally understood. They relate rather to the second-language character (as opposed to the foreign-language character) of the Irish programme - the tendency to teach Irish largely through Irish, to use Irish to some extent for real communication in class and school, and to use Irish to teach parts of other subjects in some schools. Data from a number of studies, including the present one, show that teaching through Irish is a very powerful factor determining achievement (Harris, 1983; 1984; Harris & Murtagh, 1988a). Other work shows that the proficiency in Irish of pupils of all levels of general academic ability, as measured by a verbal reasoning test, was improved as a result of Irish-medium teaching (Harris & Murtagh, 1988b).

What is important about teaching through Irish is that while only a minority of schools and classes may adopt this approach, that minority within the mainstream population of ordinary schools amounts to a very great absolute number of pupils. If this kind of Irish-medium teaching in ordinary schools had increased during the 1985-2002 period under consideration, it would have gone a considerable way to compensating for the effects on achievement of the decline in core time for Irish described above. It is clear from DES statistics (Table 3.13), however, that what in reality has happened is the opposite - teaching through Irish declined significantly between 1985 and 2002.

Unique role and changing attitudes of teachers

Before examining the issues of changing teacher attitudes during the period 1985-2002 and their implications for achievement in Irish, some mention should be made of the unique role which schools and teachers play in relation to Irish compared to other subjects. Through no fault of schools or teachers, Irish tends to be relatively 'sealed off' within ordinary schools compared to other subjects. Pupils have little or no interactive contact with the spoken language outside school. The result is that while they ostensibly learn to speak Irish in school in order to use it in their everyday lives, they know that the reality is that there are very few occasions outside school (particularly involving their peers) where there might be either a real need, or even an opportunity, to speak it. The problems which this presents for teachers and schools are set out in some detail by Harris *et al*. (1996a,b) and Harris (2005). For one thing, it is more difficult for both teachers and pupils to identify an immediate goal or motivation outside school for learning to speak the language in the classroom. Even within schools, it is very easy for Irish to become sealed off within the Irish slot in ways that other subjects do not.

The other side of the isolation of schools in relation to Irish concerns parents. Data presented in Chapter 7 indicate the tendency of many parents to adopt a hands-off attitude to Irish. It is a subject which is left largely to the school. We have documented in Chapter 6 and 7 that the great majority of parents seldom or never speak Irish to their child, tend to praise achievements in Irish (particularly spoken Irish) much less often than they praise achievements in other subjects, and leave it up to the children to develop their own attitude to Irish. It is not that parents are unconcerned about their children's progress or that the wider public, including parents, are not concerned about the Irish language. Data in the present study show parents are just as keen as ever that their children would learn Irish and, in the majority of cases, believe the school is doing everything possible to ensure that that is achieved. It is just that for personal and historical reasons many parents are not engaged with Irish, or with their children's learning it, in the same way as they are engaged with other subjects.

One of the consequences of this is that Irish depends on the attitudes, efforts, and commitment of individual schools and teachers in a way that other subjects do not. It is difficult to imagine teachers having personal attitudes to subjects such as mathematics or English that would be related to their day-to-day work in these subject areas in the way their attitude to Irish would affect their work. It will be

recalled that research in the 1980s showed, for example, that of eight factors which might have determined teachers' emphasis on Irish, more teachers said it was their own attitudes, rather than any of the other seven factors, which primarily determined the time and emphasis given to Irish. In one limited sense, this state of affairs - the centrality of teacher attitudes and contribution - has been very much to the advantage of Irish in the past. This is because, as shown in Chapter 7, teachers have more positive attitudes to Irish than parents and the general population. The Committee on Irish Language Attitudes Research survey (CLAR, 1975) and the INTO (1985a) survey also showed that in the 1970s and 1980s teachers were 'more supportive of Irish, more proficient in the language and more likely to use Irish than the general population' (Ó Riagáin, 1986, p.13). At that time also, substantial majorities of teachers were enthusiastic about teaching Irish and said their attitudes to teaching it were as favourable as when they began their careers or that their attitudes had become more favourable.

