



# HOW THE POLICY OF 'OUT OF FIELD TEACHERS' IS CHALLENGING REIMAGING AND EMBRACING CHANGE IN LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION POLICY IN POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN IRELAND

The concept of 'full inclusion in Irish education' implies that all teachers will possess the necessary skills to instruct all learners. Learners who have English as an Additional Language (EAL) would benefit from teachers who are committed to supporting their educational pursuits. The probability of this occurring in an Irish post-primary setting appears to be hindered by the concept of 'out of field teachers,' which is supported by the Department of Education's Circular 0014/2017. The term 'out-of-field teachers' refers to educators who are qualified in a specific subject area but are assigned to teach a different subject outside their area of expertise (Teaching Council, 2011a).

This article aims to assess the policy governing the establishment of professional prerequisites for educators in Irish post-primary schools. It analyses the pedagogical proficiency demanded by the Department of Education (DE) in their policy documents, as well as potential variations that may arise. When analysing Circular 0014/2017 from both an international and national perspective, it becomes evident that the policy in Ireland, which does not mandate Special Education Teachers (SETs) to possess a specialised qualification in Special Needs Education, or require SETs to have expertise in their subject area, is not beneficial for learners or teachers. The circular implies that teachers who support language learning and those who work with learners with additional educational needs will receive extra professional development opportunities. However, this paper specifically addresses the potential gaps in practice that may arise due to the unclear policy documentation and the absence of clear guidance regarding the qualifications required for teachers working with learners. The paper will determine that the utilisation of 'out of field teachers' to assist learners with additional educational requirements, such as language help or those diagnosed with special needs, is detrimental to both the learners and potentially the teachers.

**Keywords:** English as an Additional Language (EAL); Out-of-field teachers; Pedagogical proficiency, Inclusive education, Equity in education

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper examines teacher recruitment policies for educating learners with English as an Additional Language (EAL) in Irish post-primary schools, employing Carol Bacchi's "What's the Problem Represented to Be?" (WPR) policy analysis framework (Bacchi and Goodwin, 2016). Rooted in Foucault's (1994) theories, the WPR approach critiques Irish government policy by analysing its cultural and social context. This study applies Bacchi's six-step methodology to investigate gaps in the literature, focusing on the Special Educational Continuum of Support for EAL learners and proposing practical solutions.

The Guidelines for Special Educational Needs (Department of Education and Skills, 2017a) designate EAL as part of the Special Educational Needs (SEN) Department's remit, reflecting a broader policy emphasis on ongoing teacher training. While many SET teachers feel capable of supporting a range of additional educational needs, they often lack preparation for EAL-specific challenges. Collinson et al. (2009) link educational reform to broader social policies, underscoring the importance of grassroots support for policy implementation. The influx of EAL learners following the Ukrainian conflict, particularly in schools with minimal prior experience, highlights a pressing need to address these gaps.

A disconnect exists between idealistic policy goals and the realities of classroom practice, as seen in initiatives like No Child Left Behind in the U.S. and similar efforts in Europe. This article critiques the Department of Education's policies

on teacher qualifications for SEN and EAL roles, as well as the placement of EAL within the SEN Continuum of Support. Forde et al. (2020), emphasise Bacchi's framework in exploring how administrative discourse and school leadership practices influence policy enactment. Teachers must critically evaluate the intentions behind policies and question their practical classroom implications.

Social justice leadership is crucial when addressing the needs of vulnerable groups like EAL learners (Bracken, Driver and Kadi-Hanifi, 2016; Gardiner-Hyland, 2025). It is important that the needs of EAL learners and their teachers are being met. The Department of Education aims to provide a robust framework for EAL education, yet clearer guidelines are necessary to bridge the gap between policy and practice. A year after crisis-driven policy changes, it is time to reassess and refine these measures. School culture significantly influences the prioritisation of EAL learners (Batardière et al., 2022), and personal connections to the issue often drive meaningful change (Burke, 2023, Coleman, 2022). However, this journey can be challenging, as schools and EAL learners redefine their identities within an evolving cultural and educational landscape (Batardière et al., 2022).

### **QUESTION 1: WHAT'S THE PROBLEM REPRESENTED TO BE IN A SPECIFIC POLICY OR POLICIES?**

Some teachers certified in special education, despite their interest and expertise, may feel unprepared to address the teaching and learning needs of EAL students. Recruiting trained and experienced teachers to support EAL learners within the Continuum of Support remains a critical challenge. This framework, developed by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), (Department of Education and Skills, 2021) provides a systematic approach to meeting diverse student needs, prioritising early intervention, inclusivity, and adaptability (Department of Education Inspectorate, 2024).

