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Extra-curricular language learning: The case of the Irish language summer colleges (1904–2023)

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Abstract

Irish language summer colleges have been in existence for 120 years; they are usually based in Irish-speaking areas, those in attendance most often reside with local Irish-speaking families, and their aim is to provide an immersive language experience. The colleges were established at a time when the Irish language was not widely taught within the educational system; they would later serve as an extra-curricular supplement to the Irish language within the educational system. While the colleges initially attracted school teachers and scholars, they have attracted teenagers for the most part from the 1960s onwards.

The colleges yield great insight into the complex relationship that Irish people have with the Irish language, and yet, very little research has been undertaken on any aspect of these Irish colleges. This essay will provide an overview of the history of the Irish language summer colleges, and will show how these colleges are interwoven with Ireland's modern history.

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Illustrative Map

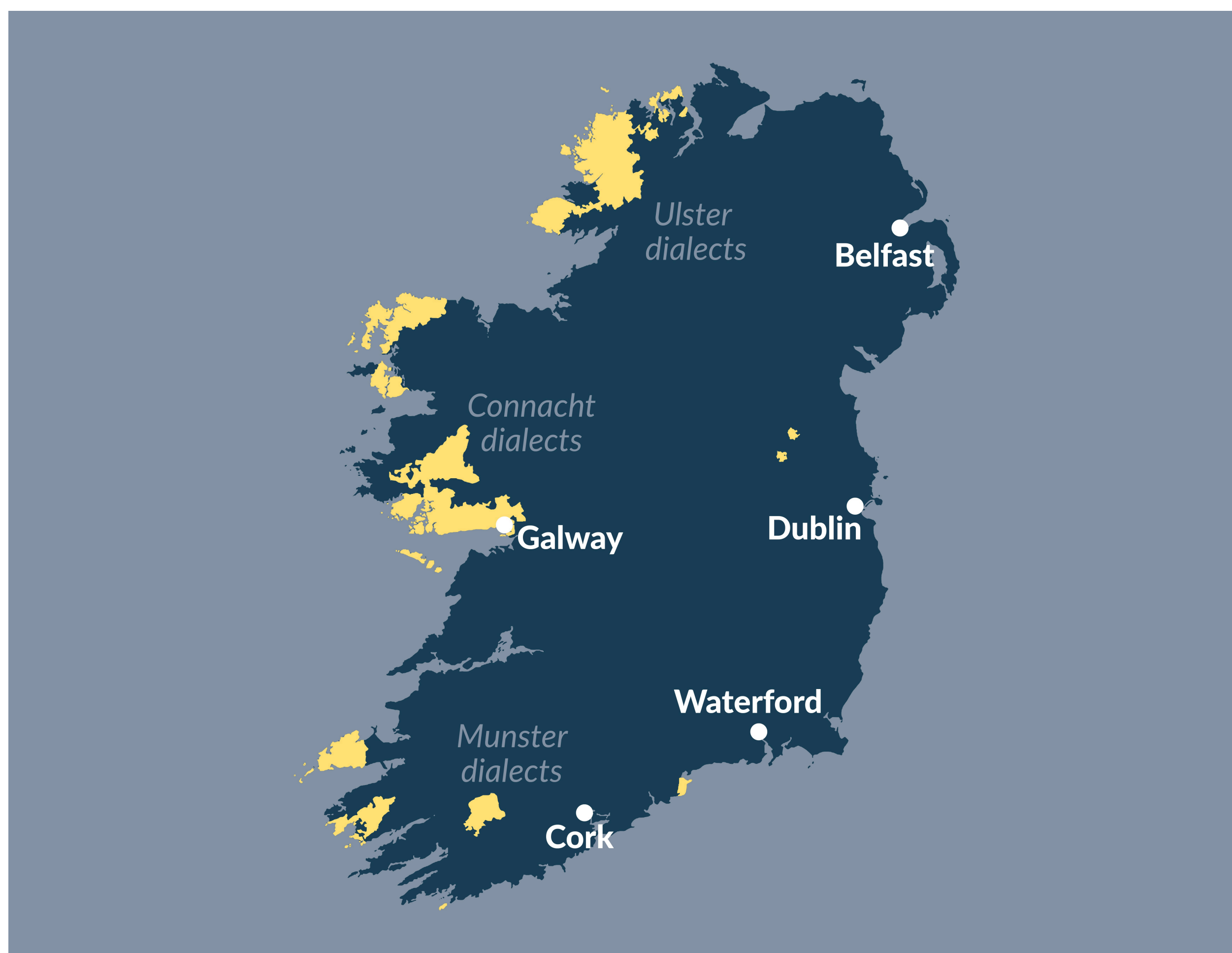

Fig. 0: Map of Ireland with Gaeltacht areas highlighted (Ó Murchadha 2021)