But the other side of this coin is that because the emphasis on Irish in school depends so much on the drive and commitment of individual teachers, the consequences can be very great indeed if teachers' attitudes, motivation, self-esteem, or professional satisfaction in teaching Irish decline. Leaving aside for a moment the causes, our results now show that teacher attitudes have begun to change since the mid-1980s. There was a significant decrease between 1985 and 2002, from 80.3% to 55.4%, in the percentage of pupils whose teachers derived satisfaction from teaching Irish. There were also significant declines in the percentage whose attitude to Irish being taught in primary school was favourable, and a significant increase in the percentage who felt that less time should be spent on Irish. We also found that for many teachers their own outlook was no longer the key factor determining the emphasis they placed on Irish. In other words, the reservoir of positive attitudes and motivation which teachers possess is no longer being harnessed in quite the same way to the benefit of pupil achievement in Irish. A particular concern here, of course, must be that these negative changes may represent a continuing trend. It is notable, however, that despite the significant decline in the percentage of pupils whose teachers had favourable attitudes to Irish being taught in primary school, the percentage still remains quite high. To that extent, the basis for renewal is there, as long as there is a positive, constructive response.

Even in the mid-1980s, 81% of teachers felt the results obtained in teaching Irish did not reflect the amount of time spent teaching Irish. Those who had become less favourable about teaching Irish cited the syllabus, the position of Irish in Irish society, the lack of pupil motivation and the lack of parental support (INTO, 1985a, 1998b). As well as the practical difficulties presented by a lack of materials, the failure to respond adequately to the calls for resources and materials may have been interpreted as a falling off in commitment to Irish at an official level.

Growth in all-Irish schools

We have already disposed in Chapter 3 of one hypothesis about the effect of the growth in all-Irish schools. This is the possibility that the new all-Irish schools

might have taken away a disproportionate number of high-Irish-potential pupils from ordinary schools, thereby causing the decline in achievement in the latter schools. The possibility is suggested by the fact, as our data show, that all-Irish parents tend to have higher levels of ability in Irish, and to speak Irish more often with their children, than parents in ordinary schools. In addition, our results show that in *both* ordinary and all-Irish schools, variations in parental ability and use are associated with significant differences in achievement in Irish (Chapters 6 and 7). We tested the possibility that the decline in Irish achievement in ordinary schools might be due to the loss of these pupils to all-Irish schools by hypothetically 'relocating'[27] them (with their 'all-Irish' level of achievement) in ordinary schools. As we showed in Chapter 3, this relocation made very little difference to the scale of the decline in achievement in Irish in ordinary schools which was observed. In other words, the hypothesis that the decline in ordinary school achievement is directly due to the loss of high-Irish-potential pupils to all-Irish schools is implausible.

A somewhat similar issue about the consequences of the growth of all-Irish schools arises in relation to the Irish proficiency and attitude profile of teachers in these schools. As has already been shown in Chapter 7, teachers in all-Irish schools have more favourable attitudes to Irish, and considerably higher levels of self-assessed ability to speak Irish, than teachers in ordinary schools. While 24.8% of pupils in ordinary schools had teachers who reported their standard of spoken Irish as 'weak second language speaker', no pupil in an all-Irish school had a teacher who placed him or herself in this category. Given the rapid growth in all-Irish schools in the period between 1985 and 2002, it is clear that teachers with a particular interest or speaking ability in Irish disproportionately took up posts in these schools. While this factor almost certainly had some effect on achievement in ordinary schools, our analysis shows that it could not have been anything like large enough to explain the scale of the decline in pupil achievement which was actually observed in our data.

Apart from the actual movement of particular pupils or teachers from one kind of school to another, however, there are other more indirect ways in which the growth in all-Irish schools might inadvertently have had a negative effect. For example, the absence of high-Irish-potential pupils from ordinary schools could be having a negative multiplier effect by changing the dynamics of classrooms and teaching. In a classroom observation study carried out by Harris and Murtagh (1997), for example, it was found that pupils with high levels of achievement in spoken Irish spoke individually in class almost twice as often as pupils with lower levels of Irish and that they were more attentive even when silent. Harris and Murtagh argued that in allowing or nominating higher-Irish-ability pupils to speak more often in whole-class teaching situations, teachers were most likely trying to achieve an optimum balance between a range of concerns: not slowing the class down too much, ensuring that there was a high proportion of successful (correct) public exchanges in Irish in order to provide a good language model for pupils in general, and so on. Teachers may also be trying to take account of the discomfort for weaker pupils of being nominated to speak in situations where their answer, or failure to answer, will expose them to embarrassment. In any

[27] This relocation exercise should also take account of differences in pupil achievement between all-Irish and ordinary schools which are related to non-linguistic variables such as parents' level of education and whether or not they had a medical card.

event, it is clear that the absence of such high-Irish-achievement pupils, or their presence in smaller numbers, removes a certain kind of vitality, stimulus and resource from the Irish class in ordinary schools. Their absence also deprives the teacher, of course, of one distinctive kind of pedagogic achievement - the experience of helping pupils to develop high levels of proficiency in the language.