Over the past two decades, teaching and learning in SEN have undergone transformative changes in Ireland (Howe and Griffin, 2020). Teachers have grappled with evolving policies while redefining their roles amidst systemic shifts. Public attitudes towards special education have also changed, placing inclusion at the forefront of educational discourse (Adenusi, 2023; Banks et al., 2016; Department of Education Inspectorate, 2024; Fennell, 2021; MacGiolla Phádraig, 2007; Ring and Travers, 2005; Rose, 2021). This perspective is informed by the author's 20 years of experience as an SEN and EAL teacher and as EAL Lead for Oide in Ireland.

EAL education is classified under SEN by the 2017 *Guidelines for Post-primary Schools Supporting Learners with Special Educational Needs* (DE, 2007) DES Circular 0014/2017 grants schools autonomy to address EAL needs, emphasising that assistance should align with recognised needs and regular evaluations (Gardiner-Hyland, 2021). Resources must support fully inclusive schools, prioritising learners with the greatest needs and ensuring continuity of support through appropriately skilled teachers (Adenusi, 2023; Ajala, 2023; Department of Education Inspectorate, 2024; McGinley, 2023). However, all teachers must receive professional development to meet the diverse needs of SEN and EAL learners (Bubb and Earley, 2007; Lowe, 2016).

Ireland's policy contrasts with other nations (Batardière et al., 2022), which often require additional certification for SEN roles. In several US states, for instance, SEN teachers must complete extensive professional education beyond their initial qualifications (White and Mason, 2003; 2006). In Ireland, however, a general teaching qualification suffices for SEN settings (Herzog-Punzenberger et al., 2022).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2007) underscores the importance of qualified teachers, highlighting the gap between policy ambition and the reality of teacher shortages and rising EAL numbers in Ireland (Keane, Flynn, and Kealy, 2023). International perspectives, such as those outlined by Rizvi and Lingard (2009), also influence equality policies. DES Circular 0031/2011 stressed the need for qualified SEN teachers, yet it did not define "appropriately qualified," leaving gaps in expectations for EAL educators (Department of Education and Skills, 2011).

Teachers face dual challenges of managing their well-being alongside pedagogical demands. While SEN educators require specialised training (Coolahan, 2007; Kang and Martin, 2018; OIDE (2025–26)), the same applies to EAL. Effective EAL teaching demands targeted training to ensure learners can progress academically (Gardiner-Hyland and van den Hoven, 2025; OIDE (2025–26)). However, DES Circular 0014/2017 lacks clarity on qualifications for EAL teachers, placing responsibility on school administrators to assign roles based on perceived expertise.

The Teaching Council's 2020 *Céim* framework for Initial Teacher Education (ITE) (2020) mandates foundational SEN training for all teachers, with research showing that initial training in SEN and inclusive education empowers professionals and benefits learners (Department of Education Inspectorate, 2024; Göransson et al., 2019; Kang

& Martin, 2018; Kennedy, 2018; Kurniawati et al., 2017; Mngo & Mngo, 2018) . Despite this, SEN and EAL remain underemphasised in Irish education (Rodden et al., 2019). Inclusion requires systemic adaptation rather than placing additional burdens on learners and their families (Adenusi, 2023; Ajala, 2023).

## QUESTION 2: WHAT DEEP-SEATED ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLIE THIS REPRESENTATION OF THE “PROBLEM”?

There are deep-seated assumptions in policy documents regarding EAL education. First, it is presumed that Boards of Management prioritise EAL needs when planning, and second, that teachers assigned to EAL roles willingly and effectively meet learners’ requirements. However, these assumptions are often unrealistic.

Irish literature on EAL in post-primary settings is limited, yet parallels with SEN policy reveal legislative and systemic shortcomings (Rodden et al., 2019). Ineffective teaching methodologies and inadequate preparation negatively impact learner outcomes (O’Gorman et al., 2009). Despite policy guidelines assuming administrative prioritisation of EAL learners, research shows school leaders face significant strain balancing government demands with professional integrity (Macbeth et al., 2018; Murphy, 2020). Consequently, SEN – and by extension EAL – often ranks low on their priorities (Menken and Sánchez, 2019; DeMatthews et al., 2021). EAL learners, often isolated linguistically and socially, may lack advocates due to parental language barriers (Adenusi, 2023; Burke, 2023).