1. Introduction

In 1922, the year in which the Irish Free State was established, the Irish language was designated a core subject within the national or primary school curriculum. This governmental decision marked a major change from the national system of education implemented by the British government in 1831, in which the Irish language was excluded from the school curriculum. In practical terms, the new status bestowed upon the Irish language in 1922 meant that all national school teachers, along with school inspectors, and lecturers in the teacher training colleges, were obliged to learn the Irish language very quickly – if they had no previous knowledge of the language – so as to be able to teach the language to the almost half a million children who attended national school. In order to gain a knowledge of the Irish language, the Department of Education sent the national school teachers to Irish language summer colleges in Irish-speaking areas, the aim of which was to provide an immersive language and cultural experience. These colleges had multiplied in number throughout Ireland since the first such college was established in 1904, at the height of the Irish language revivalist movement. The colleges were open to all age groups, from young children to older adults, and catered for all levels of language learning. Those in attendance usually stayed with local Irish-speaking families, who helped with the immersive linguistic experience. In the 1920s, the Irish language summer colleges were independently run, but were endorsed by the new government and were

closely aligned with the Irish language school curriculum: their purpose was to improve the teachers' (or students') standard of Irish over the summer holidays, which would in theory transfer into an improved standard of Irish in the classroom setting once the autumn academic term began anew.

The role of the Irish language summer colleges has not changed significantly in more than a 100 years. The Irish State continues to endorse and partially fund independently-run Irish colleges, and students who are training to become primary school teachers spend four weeks attending an Irish college as part of their undergraduate or postgraduate degree, a period known as "Tréimhse Foghlama sa Ghaeltacht" [A Learning Period in the Gaeltacht] (see Guidance Note on Immersive Educational Experience (https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/register/qualified-in-ireland/register-as-a-post-primary-teacher/guidance-note-on-immersive-education-experience/)). However, the majority of those attending Irish college nowadays are secondary school students – approximately 25,000 Irish teenagers in attendance every summer – whose parents pay for them to attend Irish college in order to improve their standard of Irish as they progress through secondary school and ahead of State examinations, of which the Irish language is a compulsory component. The Irish language summer colleges prop up the standard of the Irish language at secondary school level in particular, and are most accessible to families who can afford to pay upwards of €1,000 per teenager to spend three weeks of their summer holidays in Irish college, while the government provides several hundred scholarships for teenagers from disadvantaged backgrounds to attend Irish college each summer (Coláistí Samhraidh Dáil Éireann Debate (https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2022-09-29/1/)). The level of Irish language attained by the teenager is dependent on several factors, including the extent to which use of the English language is tolerated in the Irish-speaking environment of the Irish college, and this tolerance of English can vary from college to college. The Irish language summer colleges yield great insight into the complex relationship that Irish people have with the study of the Irish language, they serve as a microcosm of the development and coming-of-age of the Irish nation, and they provide a lens through which to narrate the nation's history. And yet, very little research has been undertaken on any aspect of these Irish colleges. This essay will address the latter lacuna, by providing an overview of the history of the Irish language summer colleges, and by showing how these colleges are interwoven with Ireland's modern history.

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2. The revivalist period (1900–1921)

By the turn of the 20th century, the Irish language had been in dramatic decline for over 60 years. The Great Famine in the 1840s had decimated the number of Irish speakers, through death and through emigration, and many Irish people who survived the famine wanted their children to be English speakers, as English was the only language of use to them if they emigrated (Wall 1969: 81–90; Wolf 2014). Added to this, the Irish language and Irish history were excluded from the aforementioned National School Curriculum of 1831, which resulted in native Irish-speaking children receiving the entirety of their education through the medium of English, a language which most of them didn't understand. At the same time, Irish children who were native speakers of English had no access to the Irish language. Scholar Tom Walsh (2016: 8–9) sums up the decision to cut the Irish language out of the National School Curriculum, stating that "the British authorities wished the

education system to act as an agent of civilisation, socialisation, assimilation, politicisation and the reproduction of colonial values with a view to making Ireland more governable". When the Irish language revivalist movement gained ground at the turn of the 20th century, spearheaded by an organisation called the Gaelic League, one of the central aims of its proponents was to ensure that the Irish language would become a key subject within the educational system, thereby reintroducing children to the language from which they had been severed. The Irish language summer colleges were intended as an interim measure: they were established to teach the Irish language to young people and particularly to their teachers, during a period when the Irish language had gained a foothold in the school curriculum, but had not yet achieved equal status with other subjects, a period in which the official teacher training colleges in Ireland were not providing sufficient resources to facilitate the teaching of the Irish language.

In 1901, the London branch of the aforementioned Gaelic League became involved in loosely organized "summer schools" or "centres in the Irish-speaking districts where a competent teacher would conduct a class which visitors could attend", as described in a 1902 report (O'Daly 1902: 7–8). These informal summer schools led on to the first Irish language summer college, established in Ballingeary, Co. Cork in 1904. Such was the popularity of the college that new colleges were established in different Irish-speaking regions each year over the next decade, and in the cities of Dublin and Belfast. By 1916, approximately 13,000 people had attended an Irish summer college, and 1,500 were in attendance on an annual basis (Mac Congáil 2005: 19–20). The majority of these were adults, and many were school teachers. Indeed, by the year 1920, it was reported that of those attending Irish colleges, 3,100 had received a teaching qualification in the Irish language; this was more than five times the number of people who received a teaching qualification in the Irish language in the teacher training colleges during the same period (Commissioners of National Education 1921: 29; Ó Buachalla 1984: 83). It's fair to say that during the early years of the 20th century, the Irish language summer colleges undertook the majority of teacher training in the Irish language.