Another aspect to the growth of all-Irish schools is the possibility that they have usurped the leadership role which some ordinary schools had enjoyed previously, particularly those ordinary schools which operated an 'extended' programme in which some Irish-medium teaching outside the Irish class proper was conducted. When all-Irish schools were very small in numbers in the early 1980s, their success could not really overshadow the achievements of ordinary schools. But with their growth and more visible presence around the country in recent years, teachers in ordinary schools may sometimes have felt that a certain kind of leadership in relation to Irish had passed to these new schools. In most ordinary schools, where the emphasis on Irish depends on the commitment and interest of the individual teacher, issues of professional esteem and satisfaction are more important than they are in the case of other school subjects. A central aspect of the reward of the job must be the teacher's perception that he or she is operating in a context, and with the kinds of supports, which allow a worthwhile level of pupil proficiency in Irish to be achieved. The growth of all-Irish schools may have redefined some of these perceptions. If this is true, it highlights the need to find practical ways to affirm the crucial role of ordinary schools in relation to the Irish language generally and to maximise the potential of such schools to produce levels of achievement in Irish which teachers themselves consider worthwhile and which are commensurate with the efforts they have expended.

None of this of course detracts from the signal achievements of all-Irish schools themselves or questions the value of further growth in all-Irish education. The issue is simply to assess, as realistically as possible, the indirect consequences for ordinary schools and to consider how any unintended negative effects might be addressed.

Institutional responsiveness: Issues of speed, scope and leadership

It would not be sensible in the context of the results we have presented to ignore issues of official or institutional responsiveness to problems in the teaching and learning of Irish which developed in the late 1980s and 1990s. Arguably, responsibility for the rapid identification of emerging system-wide problems in primary education and for the formulation of a response to them rests more heavily on official institutions in the case of Irish than it would in the case of other school subjects. If substantial declines in standards in mathematics or English reading had occurred in the period under consideration, for example, they would probably have been noticed, and caused concern among parents, much more quickly than they did in the case of Irish. Thus, pressure to initiate remedial action would have been felt sooner.

We have already discussed the most obvious problem of official responsiveness during the period 1985-2002 - the delay in providing a new curriculum and

materials for Irish, and the probable secondary effects on teacher attitudes. But another crucial aspect of official responsiveness has been that its scope has been too narrowly defined. Instead it should have covered the full set of educational and language planning issues relevant to the decline in pupil achievement, including the contribution of factors such as the time pressure on Irish, the decline in teaching through Irish, the relative lack of parental engagement with Irish in school, the deterioration in teacher satisfaction in teaching Irish, and even the lack of support for Irish outside the school.

For example, the lack of practical parental engagement and support in relation to Irish, and the relative isolation of schools in relation to the language more generally, is one of the factors which is currently taking a toll on teachers' motivation. Up to now, the implicit assumption was that problems such as these were not strictly educational or, even if they were, that they were not amenable to intervention in the case of Irish. The re-orientation now needed is to enlarge the definition of what is amenable to intervention just as, in the case of educational disadvantage for example, the definition of possible official action was gradually expanded. One of the tasks to be attempted, for example, is to find ways of accommodating the needs and perspectives of the two key stakeholders whose contribution to developing proficiency in Irish is crucial, teachers and parents. Fortunately, the ultimate objective of parents and teachers - the achievement of pupil proficiency in Irish - is not in dispute. Research may have a role to play in this area and we return later in the chapter to a research and development project which was successful promoting greater involvement (Harris & Murtagh, 1999).

In one sense, the change being argued for here simply amounts to the DES acknowledging more explicitly, and pursuing more fully, the dual educational and language-maintenance and language-planning role it already has. It is recognised both internationally and in Ireland that the Irish language planning effort rests to a unique degree on the educational system (Ó Riagáin, 1997). Thus, the DES is in effect already at the centre of the national language planning and language maintenance effort. This is not to suggest for a moment that existing difficulties can be solved quickly or easily or that official action alone is sufficient. But a change in perspective about the nature and scope of official responsiveness would open up new possibilities for affirmative action.

Language education policy and changing educational structures

Another aspect of official responsiveness which must be considered is whether the major changes in educational administration nationally which took place in the 1980s and 1990s are connected in some way to the decline in achievement. In 1985, both the Irish curriculum and the Irish conversation courses which were then in use had been developed under the auspices of the DES. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment developed the present curriculum, published in 1999. While the Department in the mid-1990s funded a project to develop prototype communicative materials and recommendations for the new courses for teaching Irish at primary level (Harris et al 1996 a, b), it was unclear for a considerable time exactly what role the Department would have in relation

to the production or financing of new teaching materials once the curriculum was in place. Subsequently, new Irish courses for ordinary schools were produced by the commercial publishers and the Department set up a project (*Scéim na nDearthóirí*) in which a group of teachers began work on the development of Irish materials for Gaeltacht and Irish-medium schools.