In practice, EAL timetabling is frequently an afterthought, with part-time teachers or those from unrelated subjects being assigned EAL hours. Anecdotally many report feeling underprepared and lack the expertise to meet EAL students’ needs, especially newly qualified teachers who often receive full EAL schedules (Coolahan, 2007; Thorius, 2019). Research emphasises the importance of equipping educators with the skills to support EAL learners academically and socially (Canagarajah, 2013a; Coleman, 2022; Hansen-Thomas et al., 2016; Reis, 2011). However, this vision remains unrealised in many schools (Gardiner-Hyland, 2021; Menken and Sánchez, 2019).

King (2019), referencing Ball (2006), notes that policies do not dictate actions directly but limit the range of available choices. Addressing the changing EAL context requires reviewing policies to align with current needs while adapting to school cultures and contexts. Teachers need clear pathways into EAL roles, fostering confidence and empowerment (Ahn, 2014; Busch, 2001; Robinson, 2017). They must be equipped to teach effectively while receiving the resources necessary to meet learners’ diverse needs (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Gardiner-Hyland, 2021).

EAL learners face complex social and emotional challenges that require a whole-school approach (Beehler et al., 2012; Block et al., 2014; Cowne et al., 2018; Taylor and Sidhu, 2012). EAL teachers play a vital role in helping students access the curriculum (Brooks et al., 2021; Keane et al., 2023; Leung and Richardson, 2023), progressing beyond Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) to achieve Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 2013). CALP, essential for academic success, involves higher-order thinking skills like analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Coleman and Goldenberg, 2010; Cummins and Yee-Fun, 2007; Nyoni, 2021; Webster, 2013).

While care for learners is important, teachers must combine empathy with expertise to truly make a difference (Hargreaves, 2003; Hargreaves and Fullan, 2015, 2020). Developing inclusive and effective educational practices for EAL learners requires skilled, confident professionals with the necessary tools and training (Department of Education Inspectorate, 2024; OIDE (2025–26), Webster, 2013).

## QUESTION 3: HOW HAS THIS REPRESENTATION OF THE “PROBLEM” COME ABOUT?

Until recently, discussions about English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners in Ireland were minimal. Before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, EAL learners in Irish schools were predominantly from urban areas and represented diverse backgrounds (Mistry and Sood, 2012). However, the war led to an unprecedented enrolment of EAL learners in rural schools, forcing schools to quickly adapt. Teachers were recruited to address the immediate needs of these learners, resulting in varied roles and responsibilities for those teaching EAL students (Block et al., 2014; Gardiner-Hyland, 2021).

Despite schools’ efforts, gaps in understanding emerged, with some teachers mistakenly assuming EAL learners were solely the responsibility of EAL specialists (Beehler, Birman, and Campbell, 2012). However, the *Continuum of Support* places responsibility for EAL learners with mainstream classroom teachers (Department of Education and Skills, 2007). While the Teaching Council’s guidelines (Teaching Council, 2011b; 2020) require all teachers to understand SEN and EAL, those working closely with SEN learners should ideally possess additional qualifications in this area.

Each EAL student has distinct social, emotional, and learning needs. Like SEN learners, they require tailored instruction to succeed (Robinson, 2017; Rodden et al., 2019; Adenusi, 2023). Teachers must account for these individual needs when

planning lessons, ensuring inclusivity for all students (Canagarajah, 2013b; Department of Education Inspectorate, 2024; Florian and Camedda, 2020; McGinley, 2023; Ring and Travers, 2005; Rose, 2001; Rose, 2021) By March 2022, inadequate training and knowledge were already impacting classrooms (George and Maguire, 2019; Kurniawati et al., 2017). Addressing this gap remains critical for professional educators.

EAL teachers play a dual role: facilitating academic achievement and integrating learners into the wider school community (Haslam, 2006). This role often extends to pastoral care due to their deep understanding of learners' challenges (Billingsley et al., 2009; Robinson, 2017). Schools must provide adequate support, recognising the additional professional development EAL teachers often pursue independently, as well as prioritising their well-being to ensure effective support for EAL learners (Coleman, 2022).

#### **QUESTION 4: WHAT IS LEFT UNPROBLEMATIC IN THIS REPRESENTATION?**

A number of critical difficulties remain. On a macro level, the Department of Education's policy directs schools to conduct EAL within the Continuum of Support and to make local judgements. Second, there is a lack of clarity on the credentials needed to operate as an EAL teacher.