At the same time as the earliest Irish colleges were being established, there was a movement afoot among social campaigners and charities in London to send poor city children on holidays to rural areas, where they could benefit from fresh air, open spaces, good food, and leisure time (Findlay 2012 [1923]: 161). Apart from benefiting the health of the children, this idea furthered the sense that childhood should be a time for instruction and enjoyment, and cut off from the working world of adults. Members of the London Gaelic League were clearly aware of the local holiday schemes to send city children to the countryside, and it was they who initiated the first organized scheme of sending children to Irish language summer colleges in the Gaeltacht [Irish-speaking area] in 1907–1908, during which period there were at least 450 children attending the classes organized by the London Gaelic League (Ó Súilleabháin 1989: 141; Ó Fathaigh & Ó Síothcháin 1908: 9). In early 1908, "The Irish Children's Fund" was announced in the London-based publication *Inis Fáil* (1908a: 4), the aim of which was to send a small group of the best young speakers of Irish off to a different Gaeltacht each year for a fortnight's holiday (*Inis Fáil* 1908b: 11). This was financed by adult members of the London Gaelic League who subscribed to a fund, rather than being funded by the parents themselves (MacDiarmada 2020: 97–111; Nic Congáil 2022: 55–62). During the same period, organisations in Ireland that promoted the Irish language began to award children and juveniles with holidays in the new Irish language summer colleges. For example, in 1908, *An Claidheamh Soluis*, the national

bilingual newspaper, awarded a fortnight's holiday in an Irish-speaking district (assumedly in an Irish college) to the juvenile reader who would secure the largest number of new subscribers to the newspaper. There are also references to school teachers encouraging their pupils to attend Irish language summer colleges (Ua Murchadha 1911: 11). P. H. Pearse, headmaster of St. Enda's Bilingual Boys' School in Dublin, organized for boys from the school to attend a "summer holiday school" in South Connemara (*An Claidheamh Soluis* 1909: 3). Roger Casement published a letter in *An Claidheamh Soluis* (1908: 12) describing a sum of money donated by an Englishman to any Irish cause that Casement deemed to be worthy of help. Casement sent the donation to the "Holiday Fund" which aimed to send "the very poorer children of Dublin" connected with the Gaelic League classes on a fortnight's holiday to an Irish-speaking district.

Alongside the Irish colleges, Irish language summer schools were also emerging in Irish-speaking areas. These were similar to Irish colleges, but without the same formal status. One such summer school was established on Tawin Island, Co. Galway, in 1909 and was directed by Éamon de Valera from 1911–1913. De Valera, of course, would go on to become *Taoiseach* [Prime Minister] and later President of Ireland. In both of those roles, he would continue his public support for Irish language summer colleges and schools. Tawin summer school focused on attracting children and teenagers, two cohorts that were not being catered for specifically in other colleges and schools (*Connaught Tribune* 1909: 9). The colleges and schools followed specific daily timetables: they held classes every morning and afternoon, in which the language was taught to beginners, and more advanced students studied texts in Old and Middle Irish. Classes were held in the open air in so far as it was possible to do so. Every evening there was entertainment, such as a *céilí*, traditional music, or storytelling, which members of the local Irish-speaking community would often attend. The idea was therefore to immerse the students in traditional Irish culture, which went hand in hand with the Irish language (O'Brien 1911: 9). Such a programme of events was deemed to be along cultural nationalist lines – a celebration of Irish culture. This daily timetable has remained similar to this day, although the afternoon classes have often been replaced by other cultural and sporting activities through the medium of Irish.

During the 1910s, the Irish language summer colleges and summer schools became synonymous with both romance and nationalism. Historian Roy Foster (2015: 50–51) claims that for the revolutionary generation, Irish colleges were "endlessly influential" and that "The importance of such places lay in bringing together the like-minded and suggesting the possibility of a new way of life". Here, youthful romances were manifold (with both young men and women in attendance): the aforementioned Éamon de Valera famously followed his future wife, Sinéad Ní Fhlannagáin to an Irish college in Tourmakeady, Co. Mayo, in 1909 (Fanning 2015: 24). As each Irish college was independently run, the level of nationalist ideology and propaganda to which the students were exposed varied from college to college. Some Irish colleges began to espouse militant nationalism. By 1914, targeted advertising was also used by Irish colleges, with advertisements reflecting the type of nationalism embraced by the publication in which they appeared. In the *Irish Volunteer* (1914: 9), an advanced nationalist publication, for example, one Irish college promoted itself as "an ideal spot to learn military tactics and to learn the Irish Language. Ample facilities for Shooting". In the lead up to the Easter Rising of 1916, several Irish colleges became central to the recruitment and build-up of military nationalism. Even in cases when only a few students and members of the teaching staff

were involved in militant nationalism, they managed to influence other students and indeed the local Irish-speaking communities. It was no coincidence that Companies of the Irish Volunteers (a militia founded in 1913) often came into being in the same locations as the Irish colleges. Following the Easter Rising in 1916, and the internment of many of those involved in the Rising, it was the younger generation who began to attend Irish college. By then, the Irish college experience had become central to the educational formation of the young nationalist élite. Indeed, the most rapid expansion of Irish colleges coincided with the intensification of the Irish War of Independence against Britain, with nine Irish colleges established in 1920 alone, and student numbers increased in the existing colleges (McCafferty 2022). Several Irish colleges were direct targets during the War of Independence, with a few being taken over, and others burned down, by British forces (McCafferty 2022; Nic Congáil 2010: 225–226).