During this same period, the school inspectorate was radically reorganised as part of a major restructuring and re-examination of roles within the DES which had originated in the Strategic Management Initiative (Delivering Better Government: Strategic Management Initiative, 1996). The Government decision in 2001 to implement the Cromien Report (Department of Education and Science, 2000) affirmed this process and charted a path of accelerating change within the Department in which the emphasis would switch from the day to day administration of the education system to a concern with core issues such as policy formulation, forward planning, accountability, quality control, and monitoring and evaluation of the system. Around this time also a new statutory body, an *Chomhairle Um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta*, was assigned a range of important new functions in relation to Irish in education including the provision of materials in Irish. This body recently took over responsibility for *Scéim na nDearthóirí*.

Without in any way questioning the merits of these structural and institutional changes, or their positive impact on education generally, it is worthwhile considering whether in every respect they were positive for Irish. Did the advantages accruing to Irish, such as the broader consultative process by which the curriculum was developed, involving a greater range of stakeholders, compensate for the loss of the protection which the language had enjoyed under the old arrangements? As long as Irish was installed in the key decision-making environment of the DES, the language was guaranteed a high priority and enjoyed relatively little curricular competition. As we argued earlier, this kind of official and institutional support is crucial for Irish. The location of day-to-day responsibility for all aspects of the language within the DES and the inspectorate - both as a school subject and as the national language - ensured that emerging problems were detected early, the location of responsibility for action was clear, decisions on a response could be taken quickly and the connections between the educational and language-maintenance aspects of problems were obvious. Another advantage of the day-to-day, hands-on responsibility which the DES had for Irish during this period was that it provided a more visible official commitment and leadership in relation to the language, communicating in a direct way where ownership of, and responsibility for, the various problems and issues ultimately lay. The new, more delegated arrangements which came into operation during the late 1980s and 1990s, whatever their other merits, were not as conducive to prompt, co-ordinated action at a national level. This was particularly problematical during a period when, it now appears in retrospect, urgent action was required.

This is not to argue for turning the clock back on educational progress and structural reform, but to urge a comparison of the support system for Irish which

existed in the 1970s and 1980s with that now in place in the new institutional environment of 2006. One of the key problems during this period of transition to the more open, delegated, flexible and specialised system which we now have, is that there was not a detailed policy framework within which the effectiveness of these new arrangements from the point of view of Irish could be assessed. Such a framework, setting out goals, processes and structures, and covering both language maintenance and educational dimensions of the question, would have ensured greater continuity and coherence of effort in the area. Policy articulation, partnership and an agreed agenda for action would seem to be some of the key elements needed to replace the kind of centralised and rigid system which once supported Irish. While the DES continues to be ultimately responsible and accountable for Irish under the new arrangements, a detailed policy on Irish in education would help to define more clearly the different roles of the DES and the other agencies responsible for the language and help to ensure that finance and planning was adequate to the task in hand. It is particularly important that it would be clear how proactive a role it is intended that the DES itself should have in future in the early detection of, and the formulation of a response to, developing problems relating to Irish.

Recommendations

A long-term exercise in educational and language planning

An adequate response to the problems of declining pupil achievement levels and growing disenchantment among teachers can be built on the analysis just presented. The central issue is to acknowledge the complexity of the problem and to enlarge our existing definition of it. The second major requirement is to develop an adequate plan of action which is equal to the range of difficulties identified in the present study and in previous research.

We propose that the teaching and learning of Irish in primary school should become the subject of a long-term exercise in educational and language planning, covering not just Irish as a subject but the wider use of Irish in school and the complex interaction between learning Irish and the supports available in the home and in the community. This exercise would involve research, development and creative work designed to provide solutions to the challenges presented by the real sociolinguistic situation in which schools operate. It would need to take account both of the educational aspects of the issue and the national aim of promoting bilingualism and the wider use of Irish. Broad-based plans and initiatives of this general kind are currently being implemented in countries such as Wales (Edwards, 2005) and Canada (Government of Canada, 2003).

