

Give Gaelscoileanna a break

An eye-catching phrase like the ‘scandal’ of ‘educational apartheid’ may grab attention for a newspaper opinion piece but it should have some basis in reality. That reality, in Kate Holmquist’s recent assault on Irish medium education, is an anecdotal world in which middle-class, privileged parents are reported to be gaining unfair advantage for their children by the novel route of having them attend all-Irish schools.

The facts, she says, speak for themselves. In fact, the series of factual errors in this column by the often excellent Ms Holmquist is remarkable.

Political correctness aside, the use of a term like apartheid has to have some consciousness of its historical reality to be in any way meaningful. The Stillorgan she refers to (the schools she singles out, as a matter of fact, are in Booterstown) - is a long way from Soweto. Still, the suggestion that its citizens are enjoying an educational leg-up by opting for Irish-medium schools is worthy of examination. Getting your child’s nose in front (unfairly) can also be achieved in the counties of Cork, Donegal, Mayo and Kerry, which are described as ‘the heartlands of Irish-speaking privilege’. But only one school listed in the Top 25 Feeder schools countrywide in these four counties teaches through Irish.

It is correct to state that pupils who answer certain subjects in Irish at the written State examination are awarded extra marks - varying between 3 and 10 per cent - but this happens on a sliding scale. Bonus marks are not awarded for exam elements such as projects or essays prepared ‘outside’ the examination centre. High-achieving pupils who go on to study, say, medicine benefit minimally from the bonus and only a tiny number nationally gain entrance by being awarded these additional marks.

The rationale of the bonus is that it is State policy to encourage more students into Irish-medium education. Support for the State’s first official language is a policy pursued by governments of all hues since the foundation of the State, all democratically elected, by a population enjoying the delights of universal suffrage.

Nowadays, the bonus is seen as a compensation for the absence of Irish language textbooks, especially at Leaving Certificate level, where pupils and teachers spend many hours translating English-language source and support material.

In any language, 14 of the top 25 non-fee-paying schools (‘fee-paying’ Gaelscoileanna do not exist) in the Irish Times league table of feeder schools are not, as we are informed, Irish-speaking institutions. Only two of the schools are Gaelscoileanna. A further two teach some students through Irish. It is, of course, common for schools to have Irish language names e.g. Clochar Íosa agus Mhuire but not to teach through Irish.

Next (inaccurate) statement: ‘Every year, the most Leaving Cert students with the most As come largely from Irish-speaking schools’.

In schoolyard parlance: Says who?

No official figures are available quantifying the exam grades achieved by any category of pupil, nor is it currently legal to publish any such league tables.

We are blithely assured that ‘students from Irish-speaking schools are more likely to get on the university course of their choice, whether it’s Law, Medicine or the Arts’. This is simply not the case, as The Irish Times correctly reported in its Feeder Schools 2008 analysis: nearly 70 per cent of the top-ranked schools are fee-paying, English-medium schools.

Attending an Irish-speaking school, your child ‘will be surrounded by mostly middle-class children’. Post-primary Gaelscoileanna in the Dublin area are based in Cabra, Clondalkin, Donaghmede, Glasnevin, Lucan and Tallaght, as well as Booterstown. All cater for pupils in their catchment areas and beyond, without regard to socio-economic background.

The child will also be likely ‘to have smaller classes’, apparently. Any reference to published figures? Any basis in fact whatsoever? None.

Ms Holmquist informs us that things have ‘got to the stage now where having dyslexia is considered *an enviable bonus* amongst secondary school students, because it exempts these students from having to do Irish’. Readers can make up their own minds on the virtues of this phrase.

The consoling quip ‘if only they’d written their letters the wrong way and become exempt’ can be dismissed as juvenile. More crassly, she suggests to parents that if their child ‘is going to have a special need, then it’s the one to pick’. This is grossly offensive as is the insinuation that Irish medium schools may be ‘weeding out’ children with special needs.

But is the suggestion factual? Absolutely not. The evidence is transparently to the contrary from the enrolment policies of Irish-medium schools. Apartheid might be an apt term for such a policy, were it not specifically prohibited by law under the terms both of the Education Act and the Equality Act.

A fantastic scenario is conjured up of parents and teachers struggling heroically to enable the children in their care to ‘communicate well’ in English, only for all this good work to go to waste, as the unfortunate pupils are then disadvantaged by ‘being made to study Irish’.

International evidence shows that children with language difficulties *benefit* from learning an additional language. In any event, the progress of these children would logically be stymied by ‘being made’ to work their way through Mathematics, History, Science, French etc.

Muslim, French or Chinese children doing the Leaving Cert through English are a welcome feature of the new multicultural Ireland. But this State has no conceivable obligation to promote Arabic, French or Mandarin - that is a matter of national policy without any discriminatory element to it.

Bonus points for Mathematics would support progressive economic policy, we are now told. But bonus points for studying through Irish? Regressive at best, a form of racism at worst.

The inspiration for this polemic seems to have been an overheard conversation *as Gaeilge* on the Dart. Sadly, it reeks of ‘*Dúirt bean liom go ndúirt bean léi*’.

And as for the paper of record? Must try harder.