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3. Constructing the Irish Free State (1922–1931)

By the time the Irish Free State was established in 1922, a process of linguistic expansion was underway in the educational system in the 26 counties of Southern Ireland; while a process of linguistic contraction was underway in the educational sphere in the six counties of Northern Ireland. The Free State inherited a national school curriculum in which "Irish was made an obligatory subject for at least one hour per day in all standards in all national schools" (Coolahan 1981: 40). From August 1922 until 1925, Eoin Mac Néill was Minister for Education, and he was committed to implementing linguistic change within the school system (see Mulvagh & Purcell 2022). Mac Néill himself had been deeply involved in the Irish college movement since its inception, and it was no coincidence then that the Irish colleges were best equipped to teach the Irish language to the national school teachers who needed to learn the language very quickly (see Department of Education 1923–1924: 26). In 1922, teachers were encouraged to attend the special summer courses organized for them, and national schools were closed in the summer months to facilitate this. In 1923, 1924, and 1925, attendance was stated as compulsory for those under 45 years, and this reverted to attendance on a voluntary basis in 1926 (see Department of Education 1927–1928: 16). The same year, all secondary school teachers were required to pass an oral Irish examination to satisfy the requirements of registration. And from the school year 1927–1928, all secondary schools recognized by the Free State had to offer Irish as a school subject. These summer courses were an interim measure, while the teacher training colleges increased their capacity to teach the Irish language. By the end of the decade, the Irish colleges had begun to shift their attention towards young people once more if they were to survive, with children as young as eight years old in attendance.

In contrast with the trajectory of the Irish language in the Free State during the 1920s, in Northern Ireland, the Irish language was being pushed out of the educational system by the unionist-controlled government. In reaction to this, a group of Irish language activists belonging to an organisation called Comhaltas Uladh established a scholarship scheme in 1926 that enabled children from the six counties of Northern Ireland to spend their summer holidays in an Irish college, Coláiste Bhríde, in Ranafast, Co. Donegal, located within the Free State. This scheme was known as *Coiste na bPáistí* [Children's Committee] and would proceed to provide scholarships for generations of Catholic children in Northern Ireland, allowing them to immerse themselves in the Irish language and culture in the Donegal Gaeltacht. Each child made a promise that they would speak only Irish, and the

young learners of Irish were integrated into local Gaeltacht life: while not at class, they helped in the hayfields; and a hardy few boys engaged in *buachailleacht* [herding the cows]; by night, they listened to stories or music accompanying *céilithe* (Mac an tSaoir 2004: 9–12). It is arguable that this scheme, and later schemes that stemmed from it, were the most influential factors in facilitating the continued use of the Irish language in Northern Ireland throughout the 20th century and beyond.

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4. The de Valera Era (1932–1959)

In 1932, the Fianna Fáil party took power in the Free State, under the leadership of Éamon de Valera, who became *Taoiseach* in 1937 and remained in power for most of the period up until 1959 (at which point de Valera became President).[1] In the Free State, Irish colleges were more closely related to the educated middle classes rather than the urban poor: they appealed to parents who wanted their children to gain educational advantage; they provided cultural caché within the new Ireland; and they were paid for by the parents themselves. However, several Irish-language activists wished to make the Irish colleges more accessible to young people from less well-off families. This led to the establishment of two schemes in the 1930s, both of which aimed to send children to the Gaeltacht to immerse them in the Irish language.[2]

The first organisation was called *Coiste na bPáistí*, which was linked to the Dublin trade union movement and aimed to send Dublin "children of the poor and unemployed" to the Gaeltacht for a month to learn Irish (Children's Gaeltacht Committee 1935). In 1934, 78 children participated in the scheme (*Evening Herald* 1934: 2); by 1939, 367 Dublin children had participated in the scheme, which had by then expanded to include children living in Limerick (*Sunday Independent* 1940: 10; *The Liberator* 1937: 3). The Committee collected subscriptions from various trade unions, and in 1935, the Fianna Fáil government agreed to contribute to the scheme (Children's Gaeltacht Committee 1935). The Department of Finance stipulated that this scheme catered "solely for pupils of National Schools in the *Saorstát* [Free State] between the ages of 11 and 14 years whose parents are unable, in the opinion of the Committee, to provide the funds required for sending their children to the Gaeltacht" (Children's Gaeltacht Committee 1935). The Fry-Cadbury company provide scholarships to support the scheme: Fry-Cadbury had established its first factory in Dublin in 1933, and realized that by using the Irish language in their marketing campaigns and by promising scholarships, they would gain access to national schools around the country. An article published in the *Irish Press* (1936: 7) stated that: "No English would be permitted to be spoken while in An Gaedhealtacht and the children while there would be under the control of the parish priest, An t-Athair Seamas O Ceallaigh". The role of the Catholic Church within this scheme is clear; however, what sets this scheme apart is that the children who participated in it were not sent to Irish colleges. Instead, they participated in the normal daily lives of their host families. This scheme was later extended to three months in the 1950s, and the children involved attended local national schools in Irish-speaking areas (McCafferty: Gael Linn sa Ghaeltacht (https://comhar.ie/iris/83/5/gael-linn-sa-ghaeltacht/)).