While the present report concerns Irish at primary level, it is clear that a language planning exercise of the kind proposed would be much more effective if it embraced all educational levels. Its effectiveness would be further enhanced if explicit political agreement at a national level was secured in advance in relation to its goals and implementation processes (as was done in the case of the Government of Canada's *Action Plan for Official Languages*). While the legal and

constitutional framework for promoting Irish in the education system already exists, there is always a substantial grey area concerning what is desirable or possible in terms of official action. This often makes it difficult for government departments and statutory bodies to act with sufficient decisiveness in formulating and implementing the necessary new initiatives. The process of deliberating on a national plan, and securing political agreement for its goals and implementation, however, would bring great clarity and energy to the whole enterprise. It would inform public opinion on the scale of the task to be carried out and the measures needed to achieve success.

The initial practical steps in the planning exercise would involve taking a proactive approach - establishing what problems and possibilities exist in relation to the teaching and learning of Irish in primary school; finding out what teachers, parents and pupils desire in relation to Irish; what initiatives teachers and parents would support; and what teachers require in the way of materials. This could be done in part through a consultative process described below, by establishing pilot schemes, and by commissioning research to investigate new ways of responding to the problems identified. While there have been some negative changes that would now be difficult to reverse (e.g. the reduction in core time for Irish which has already taken place), the aim should be to compensate for these by, for example, increasing the amount of Irish medium teaching, developing parent initiatives and programmes, and providing opportunities for teachers to improve their Irish. Some proposals in relation to the three areas just mentioned are developed below. Suggestions will also be made about monitoring, evaluation, and test development.

Teaching content/subjects through Irish

Any agenda for action must have as goals the affirmation of the traditional role of ordinary schools in relation to Irish and the identification of new ways of supporting them so that, as a group, they can at least reach the levels of achievement in Irish they did in the past. In doing this, it will have to be acknowledged that there may be quite a range in how ambitious different schools may choose to be in relation to Irish. We should aim for the maximum Irish programme that each school, and each set of parents, is willing to implement. Where the teacher's own outlook and motivation make it possible to place a special emphasis on Irish in a particular school, and where local parental attitudes permit it, there should be easy access to the support, structures, training and materials to capitalise on that potential and to deliver that more ambitious programme.

There is clearly a considerable amount of unused potential of this kind at present. The survey reported here showed that 24% of parents in schools that presently do not teach any subject through Irish would support the teaching of one or two subjects through Irish. Even if only a small minority of children who are currently learning Irish as a core subject in ordinary schools were to participate in an 'extended' programme of this kind (or a more ambitious partial or early immersion programme discussed below) the overall effect on pupil proficiency nationally could be considerable. This is simply because of the absolute number

of children who would be involved. Equally, of course, it must be frankly acknowledged that many teachers and parents will not be interested in this kind of programme at all. In these cases other approaches to support the enterprise of developing pupil achievement in Irish will have to be sought.

Two broad approaches to the goal of extending the amount of teaching through Irish should be developed:

a) promoting the teaching of one or two subjects, or parts of subjects, through Irish in ordinary schools - an *extended core programme*.
b) developing *intermediate forms of immersion education*, less ambitious than the full-immersion approach of all-Irish schools but more ambitious than a subject-only or extended programme.

These intermediate programmes are relatively common elsewhere (see Swain & Johnson, 1997) and produce improvements in second language achievement which reflect the additional hours of real communicative contact with the language. One of the key advantages of these programmes, of course, is that they achieve these additional contact hours without taking time away from other school subjects. These approaches have also now become part of a larger educational movement operating under the general umbrella of *content and language integrated learning* (Marsh, 2002) which is actively supported by the Council of Europe's Language Policy Division.

An extended core Irish programme

Within this option there are two somewhat different approaches. One involves providing ordinary schools with the possibility (e.g., by providing materials, training or support) of teaching through Irish on an informal basis, without offering a specific 'extended' programme. Many teachers may prefer to start off that way. As the project described below showed, however, perceptions of what is possible often change once the new approach is tried out. The alternative is to promote an extended programme in a more explicit way, with the school indicating that it is offering such a programme and seeking parental support.

A major research-and-development project on teaching Science and Art in Irish to pupils in third and fourth classes in ordinary schools in recent years explored the possibilities of this approach (Harris & MacGiollabhuí, 1998a,b,c; Harris & Murtagh, 1999). A key finding was that there were two requirements to make teaching through Irish a viable and attractive option: (a) the development of specially tailored materials and (b) the provision of workshops or training for teachers. The DES had a policy for many years of generally encouraging teaching through Irish. Prior to this research and development project, however, materials in Irish, specifically geared to the linguistic needs of pupils in *ordinary schools*, and to the requirements of teachers who were embarking on Irish-medium teaching for the first time, had never been made available. The teachers who participated in the project came from a wide variety of ordinary schools, including schools in disadvantaged areas. The vast majority had no previous experience in teaching through Irish and none had taught Science before.

