

# Northern Ireland, ESOL provision and '(In)visible Minorities'

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The recent unprecedented riots in Dublin and the increase in racist attacks targeting migrant/refugee businesses throughout Northern Ireland (NI) show the rise of the far right and their opportunist stoking of anti-refugee/asylum sentiment and intimidation throughout the Island of Ireland due to ongoing geopolitical events (Telford and Grandjean, 2023). However, from an NI perspective, racist attacks against minorities have been epochal and, until recent decades, have gone unreported (due to police inaction and mistrust) and, therefore, received little or no political action, media attention or condemnation. Low immigrant numbers prior to the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) pre-1998 led to a fabricated assumption that immigration and, indeed, racism were non-issues, therefore negating the necessity for and eliminating ethnic minority communities from public policy, denying profile, needs and supports, including education (Crangle, 2023). Crangle (2023, 60) states, 'reflecting their semi-invisible, one-dimensional status in society, the political consensus was that barely any immigrants or people of colour lived in NI and those that did were treated well'. The reality was that migrants/minorities had to navigate an acute sectarian divided society during the Troubles, 'not take sides', 'get involved', 'keep their heads down', 'remain neutral', 'not complain or criticise'. Such ethno-religious navigation has meant a lack of visibility, agency, and advocacy throughout NI society and is suprisingly evident in NI's universities (Queen's University, Belfast and the University of Ulster). Both have failed to respond to the changes in their local populations through their research functions. Belluigi and Moynihan (2023: 1) state that:

this lack of engagement has under-served and maintains the historical undocumenting of the histories, perspectives, needs and accounts of ethnic minorities and migrants through academic knowledge production. Localised knowledges and perceptions concerning minoritised groups

are left open to continued nonhistorical, decontextualised, unsupported, nonfactual, invented or imagined assumptions, stereotyping, othering and homogenising. Such under-responsiveness places the burden of knowledge-making on non-academic individuals, community, volunteer groups or academics outside the locality.

Such lack of engagement, it could be argued, is still evident, with both NI universities having yet to become universities of sanctuary, offering good practice in welcoming asylum seekers and refugees into the university community and fostering a culture of welcome and inclusion for all. These ill-informed stances and lack of academic engagement have had severe policy implications, leaving migrants and minorities marginalised, without agency throughout NI and more vulnerable to discrimination than their counterparts in the UK. The lack of minority agency, visibility and support is acutely reflected across all education sectors, particularly English Language Education (ELE). Such provision includes English as an Additional Language (EAL), English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in particular, which for many decades was ad-hoc, non-specific, underfunded, under-resourced, and reactive rather than planned (ESOL-NI 2020). While ESOL provision has evolved over the last twenty-five years due partly to community and voluntary activism leading to greater regional coordination, funding and more qualified teachers/volunteers delivering classes, significant issues remain (Parizzi and McKeown, 2019). These include ESOL funding mechanisms that privilege FE colleges over community/voluntary educational settings (lack of ring-fenced funding) and impractical formal accreditations. Current ESOL qualifications reinforce a teach-to-the-test pedagogy and the endorsement and maintenance of 'standard English' that seems to eliminate authentic learning opportunities, eroding learners' needs (LWIW and USW 2023). Other issues include waiting lists,

clarity surrounding educational access and pathway/ progression routes into further vocational and higher education (Parizzi and McKeown 2019).

The Good Friday Agreement (GFA) and subsequent peace and stability in NI have been an opportunity (unfortunately going awry) to address educational disadvantage and division. Attention continues to be repeatedly diverted away from issues of attainment, inequality and poverty - towards a focus on protecting respective religious, political and middle-class community interests (Purdy 2022). Global displacements and the arrival of asylum seekers and refugees through various resettlement schemes are becoming a new norm within the global north, leading to significant inward migration and placing further significant pressures on public services and, in particular, education. NI government departments, Education and Economy (DoE/DfE) can no longer 'remain blinkered' - ie view and implement temporary, piecemeal, reactionary ELE provisions throughout the NI educational sectors. These new norms have led to an ever-increasing diversity in Northern Irish society and a significant mandate for transformative ELE provision: EAL, ESOL and EAP.

However, there seems to be an educational reluctance or drag, a lack of urgency regarding curricula reform that reflects a more inclusive, diverse society with 'newcomer' children (a term used within NI DoE [2019] documentation) remaining semi-invisible and, in the case of 16+ unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors (UASMS), invisible. The apparent educational aversion to change means that such learners are marginalised within curricula, educational policies, strategies and recommendations. For example, NI's Education Authority (EA) (2022) states it is responsible for school placement, language support, and translation services for newcomer children at primary/post-primary levels 'only', thus excluding 16+ UASMS. For those aged 16+, the designated Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust, through social workers and other statutory authorities, are accountable for allocating appropriate education and training opportunities. Such children should be registered with an appropriate school, college or training provider as soon as possible and get assistance, maximising learning opportunities (HSCB 2018).