The second organisation, *Clann na hÉireann* [Children of Ireland], was established in 1934. It stemmed from the Gaelic League and several educational organisations; and it focused on the promotion of spoken Irish among children through extracurricular activities rather

than within the educational system (*Irish Independent* 1939: 8). In 1935, the first camp for 25 boys was held in the Irish-speaking area of Furbo, Co. Galway, and as the organisation grew in popularity, in 1939 its directors decided to establish a summer camp in the newly settled Gaeltacht of Gibbstown, Co. Meath. In 1935, the de Valera government had initiated a small-scale migration scheme for Irish-speaking families in Connemara to move to Rath Cairn in Co. Meath, where there was a better quality of land for the families to live on, but where the families could also sow the seeds of the Irish language; and over the following few years, native speakers from other Gaeltachtaí migrated to the nearby Gibbstown (Ó Conghaile 1986). As the Gibbstown community was not in a position to provide accommodation to young language learners in their homes, a hostel called *Brú na Midhe* was built. This venture was reportedly a great success and almost 500 young people stayed in Brú na Midhe each summer, with separate courses being held for each sex (*Evening Herald* 1940: 3).

There are two points to note here: the first is that up until the establishment of Clann na hÉireann, courses were usually mixed gender. The Gaelic League of the early 20th century was very much in favour of gender equality and promoted mixing of the sexes. Yet, after the foundation of the Irish Free State, women's rights were constantly eroded, culminating in de Valera's 1937 constitution, in which the place of women was designated as being in the home. So by segregating boys from girls, Clann na hÉireann was in keeping with the increasingly conservative gender norms of mid-20th century Ireland, which were influenced to a large extent by the Catholic Church. The second point is that by putting young people in a hostel, they were being further removed from the company of native Irish speakers – the whole point of earlier Irish colleges had been for students to stay in the homes of Irish speakers, allowing for language immersion. Well-known Irish-language writer Máirtín Ó Cadhain (1954: 4) would later claim that by staying in a hostel "Chraobhscaoilfeadh na páistí a gcuid cainte mínádúrtha féin ar a chéile" [The children would disseminate their own unnatural speech among themselves]. This is a concern that still exists to this day. So too does it remain the case that 21st teenagers attending Irish college in a hostel or boarding school setting have little engagement with the local community (Ionad na dTeangacha, Ollscoil na hÉireann Má Nuad 2013).

By the 1950s, some traditional Irish language summer colleges were diversifying, based on the assumption that as the standard of teaching Irish improved in the schools, young people would no longer need to attend the supplementary Irish colleges. For example, Coláiste Rois Goill, in Donegal, was offering tailored summer courses in drama and writing for adults and also using the facilities available to upskill local people with "Vocational Education classes during the winter for the young people of this Donegal Gaeltacht" (*Donegal Democrat* 1951: 4). Several new Irish colleges followed the Brú na Midhe model, either by advertising single-sex courses, or by using hostel or chalet accommodation, rather than the traditional approach of living with Irish-speaking families. In 1959, for example, Trabolgan Irish College in Co. Cork was opened, with "700 girl students" in attendance. One newspaper report stated that the College "is situated on 200 acres, consists of 127 chalets, two diningrooms, and a ballroom which is also used as a chapel. Students will also be able to enjoy the indoor swimming pool and private beach as well as other recreational facilities" (*Southern Star* 1959: 1). This College was very clearly aimed at the middle class, with the luxuries of a ballroom and an indoor swimming pool being a far cry from the living conditions in other Irish colleges. The investment in such facilities also points to the fact that the Irish colleges were increasingly being seen as money-making

enterprises, rather than simply promoting the Irish language. Trabolgan College was opened by the new President Éamon de Valera, and many other Irish colleges were also officially opened by senior politicians, who were endorsing the centrality of the Irish colleges to the national culture.