Each lesson in the teacher's manual contained a number of elements, including a list of the main vocabulary items involved (Irish and English), a list of informal phrases or idioms that might be useful to the teacher during the lesson, an outline of the main steps in the lesson (usually illustrated) and a full script for the teacher. The aim was to anticipate some of the difficulties which would be presented by the limited linguistic ability of pupils, and to suggest possible ways around these difficulties. The prepared material, which was intended to be used and adapted by the teachers as they saw fit, freed them from some of the minute-by-minute decisions about the lesson to be taught. This allowed them to attend more closely to classroom dynamics and to devote more of their creative energy to responding to the needs of pupils who were learning through Irish for the first time.

One of the findings of the study which has implications for developing this approach more generally was that the views of many participating teachers on how difficult it would be to teach through Irish did change over time: they became more positive and enthusiastic about it as their experience increased. But without the peer support and validation which a comprehensive scheme of this kind provides - where teachers can share their experiences in tackling a new pedagogic challenge - individual teachers acting alone may well feel that it is too difficult to begin teaching through Irish. One of the more obvious initiatives which could be undertaken in the near future, therefore, would be to extend this approach to other subject areas and grade levels and to provide workshops as part of a comprehensive pilot scheme, so that teaching through Irish in ordinary schools can become a more real and viable option.

Intermediate Irish immersion programmes

To make really substantial improvements in pupil proficiency in Irish at primary level nationally, however, it would be necessary to increase the amount of Irish medium teaching (and the number of language contact hours) more substantially. There have been a number of previous calls for a range of bilingual or intermediate immersion programmes of this kind for Irish (Harris, 1984; Harris & Murtagh, 1999; Mac Mathúna, 1985). These intermediate programmes would be more ambitious than Irish-as-a-subject or extended-Irish programmes but less ambitious than the total immersion all-Irish programmes. They vary from full to partial immersion at different grades in primary school and are often defined by the grades at which the full immersion component is implemented. Among the possibilities are *early immersion, mid immersion, late immersion* and *partial immersion*. Early immersion might consist of full Irish immersion up to, say, the end of third or fourth class, then reducing eventually to partial immersion (50% Irish medium) or perhaps to just the regular English medium programme by sixth grade. Mid or late immersion could consist of Irish as a subject only (or 50% Irish medium) up to third grade, then changing to full Irish immersion for the remainder. Partial immersion involves 50% Irish medium instruction all the way through primary school.

Considerable planning, materials preparation and teacher training would be necessary, however, to develop these possibilities into real programme options.

The DES itself would have to take the initiative in promoting these new programmes since there is no group similar to Gaelscoileanna specifically promoting and setting up intermediate immersion programmes at present. It would also require a team of Project Leaders to promote the option among teachers and schools and to manage the development of materials. A link with researchers or applied linguists during the period when the programmes were being developed for the first time would also be important. The piloting of these intermediate immersion options in ordinary schools might also contribute to, and benefit from, the experience of Gaeltacht schools where the curriculum must often accommodate the needs of native speakers of Irish and English in the same classroom. The development of these programme might also require a review of the existing Irish curriculum in order to accommodate them.

If this approach were adopted, there also might be some merit in considering the creation of at least a loose linking structure for existing expert teacher groups already dealing with language in primary school. The expert groups are (i) the proposed new group to develop intermediate immersion programmes (ii) *Scéim na nDearthóiri* teachers who are engaged in materials production (iii) *Na Cuiditheoirí* who are providing support at the school and teacher level and (iv) the Project Leaders of the Modern Language in Primary School Initiative based in the Kildare Education Centre who combine elements of school/teacher support, materials production, inservice training and the general promotion of modern languages in primary schools. Since some aspects of the roles and tasks of these groups overlap at the level of skills and knowledge (e.g., teacher support by school visits, materials development, inservice training and promotion of new teaching approaches or programme options), they are likely to benefit from sharing experiences and expertise.

The existence of an overall policy statement on Irish in education would be critical if intermediate forms of immersion education were to be vigorously promoted, since the desirability of the continued growth of the total or full immersion approach of the existing *all-Irish* schools would have to be clearly affirmed and supported. Intermediate immersion programmes should not be promoted in a way which would undermine the all-Irish approach.