There seems to be a government quiet on teacher credentials and special educational needs (O'Gorman et al., 2009; Rodden et al., 2018). There are modest signs that may push management in the correct direction, but this is where the story stops (Murphy, 2020). Compared to other countries such as England and Australia, we need better guidance in this area (Canagarajah, 2013a; Cummins and Yee-Fun, 2007; Hansen-Thomas et al., 2016; Leung and Richardson, 2023).

As school leaders begin to create EAL schedules for the following year, it would be helpful if there was a policy outlining why certain teachers are chosen to teach in the EAL department. Even the establishment of an EAL department in certain schools would be much appreciated (Szymczyk, Popan and Arun, 2022; Wang and Sun, 2021). When one takes the time to investigate a school's unwritten policy about timetabling choices, what teachers teach, to whom, and at what age and stage, one may discover a lot about the school's cultural approach to EAL and inclusion (Department of Education Inspectorate, 2024; Mistry and Sood, 2020). At the micro, meso, and macro levels (Devecchi et al., 2012; Göransson, Lindqvist and Nilholm, 2015; Kurniawati et al., 2017; Travers, 2006), we can see a narrative about the whole school approach to EAL learners and how they are supported in their learning and inclusion in the school (Adenusi, 2023; Burke, 2023; Coleman, 2022; Department of Education Inspectorate, 2024; McGinley, 2023).

School culture discourse concerning EAL might disclose more in its silences than in its pronouncements. According to Zepeda and Ponticell (1997), we may not always be aware of the cultural themes being conveyed in our schools. The silences reveal more about the lessons learnt and the public views of school administrators than any lofty policy. Finally, for learners adjusting to a new culture, social environment, and language, the unsaid signals we communicate might be the most impactful (Adenusi, 2023). For many, EAL seems to be just another addition to school policy, rather than something the school really believes in (Mistry and Sood, 2020). To become really ingrained in culture, EAL must be part of regular educational practice rather than something celebrated once a year (Haslam, 2006). It appears in every parental notification, every non-uniform day, and every celebration (Webster, 2013). Several studies have shown that what is promoted by school administration and culture has a substantial influence on how teachers strive towards inclusion in their classes (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002; Mistry and Sood, 2020). It is critical for schools to recognise that cultural silences may emphasise and muffle other areas we consider significant or not (Abrams and Abrams, 2021; Murphy et al., 2022; Wilkinson, 1997).

#### **QUESTION 5: WHAT EFFECTS ARE PRODUCED BY THIS REPRESENTATION OF THE "PROBLEM"?**

The EAL Policy has a significant impact on EAL learners and teachers at the national, municipal, and school levels. Our approach to caring for those with the highest degree of need reflects our societal and national values (Bracken, Driver, and Kadi-Hanifi, 2016). The relationship between a country's social and educational policies and teacher professional development is illuminating in terms of our priorities and what we consider to be valuable and significant (Collinson et al., 2009; King, 2011, 2014, 2019). King (2019) establishes a connection between professional development and its ability to empower teachers in their efforts to promote inclusion.

If our nation really aims to enhance student outcomes for EAL learners, it is crucial that we dedicate time, effort, and resources to continual professional development in the field of EAL (Block et al., 2014; Gardiner-Hyland, 2021). Effective teaching of EAL learners requires educators who have a comprehensive understanding of the learners' current level, their future learning goals, and the necessary steps to bridge the gap (Merrins et al., 2023). Research by Cummins and Yee-Fun (2007) suggests that when learners are taught by such educators, their learning outcomes are

significantly improved. In contrast, learners who are assigned to educators solely based on the number of hours they need to fulfil (Billingsley et al., 2009. Howell, Bradshaw and Langdon, 2022; Ingersoll, 2003) may not experience the same level of improvement.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that their teachers are often recently appointed teachers in our post-primary schools.

Whilst, they often serve as ‘out of field’ teachers. Recent research suggests that they are feel better for the multi-lingual classroom than some of their colleagues (Gardiner-Hyland and van den Hoven, 2025). Occasionally, they get hourly contracts and aspire to create a favourable professional image to be employed by the school to instruct in their preferred topic, transitioning into their desired area of study. However, they might refrain from vigorously advocating for their students as they want to create a favourable impression on school administration and leadership to ensure future employment within the institution. Their designation as ‘out of field teachers complicates advocacy efforts.