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5. Alignment with second level education (1960–1999)

In the second half of the 20th century, the Irish colleges became more closely aligned with secondary schools than national schools, with teenagers becoming the dominant cohort in attendance at Irish colleges. Liam Mac Mathúna (1977: i) has noted the large increase in numbers attending Irish college: in 1961, 8,726 people were in attendance; in 1976, 19,121 attended Irish college. In the 1960s, two major changes in the secondary school system accounted for the increasing demand for Irish colleges. In 1960, an Irish language oral exam was introduced as part of the Leaving Certificate. The new emphasis on oral language skills benefitted the Irish colleges, with those students who attended Irish colleges potentially having an educational advantage over those who didn't (Mac Giolla Chomhghaill 1965: 26). The second, and most influential change, was the introduction of free second-level education in 1967, which made secondary education available to all, not just the wealthier classes who paid for their children to attend private secondary schools, as had been the case until then. With most young people attending secondary school, and attaining a higher level of education, the competition to proceed to university became more intense. Irish colleges capitalized on this and began to offer intensive courses for Leaving Certificate students (Mac Gabhann 1964: 9–10). Wealthier families could continue their children's educational advantage by sending them to Irish college, in the hope that they would receive better Leaving Certificate results.

In the early 1970s, the *Gaelscoil* [Irish-medium school] movement began to emerge (Ó Luain 2022: 64–77), and at the same time, a declining number of national school students under the age of 12 attended Irish colleges. By this point, the focus of the Irish colleges was firmly set on teenagers and an additional role was becoming widespread within the hierarchy of Irish college (Mac Mathúna 1977: iv; *Evening Echo* 1978: 8). This was the role of *cinnire* [house prefect] essentially a youth leader in their late teens chosen from among the student body. A cinnire was appointed in each house in which the teenagers resided and served as a go-between for the students, the *mná tí* [the women in charge of the individual houses] and the college authorities. The *cinnire* increasingly became an integral part of Irish colleges – with separate half-term training courses catering for those teenagers wanting to become *cinnirí* – and depending on the college in question and the age of the *cinnire*, they might receive a reduction in the college attendance fee, or payment for taking on the role. This role has evolved over time, with one college, Coláiste na bhFiann, for example, hosting an *Acadamh Cinnireachta* [Leadership Academy], and other colleges hosting Leadership Courses with an emphasis on fluency in the Irish language and on responsibility.

By the 1970s, the individual Irish colleges had a representative body in place, *Comhchoiste Náisiúnta na gColáistí Samhraidh* (*Irish Examiner* 1973: 15). This is better known as CONCOS (https://www.colaistigaeilge.ie/concos) and is now defined as "a federation of 47 Irish Summer Colleges both inside and outside the main Gaeltachtaí, as well as Residential Colleges in all four provinces". At the same time, a national Irish-language organisation

called Gael Linn (est. 1953), took over responsibility for Coiste na bPáistí and later Clann na hÉireann, while also initiating new types of schemes for immersing young people in the Irish language in Irish-speaking areas, young people who weren't necessarily being catered for up to that point. These included a scholarship scheme that sent English-speaking young people between the ages of 12 and 14 to live with Irish-speaking families for a period of three months, a sport-based summer course for teenagers who were already fluent speakers of Irish, and a two-month scholarship scheme for teenagers in Northern Ireland to immerse themselves in the Irish language in the Donegal Gaeltacht. During the 1980s, Gael Linn expanded its scholarship scheme for young people in Northern Ireland.

Although teenagers would continue to keep the Irish colleges afloat during the 1980s, the need to continue a provision for adults, from Ireland and abroad, was recognized with the establishment of Oideas Gael in Donegal in 1984. Oideas Gael was marketed as a summer school rather than an Irish college and it set up courses for adults that included many aspects of Irish culture through the medium of the Irish language. Oideas Gael was established in Gleann Cholm Cille, a Breac-Ghaeltacht, *breac* meaning 'speckled', essentially a bilingual area. The thought process involved in setting up a summer school or college, the implications for the local population, and the practical steps in setting one up were discussed by Liam Ó Cuinneagáin (1993: 45–50), one of the founders of Oideas Gael, in an article published in 1993. Ó Cuinneagáin emphasized the perspective of, and challenges faced by, native speakers living in the bilingual area where the school was to be established: these were people belonging to a minority language community within a country that was dominated by the English language; young native speakers of Irish were often reluctant to speak their minority language among themselves; Irish-speaking parents often promoted the English language among their children, as English was needed to secure a good job; and native speakers had a lack of confidence in using the Irish language due to a dearth of modern vocabulary being widely used. The success of any Irish school or college was dependent on changing the attitudes of local native speakers towards their own language, and through developing the local economy, thereby enabling Irish speakers to find jobs locally, rather than having to emigrate, which was often the case in the early 1980s in particular, when Oideas Gael was established (Walsh 2003/2004: 89).

Throughout the 1990s, Irish colleges thrived, owing to the improved economic conditions that accompanied the Celtic Tiger, and to the newly positive sentiment towards the Irish language due to the establishment of the first Irish-language television station TnaG – now TG4 – in 1996. The most contentious question during this period related to *Riail na Gaeilge* [Irish-language rule] (that Irish must be spoken all the time). Such a rule had existed to a greater or lesser extent since the foundation of the Irish colleges – sometimes implicitly observed, sometimes rigorously implemented – but by the 1990s, parents as customers, had become more vocal, and were taking to the media when their children were sent home from Irish college for speaking English (see Petit Cahill 2020: 228–244). Each Irish college implemented the "Irish-language rule" to different extents: some would completely overlook the use of English, while others would send teenagers home when they uttered so much as a word of English. As one student told the *Irish Times* newspaper: "everyone spoke English at one time or another at the college, especially at the ceilis, but the thing was not to get caught" (McGarry & Foley 1996: 8).