Parental involvement and the isolation of schools in relation to Irish

A concerted attempt should be made to identify strategies to bridge that gap between home and school and to reduce the relative isolation in which teachers in ordinary schools work in developing pupil proficiency in Irish. Many of the forms of parental support which are lacking (see Chapter 7, and Harris & Murtagh, 1999) do not depend in any direct way on the parents' ability in Irish as such, and the likelihood is that other factors are responsible for their reluctance - doubts about the utility and importance of Irish, lack of awareness of the effect of not supporting the educational enterprise of learning Irish, or lack of knowledge of how best to help their children with Irish. Parents need to be alerted to the specific educational consequences for their own child of providing only lukewarm support, or actually withholding approval altogether, for the process of learning Irish. Having in principle committed themselves to the notion

of their children learning Irish, to then remain neutral about the value and success of the enterprise, and to communicate this hands-off stance to children, is to greatly increase the chance of the enterprise failing.

We are proposing, therefore, a series of research and development projects which, working jointly with parents and teachers, would explore ways of bringing parents closer to what happens in the Irish class. Involvement in the learning of spoken Irish, the core of the Irish lesson, is particularly important and presents special difficulties. Harris and Murtagh (1999) argue that what is needed in the case of spoken Irish are occasional home-based tasks and activities which serve one or more of the following functions: informing parents about how Irish is taught and how much the child has learned; giving the child a chance to shine in front of the parents, to demonstrate his or her competence in speaking Irish; providing occasions for parents to recognise and praise the child's achievements in learning Irish; and encouraging parents to become more directly involved in the child's learning of Irish.

An example of the kind of initiative needed is provided by a pilot project carried out some years ago that produced promising results (Harris & Ó Cathalláin, 1999). The pilot materials were subsequently developed into a larger programme (Harris & Ní Fhearghail, 2003). The original pilot project involved the production of a booklet for parents and the development of communicative lesson units which anticipated and attempted to facilitate the involvement of parents at home. A number of schools representing a range of social and educational circumstances participated. Basically, the project required pupils to carry out a simple but interesting task at home which briefly involved the parents' participation and which was linked to the Irish lesson. Pictorial assistance was provided on all written Irish material brought home by the child in order to simplify the task. Even in cases where the exchanges with parents at home took place in English, the result was considered satisfactory in that it was successful in establishing that crucial direct parental link with activities taking place in the Irish class at school. One example of the kind of home-based tasks used is a simple one or two-question 'survey' in Irish: e.g. which of two television programmes the parents preferred. Other tasks involved the pupil inventing, in consultation with the parents, a name in Irish for their own home; collecting information from parents or grandparents about place names associated with the latter's upbringing; the pupil and parents choosing a photograph of the child as an infant to be later used in a guessing game at school in which pupils tried to link classmates to each photograph. While not all parents respond to initiatives such as these, there is evidence that many do and that there are real benefits in terms of pupil motivation.

Support for teachers

Teachers represent a very important resource for Irish in a number of ways - their own above-average ability in Irish, their personal commitment to the language, and their professional role in teaching it. Their full involvement in defining needs, approaches and initiatives are central, therefore, to any programme for renewal.

Two broad issues relating to teachers and the teaching of Irish at primary level need to be examined. The one which we have mainly focussed on in this chapter concerns issues such as satisfaction in teaching Irish, affirmation of the role of ordinary primary schools in developing proficiency in Irish, and creating the kinds of programmes, support and materials which will allow a worthwhile level of pupil proficiency to be developed. Among the goals for the future are:

a) to achieve a better balance between the effort which teachers in ordinary schools put into teaching Irish and the level of success achieved in the classroom;
b) to ensure that responsibility for promoting the language is more widely and more equally shared;
c) to give more generous recognition to teachers' efforts and achievements in relation to Irish ordinary schools;
d) to provide adequate training and support for teachers involved in new initiatives relating to Irish.

The second issue relates to teachers' own competence in Irish, their original language education, and opportunities for further training, improving proficiency, and using the Irish they already have. Data presented in Chapter 7 relating to teachers' own assessment of their speaking proficiency, opportunities to practice their Irish, and willingness to take a course to improve their proficiency point to the existence of significant needs and opportunities. In relation to initial teacher training also, it is notable that the EU recommends that teacher trainees should spend a substantial period in the heartland of the target language they will eventually teach (Commission of the European Communities, 2003).

Monitoring, evaluation and test development

The results reported here, as well as the comparable surveys conducted in the late 1970s and 1980s, demonstrate the importance of continued programme evaluation and monitoring at the system level in the case of Irish, so that emerging problems are detected early. Future work might usefully alternate every few years between more in-depth studies of teaching and learning processes and surveys based on large representative samples such as the one conducted here.