Yet, there is scant recognition that many 16+ UASMS are in an indeterminate educational state due to age, interrupted or little formal education, lack of English language proficiency, and retracted NI-ESOL provisions. As a result, they cannot access formal secondary, further or higher education, and no alternative sustained, and bespoke government-

funded provision has been made available. Any provision delivered within the community/voluntary settings has been scant, reactionary, and piecemeal rather than planned and maintained. The first pilot 16+ ESOL programme (Stepping Stone programme) was delivered in 2021-2022 within community education settings in Belfast, but due to a lack of sustained funding and the collapse of the NI Executive, no further delivery has been possible (Flanagan, Fc). In addition, both primary and secondary NI curricula (not revised since 2009), Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and English language qualifications, e.g., CELTA, lack diversity, representation, inclusiveness, awareness and an understanding of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Therefore, education in NI continues to reflect, facilitate and privilege a binary, neoliberal, white-abled, (preferred) middle-class, homogenous society (Purdy 2022).

This lack of visibility and agency is not a particularly NI phenomenon, as refugee research continues to observe that refugee and asylum-seeking children are marked by their invisibility in educational policy and practice globally (McIntyre and Abrams 2022). Such exclusions mean newcomers, refugees, and asylum seekers are subject to exclusionary policies and practices determined by immigration and welfare procedures and strategies. By doing this, all newcomers, including children, are therefore positioned through policy as a potential threat to national security and a drain on welfare resources (McIntyre and Abrams 2022).

Education and economic policies in NI have pivoted over the last twenty-five years from viewing immigrants as non-existent to semi-visible to embedding policies underpinned by raciolinguistic ideologies rooted in British colonial logics. Such ideologies frame language practices of low-income, racialised speakers as limited and deficient. Such policies require marginalised learners of English to modify their speech patterns in line with normative standards under new guises of social justice. Current NI-ESOL provision reflects a liberal-democratic distributive social justice based on 'simple equality' and normalises disadvantaged groups by providing basic material, cultural and social services (Badwan 2021). The prescriptive use of standard English is often framed as a basic linguistic need or 'survival English' - that is, all newcomers need to achieve social justice or are deemed to lack what society expects them to have, and education is considered the way to address this deficiency (Badwan 2022). Thus, those with low language proficiency levels and possibly suffering psychological trauma are pathologised and viewed

as deficient or 'othering' as their perceived learning difficulties lead to marginalisation and become obscured within educational settings (Flanagan and O'Boyle 2021). In addition, individuals' funds of knowledge and life capital (skills, knowledge, other languages) are of minimal value and overlooked.

Intercultural understanding should be a significant aim in language education, but instead, language learning is often presented as having a largely extrinsic value and a broader objective of benefitting the UK economy. The current NI-ESOL provision's potential for social justice through redistribution, recognition and participation (Fraser 2003) remains limited, due to the current 'human capital approach' to ESOL provision, especially in NI-FE institutions. Thus, the 'institutionalised obstacles' of the economic structure and the hostile immigration discourses in the UK are unlikely to be overcome any time soon. Therefore, any forthcoming draft NI-ESOL policy must be scrutinised. ESOL practitioners' and learners' voices and recommendations must be heard, to ensure a more transformative, holistic approach to ESOL provision underpinned by human and social capital theory elements, especially for 16+ newcomers.

For real change to occur, there is a need for a new coalition for English language education across all language subfields: ESOL (community/voluntary/FE), EAL (primary/secondary) and EAP (university) sectors in NI, the UK, and Ireland. Such alliances, through research, advocacy, campaigning, establishing Professional Learning Communities (PLC), special interest groups (SIGs) and political activism, could be a start. By working collaboratively, this alliance would be able to identify collective problems, reinvigorate models of language for education, and engage with linguistic stratification and diversity (Rampton 2023). Moreover, it could probe, if not challenge, traditional boundaries, energise language classrooms, take action on language policies, strategies and recommendations, revive language teachers and enrich teacher education (Rampton 2023). In the short to medium term, this coalition could bring real change and awareness to how damaging current racio-linguistic ideologies and language policies are to newcomers, and provide possible alternatives within all educational sectors (Cushing 2023).

Finally, for ESOL practitioners, closer attention must be given to the types of spaces created, and more questioning and discussion around the kinds of English teaching and epistemological worldviews, and how this impacts ESOL learners must come to the fore (Badwan 2022). Such spaces and greater

engagement are beginning to emerge throughout NI with organisations like NATECLA (National Association for Teaching English and Other Community Languages to Adults). This Island of Ireland forum and professional organisation for ESOL practitioners and learners strives to provide high-quality English language instruction within the community and voluntary sectors through workshops, webinars and conferences. The aim is to cultivate professional teachers, voluntary and community collaborations, ESOL activism and the development and reflective dialogues surrounding transformative ESOL practices, including the promotion of trauma-informed pedagogical approaches. Such collaborations are imperative to support overstretched, underfunded, formal NI-ESOL provision by providing spaces of safety and belonging for all newcomers to gain learner agency, be visible, be part of their community, integrate and succeed in education.

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