



# IONTA OBHAS ULTACH

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## ULTACH TRUST

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### **Inquiry into the Education Training Inspectorate (ETI) Assembly Education Committee**

**Aodán Mac Póilin, ULTACH Trust**

A chara

ULTACH Trust is a cross-community Irish language organisation. In the past our organisation was heavily involved in the promotion of Irish-medium education. We still have some involvement in the area, and have maintained contact with many Irish-medium schools and preschools.

Our observations are based on conversations with a range of people working in the sector. They have three major areas of concern about how the Inspectorate interfaces with Irish-medium schools.

The first of these is that many inspectors are given responsibility for inspecting Irish-medium schools without sufficient knowledge of the language to carry out their task. Indeed some of them have no Irish at all.

We understand that it may not always be possible to have a full team of inspectors with a high command of the language, and we understand that efforts are made to have at least one Irish-speaking inspector in primary and secondary schools. However, we have been told of incidents in which inspections were led by inspectors with no Irish at all. As the lead inspector is the person with the most input into inspections, we believe that there is no justification for giving such a level of authority to someone who does not understand the language of instruction.

We have also been told that the same care is not given to inspections of Irish-medium preschools, and that they are frequently inspected by teams in which none of the inspectors know the language. This should not be allowed to happen.

The second cause of concern relates to the lack of consistency in the inspection process. Schools have a good idea, when they hear who is to inspect them, what kind of a report they are liable to get, and claim that their estimate is usually correct. Some inspectors are particularly notorious for the severity of their evaluations. A number of inspectors have been singled out for being particularly hard on Irish-medium schools. It is not always clear if this is due to hostility on their part, or to a very poor understanding of how Irish-medium education works.

There is something badly wrong with a system when evaluations appear to be so arbitrary, and when they appear to be dependent on the personality – or personal attitude – of individual inspectors. There does not seem to be a mechanism in place to ensure a high level of consistency in inspectorial reports.

The third area of concern is that of inspectors who appear to be badly informed about how immersion education works. According to our contacts, these inspectors appear to assume that what is desirable in a first-language setting must also be desirable – in all circumstances – in a second (or immersion) language setting. While many basic principles of good practice are common to both English-medium and Irish-medium education, in some cases the mechanical application of evaluative principles designed for English-medium schools are completely inappropriate for Irish-medium schools. One example of this is a common complaint from inspectors that teaching in Irish-medium schools is too directive, or too teacher-centred. There is a simple answer to this. You cannot discovery-learn a second language; if you want Irish-medium education to succeed, until the language is well-established, you have to accept a different level of teacher direction than in a first language situation.

Behind all these problems is a single, basic, structural problem. Inspectors are given too much power. Evaluations made by inspectors are regarded by the Inspectorate as inviolable, and cannot be challenged. While this does not mean that all inspectors – or all inspections – are unfair, it does mean that inspectors who have taken a stand on a particular educational dogma, or are not very intelligent, or who may have an instinctive bias against Irish medium education, can abuse their power.

Mise le meas

AODÁN MAC PÓILIN  
Director