At the same time, the question of child welfare was increasingly becoming a matter of concern in Ireland, with a growing volume of official reports documenting the historical abuse of young people by Catholic priests and others in roles of authority. The Catholic Church had become increasingly involved in many of the Irish colleges from the Free State era onwards, with Mass being either a daily or weekly fixture within the Irish college schedule, and reports exist of priests having access to the young people's bedrooms within the Irish colleges (Ó Domhnaill 1939: 11). While the Catholic Church has not been implicated in abuse of young people in the Irish colleges to date, it's clear that safeguarding of young people was not in the public consciousness at a time when priests and other unvetted adults could access young people's bedrooms. The most prominent case of child sexual abuse within the institution of the Irish college was that of paedophile Domhnall Ó Lubhlaí, the founder of the aforementioned Coláiste na bhFiann (est. 1968), whose sexual abuse of boys in the 1970s turned into a public scandal in the 2000s when it emerged that the *Gardaí* [Irish police force] did not follow up on allegations concerning him in the 1990s (McCarthy: Gardai probe Gaeltacht schools sex abuse claims (https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/gardai-probe-gaeltacht-schools-sex-abuse-claims/26176738.html)). The Irish colleges, like other institutions, have responded to such incidents by committing to adhere to the government's Children First Act 2015 which focuses on child welfare policy and protection.[3]

6. Economy and technology (2000–2023)

The 2000s were boom times for Irish college, with over 25,000 students in 2006 cited as being "an all-time record". Upwards of 1,000 of the students were adults; however, the vast majority were young people over the age of 10 (McDonald: Bualadh bos (https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/bualadh-bos-were-falling-back-in-love-with-irish/26353160.html)). This surge in numbers was largely due to the effects of the Celtic Tiger, with parents having more disposable income. Since their establishment, the Irish colleges have been essential to the local economy in Irish-speaking areas, not alone through the fees paid by students that pay teachers' salaries among other things, and the grants paid by government that provide an income to the *mná tí*, but by increasing tourism, and keeping local suppliers and businesses afloat, from bus companies, to shops, to hotels, and restaurants. Indeed, Irish colleges are claimed to be worth €50 million to the Gaeltacht economy on an annual basis, a figure far in excess of what the government invests in the sector annually (Ó Caollaí & Pollak: Call for State support (https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/call-for-state-support-for-gaeltacht-colleges-1.4234463)). Yet, as Irish colleges are funded to a large extent by families' disposable incomes, along with Governmental support, their ability to prosper and grow is dependent on the wider economy. For example, following the financial crisis of 2008 demand for Irish colleges (https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-20122307.html) dipped by 40% by 2010. While numbers attending Irish colleges climbed over the following years, Covid-19 in the summer of 2020 and 2021 caused, and indeed precipitated, new problems. From the very beginning, the language immersion model of the Irish college depended heavily on local Irish-speaking families hosting groups of students; with the *mná tí* fulfilling a fundamental role within the structure of the Irish colleges, by providing students with direct access to the Irish language, accommodation, food, along with numerous other supports. Or as one woman who has undertaken this role recently put it: "caithfidh tú a bheith i do mháthair, i do chaomhnóir, i do chomhairleoir agus i do

bhanaltra" [you have to be a mother, a guardian, a counsellor, and a nurse] (Tuairisc: article (https://tuairisc.ie/caithfidh-tu-a-bheith-i-do-mhathair-do-chaomhnoir-do-chomhairleoir-is-do-bhanaltra-ganntanas-mna-ti-pleite-i-dteach-laighean/)). For many *mná tí*, accommodating Irish college students was, and continues to be, their main source of income, an income that is paid by the Irish government through a daily grant per student being housed. Around 700 families provided accommodation to Irish college students immediately before the pandemic (see Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media: press release (https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/27daf-minister-of-state-chambers-approves-increase-for-mna-ti-in-the-gaeltacht-summer-college-sector/)); however, in the post-Covid-19 environment, and the cost-of-living crisis in Ireland, an increasing number of families are opting out, with some Irish colleges considering dormitory-style or hostel accommodation as a result (Ní Thuathaláin: article (https://tuairisc.ie/seanchlochar-a-athchoiriu-agus-tithe-a-dtogail-ag-colaiste-samhraidh-chun-mna-ti-a-mhealladh/)). Whether such accommodation will facilitate an immersive language experience is a subject of current debate, with a report recently being published on this specific subject (Ó Duibhir 2022).