Now that *Curaclam na Bunscoile* is being implemented, it is important that it would be thoroughly evaluated on an ongoing basis across a range of schools. Communicative language teaching is not based on a unitary theory or method but rather on a 'fluid and changing body of ideas' (Mitchell, 1994) which exists in weak and strong versions. Teachers vary, for example, in the extent to which they adopt various communicative activities and principles. In any event, classroom second-language acquisition research is constantly leading to new developments in pedagogy and the use of materials.

It is critical to establish over time how the curriculum is being implemented, what classroom learning processes are being promoted, how satisfactory teachers and pupils find the materials and recommended activities, and how effective the new programme is in developing communicative proficiency in the language. New materials should be developed on an ongoing basis and promising developments such as the European Language Portfolio (Council of Europe, 2004a; Little 2003; Little & Perclova, 2001) should be adopted more widely and their contribution evaluated.

For future surveys it will be necessary to undertake substantial revisions of existing tests, especially the Irish Listening and Irish Speaking tests, while retaining a sufficient number of items to allow for comparisons with the 2002 survey. Ideally, these instruments should allow us to place pupils with widely varying levels of proficiency in Irish on a single scale, so that a coherent and fine-grained picture of achievement in Irish in ordinary, all-Irish and Gaeltacht schools can be provided. It would be very desirable to locate this test development work within the Common European Framework (CEF) for language teaching and testing which is rapidly becoming the standard reference system in this area (Council of Europe, 2001; Trim, 2002). The gradual harmonisation and calibration of new and existing scales for the assessment of language in relation to the CEF is now proceeding in many countries. This means that if we were to use the same framework in developing new scales for Irish, it would greatly enhance our ability to participate in the Europe-wide comparative national assessments of second language learning which now seem increasingly likely to take place. In principle, the data generated by such international assessments could provide a much larger interpretative context within which success in teaching and learning Irish could be assessed [28].

Policy development and implementation

The main elements of policy development and implementation recommended here would appear to be a matter for the DES: the definition of what needs to be done, scrutiny of the DES's role vis a vis other bodies in relation to Irish, the development of a language education policy for Irish, the assembly of a plan of action relating to the teaching and learning of the language in primary schools and implementation of that plan. There would seem to be merit also, in the short to medium term, in having a committee or group within the DES engaged directly with these questions. This would have the effect of locating decision-making about Irish once again at the high level it traditionally enjoyed.

The fact that policy is co-ordinated by the DES, of course, need not prevent it from adopting a broad-based partnership and inter-agency approach, with teachers at its centre. In this context, it should be noted also that the DES has already invited the Council of Europe to conduct a *Language Education Policy Profile* for Ireland (Beacco & Byram, 2003; Council of Europe, 2004b). The process, which involves the preparation of a Country Report by the DES, will

[28] The information obtained from national assessments might be augmented in a useful way if teachers also had access to a wider range of standardised tests and other instruments for monitoring the learning of Irish at class and school level. The recent publication of *Próifílí measúnachta don Ghaeilge sna scoileanna Gaeltachta agus scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge* (Ó Siaghail & Déiseach, 2004) advances this possibility considerably.

obviously contribute significantly to the development of policy. The Council of Europe exercise, however, is not a substitute for the much more detailed examination of the whole range of issues related to Irish, and particularly Irish in primary schools, which is now needed. The Country Report prepared in present circumstances will be limited by the existing level of research and thinking in this area. The point is that these need to be expanded considerably.

There are a number of other specific initiatives which might be considered in responding to the results of the present study. One possibility would be to initiate a consultative process which, over a period of time, would include all primary schools in the country, focussing on their experiences of teaching Irish in recent years, and perhaps using a summary of the results reported here as one point of departure. A very useful consultative process of this kind took place after the publication of the original report on the first three national surveys on Irish in primary schools in the early 1980s (Harris, 1984). It would also be worth examining the value of having a group of teachers working with applied linguists or other specialists in developing some of the initiatives which will be needed.

Any successful plan which emerges from this process of reflection and consultation will have to have a strong element of affirmative action. Ultimately, the issue is whether we consider Irish important enough to give it the kind of attention at the highest level in the educational system that we give other major educational challenges, such as disadvantage or equality of access to third-level education. These are problems which, like many aspects of the teaching and learning of Irish, have a strong social dimension outside the school. In responding to such dilemmas, the attitude adopted in recent times has quite rightly been that if initial efforts or plans do not produce the desired result, other, better approaches, must be tried. Responses are no longer limited to narrow, once-off initiatives. New ways of solving major educational and social problems are constantly being tried, and always with the expectation that success can ultimately be achieved. The challenges presented by Irish in primary schools now require a strategic response which is distinguished by the same urgency, commitment, and sustained action.

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