This lack of representation is particularly evident for EAL learners who are still acquiring English proficiency. Among these are Traveller, Mincéir, and Pavee communities within Irish society, who often do not use English as their primary language at home and have historically faced systemic marginalisation in both societal and educational contexts (McGinley, 2023; Stewart, 2024). Other EAL learners are new arrivals in our country, it will take time for them and their parents to find their voices and to advocate for themselves. As such, EAL learners are some of the most marginalised learners in our schools. They don’t yet have a voice to advocate for themselves (Gardiner-Hyland, 2025).

### **QUESTION 6: HOW AND WHERE HAS THIS REPRESENTATION OF THE “PROBLEM” BEEN PRODUCED, DISSEMINATED AND DEFENDED?**

The dissemination of challenges associated with the EAL policy occurs at multiple levels—national, municipal, and school—through societal and educational systems. At a national level, it is essential to examine the intended beneficiaries of educational programmes (Cambois et al., 2016). This raises critical questions about why English as an Additional Language (EAL) is included within the *Continuum of Support* (Department of Education, 2007) and why the *Guidelines for Schools* (NEPs, 2007) provide limited information on the topic. Howell, Bradshaw, and Langdon (2022) argue that policy decisions are often shaped by those in powerful societal positions who manipulate them for their benefit. Skelton (2019) highlights that marginalised groups, such as EAL learners, frequently lack a voice in policy discussions.

A country’s alignment between its social policies, educational priorities, and teacher professional development reflects its values and what is deemed significant (Collinson et al., 2009; King, 2011, 2014, 2019). King (2019) links professional development to empowering teachers in fostering inclusion, but the absence of robust EAL-specific training systems perpetuates the issue, however, Oide have made inroads recently in this area (OIDE; 2025–26). Research further underscores the role of school culture in shaping teacher attitudes and fostering effective inclusion (Department of Education Inspectorate, 2024; Hulme et al., 2019; Jerrim, 2020; Mullaney, 2017). Failing to prioritise inclusive education that meets the needs of EAL learners undermines efforts to create safe, supportive environments where all students can thrive (Adenusi, 2023; Burke, 2023; Gardiner-Hyland, 2021; Holmqvist, 2019; McGinley, 2023; Mullaney, 2017).

The challenges are further disseminated through structural vulnerabilities within the teaching workforce. EAL learners are often assigned to recently hired or “out-of-field” teachers—educators working outside their area of expertise. These teachers, typically employed on hourly contracts, may prioritise cultivating a favourable professional image to secure long-term employment in their preferred subject rather than advocating strongly for their students. This dynamic reflects systemic shortcomings in the allocation of trained educators and weakens the advocacy needed for this marginalised group (Merrins et al., 2023).

The problem is compounded by EAL learners’ limited capacity to advocate for themselves. Many learners do not use English as their primary language at home and have historically faced systemic marginalisation in both societal and educational contexts (McGinley, 2023 Stewart, 2024). Similarly, new arrivals to Ireland face barriers as they and their families acclimate and find their voices. Without strong support, EAL learners—often among the most marginalised in schools—struggle to access the advocacy and resources they need to succeed (Coleman, 2022).

### **CONCLUSION**

This article analyses policies on recruiting teachers for post-primary learners with English as an Additional Language (EAL) using Carol Bacchi’s “What’s the Problem Represented to Be?” (WPR) method. Bacchi’s framework reveals the complex interaction between policy and practice within Irish government policy and the Special Educational

Continuum of Support, highlighting significant gaps between policy objectives and the realities faced by educators and EAL learners.

The study underscores the urgent need for a well-organized system to recruit and train EAL teachers. Current policies lack clear certification standards and norms, leaving significant discretion to school administrators, often resulting in insufficient support for EAL learners. These challenges are compounded by the assumption that all teachers inherently possess the skills and willingness to meet EAL learners' diverse needs without additional training or resources.

The research critiques policy assumptions, such as the expectation that school leaders prioritize EAL in staffing decisions and that teachers assigned to EAL roles are adequately trained. Practical challenges, including a lack of preparation and a sense of inadequacy among educators, further widen the gap between policy and implementation.

The paper also explores the cultural and social dimensions of EAL education, emphasizing the importance of embedding EAL within the broader educational framework rather than treating it as an isolated post-primary concern. School culture plays a pivotal role in shaping the experiences of EAL learners and educators, underscoring the need for more inclusive and supportive environments (Department of Education Inspectorate, 2024).

Ultimately, the study calls for a reassessment of policies to align better with the needs of EAL learners and educators. Recommendations include defining explicit teacher credential requirements, fostering continuous professional development, and cultivating an inclusive educational culture. Addressing these deficiencies will help ensure that EAL learners receive the high-quality education they deserve, facilitating their academic and social integration.

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