The question of technology and how it augments or hinders language learning has arisen since the early 2000s, when mobile phones became a must-have among teenagers. Prior to the emergence of mobile phones, handwritten letters were the main form of correspondence between those attending Irish college and their families and friends at home. When mobile phones arrived, they were initially confiscated, but later the students were allowed access to their mobile phones at certain times of the day. The concern expressed by college authorities was that the use of mobile phones could increase the amount of English used in the Irish-speaking environment. Some Irish colleges have found ways of using new technologies and new media to their benefit. Coláiste Lurgan (est. 1966), based in Co. Galway, is the prime example. In 2012, Coláiste Lurgan established a YouTube channel, TG Lurgan (https://www.youtube.com/c/tglurgan/videos) , which has over 120,000 subscribers with its music videos having been viewed over 20 million times. Such is the demand that its summer courses have long waiting lists. Coláiste Lurgan is situated close to the headquarters of the Irish-language television station TG4, and has therefore had ready access to people with televisual skills. The college began to make musicals based on Irish legend, tales relating to the legendary figure of Fionn Mac Cumhaill for example, which provided the teenagers involved with some sense of epic Irish tales. The college quickly proceeded to focus on music videos, by choosing well-known pop songs in English and performing Irish-language translations (Mac Dubhghaill 2017). Although Coláiste Lurgan is the most successful and best-known Irish college that engages with the performing arts, other Irish language summer colleges also create music videos and post them online, a practice and marketing strategy that increases publicity for the individual colleges.

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7. Conclusion

Although Irish colleges are grappling with new pressures, good and bad, including increasing numbers of students and accommodation shortages, they are continuing to implement new schemes for language learners, along with variations on old schemes. For example, as part of the Government's 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010–2030, an "Erasmus Gaeltachta" scheme was established in 2019, building on the template of the

European Erasmus scheme at university level and enabling "up to 175 third-level students" to spend an academic term in an Irish-speaking area, living with an Irish-speaking family and attending a third-level course. Another recent government-endorsed scheme, entitled "DEIS Gaeltachta", acknowledges the often-prohibitive cost of sending teenagers to Irish college, and offers a sizeable grant to 400 students from disadvantaged secondary schools to attend Irish college during their summer holidays. However, with approximately 200 post-primary DEIS schools in the Republic of Ireland, this scheme doesn't extend very far (Department of Education: press release (https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/71054-minister-foley-announces-32-million-major-expansion-of-the-deis-programme-incorporating-310-new-schools/#:~:text=Currently%20884%20schools%20and%20over%20180%2C000%20students%20benefit%20from%20). The Irish colleges themselves have also been expanding their range of courses, with some offering short study courses ahead of State Examinations, and others offering tailored school tour packages. The aforementioned Coláiste Lurgan, is seeking planning permission for a "Centre for Education and Youth" which would enable it to further its reach in terms of the performing arts through the medium of the Irish language (Tuairisc: article (https://tuairisc.ie/ceann-de-na-deontais-ghaeltachta-is-mo-riamh-le-fogairt-dionad-nua-i-gconamara/)). All of these new schemes and plans for expansion testify to the ability of the Irish language summer colleges to maintain an important extra-curricular role in language learning in Ireland, a role they have performed for the last 120 years. However, if the educational system were producing fluent speakers of Irish, then there would be no need for Irish colleges. The Irish colleges are therefore propping up an educational system that is not providing students with adequate Irish language skills, and a high standard in the Irish language is required to access third-level education (with certain exceptions and exemptions). While the failures within the educational system allows the Irish college to thrive, the Irish college experience is far more than a linguistic experience. A well-known Irish journalist, Justine McCarthy, has perhaps provided the best description of Irish college (https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/whats-the-irish-for-child-sexual-abuse/26176750.html) as follows:

> The coláiste samhraidh [Irish college] is a uniquely Irish cultural vehicle for the tortuous journey to adulthood. Stamped with the approval of parents and the rest of the establishment as a mind-improving linguistic experience, it is the first opportunity for thousands of Irish children every summer to flex their burgeoning independence in a controlled environment.

The "approval" of Irish society is clear from a recent nationwide survey in which the majority of those surveyed in the Republic of Ireland, and half of those surveyed in Northern Ireland, believed school children should have the opportunity to attend Irish college (Tuairisc: article (https://tuairisc.ie/creideann-tromlach-mor-o-dheas-gur-choir-go-mbeadh-an-deis-ag-paiste-freastal-ar-cholaiste-samhraidh-gaeltachta-suirbhe/)). While generations of parents have sent their children to Irish colleges for linguistic, cultural, and educational reasons, it is often the social element of the Irish colleges that appeal to the young people themselves, not least the first taste of freedom.

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Footnotes

1
Éamon de Valera was Taoiseach between the years 1937–1948, 1951–1954, and 1957–1959 (see Fanning: De Valera, Éamon ('Dev') (https://doi.org/10.3318/dib.002472.v1) ; Department of the Taoiseach: Eamon de Valera (https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/9feb2a-former-taoisigh/#eamon-de-valera) ; President of Ireland: Eamon de Valera (https://president.ie/en/the-president/eamon-devalera) .

2
For a deeper understanding of the Gaeltacht, see Ó Torna (2005) and Walsh (2022).

3
See for example Coláiste Chamuis (2019) and Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2017).

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