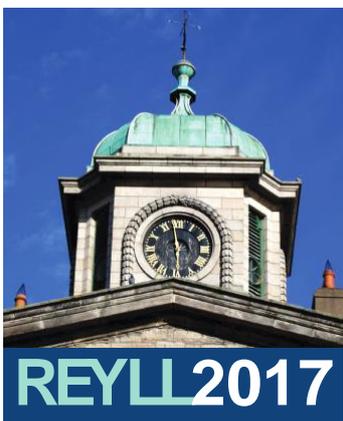


# 2019 TEANGA: Special Edition 10

Iris Chumann na Teangeolaíochta Feidhmí in Éirinn  
The Journal of the Irish Association of Applied Linguistics



## Proceedings of Multilingualism in the Early Years Conference

Dublin Institute of Technology May 2017



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# Factors which impact on transitions from Irish-medium Naíscoil to Bunscoil

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## **Abstract**

The Irish-medium naíscoil (pre-primary) sector is considered the foundation stone on which further sectoral developments at primary and post-primary level are initiated. This paper reports on research commissioned by the Department of Education in Northern Ireland on the educational outcomes of Irish-medium [IM] pre-school settings. The research was undertaken by RSM Mc ClureWatters (Consulting) and the author of this paper was project manager and lead author. The research explored which core components lead to optimum readiness for transition to IM primary school and the extent to which these components are present in IM naíscoileanna in the statutory and voluntary sector in the north of Ireland. The research methods were qualitative including a desk based legislative and policy analysis, a literature review and semi-structured interviews with school staff. Findings indicate that IM naíscoil practice is different from monolingual English-medium practice in a number of ways including transition practices. There are also differences between statutory and voluntary naíscoileanna. A number of recommendations are made in order to ameliorate differences in provision and associated inconsistencies in order to ensure equality in provision and the best outcomes and transition experiences possible for young Irish-medium learners.

**Keywords:** *Irish-medium, early years, transitions*

## **1. Introduction**

The Irish-medium [IM] nursery sector is the foundation on which further developments at primary and post-primary phases are initiated (Mhic Mhathúna, 2011). The naiscoil [nursery] sector in the north of Ireland is a relatively young sector. The first immersion naiscoil was set up in 1978. Growth in the sector was initially without state support but through the fund-raising of parents and language activists (Ó Baoill 2007). State recognition and funding was slow at the outset. However an integral part of the *Good Friday Agreement* (1998) was that the British Government signed Parts 2 and 3 of the Charter for Minority Languages (Council of Europe 1992) agreeing to encourage and facilitate IM education. This has been described as “the transition from being a marginal (and, perhaps, marginalised) element in the education system to being a stable and full partner in that system” (Peover 2002, p. 25) and as “coming in from the periphery” (Mac Corraidh 2006, p. 181). There followed a period of substantial growth in the sector at naiscoil, primary and post-primary levels.

A review of IM Education (DE, 2009) highlighted the need for research on the educational outcomes of IM pre-school education. RSM McClureWatters (Consulting) Ltd was appointed by the Department of Education to undertake the project during the academic year 2014–15 (McClureWatters et al., in press). The author of this paper was project manager and lead author of the research. The research aimed to identify which core components in naiscoileanna lead to optimum readiness for transition to Foundation Stage in IM primary schools and the extent to which these components are present in naiscoileanna in the statutory and voluntary sector in the north of Ireland. The data relating to the contextual factors which lead to successful transition to primary education including the transition arrangements from naiscoil to bunscoil will be discussed in this paper.

## **2. Literature Review**

Many issues related to early years education are generic and can be applied equally to Irish-medium and English-medium settings. However, there are significant differences between immersion contexts and monolingual contexts. Pupils are learning language and learning from the expected curriculum experiences simultaneously. Particular approaches to learning, teaching and assessment are required so that the linguistic needs of pupils are supported as well as other developmental and learning needs.

Common features can be identified from the international literature on immersion education (Bangma and Riemersma 2011) and reviews of research and classroom based studies in

Ireland both north and south which contribute to the current understanding of what constitutes good practice in Irish-medium naíscoil settings (Andrews 2006; Clay and Nig Uidhir 2017; Hickey 1997; Mhic Mhathúna 1999). Key factors include the creation of a comfortable learning environment which encourages the use of Irish. There is an emphasis on contextual understanding through play-based learning and the use of visuals, concrete materials and paralinguistic cues to secure understanding. Teachers model the language in all routines and pupils take part in shared activities such as songs, stories, rhymes and circle time routines. Language skills are developed in a systematic way through a thematic approach. Themes are chosen based on pupils' interest and in order to maximise exposure to relevant vocabulary and syntax.

The role of the teacher and other adults is notably different in Irish-medium settings. Planning for language development is an important requirement as is assessing and monitoring children's developing linguistic skills (Hickey 1997). Andrews identifies essential teaching competences, including:

- familiarity with the overall content of the setting's language programme;
- familiarity with the sequences in which particular aspects of language are addressed;
- use of non-verbal cues;
- taking advantage of opportunities to revisit and use language which has been a focus in the past; and
- providing a balance between language which is just at the level of children's understanding and language which stretches their competence (Andrews 2006, p. 33).

Mhic Mhathúna (2009) highlights how IM teachers support children's initiatives and interests in the early stages of language development:

To do this successfully requires a deep knowledge of the process of second language acquisition as well as early childhood pedagogy. Staff need to know how to manage the process of second-language learning so that children are offered input at an appropriate level sufficient for progress but not overwhelming. They need to be able to apply this knowledge to

early years practice so that children are offered a rich educational experience as well as language learning. (Mhic Mhathúna 2009, p.306).

### *2.1. Irish-Medium Professional Development*

Pre-service and in-service professional development is highlighted in a study of Māori-medium education (May, Hill & Tiakwai 2004) which identifies essential aspects, including:

- bilingual theory and research;
- the bilingual programme the school uses;
- second language acquisition and development;
- instructional strategies in second language development;
- multicultural and educational equity training; and
- cooperative learning strategies” (May, Hill & Tiakwai 2004, p. 125)

A number of researchers highlight importance of specific pedagogy and competence in the target language. Hickey and de Mejía (2013) argue that in-service provision is also necessary to retain experienced staff, stating

There is a need for “high-quality and systematic ongoing training delivered by effective and experienced practitioners, allowing them to share their expertise. Such training needs to be accompanied by the development of adequate career structures where these are currently lacking, to promote better retention of the most effective and experienced practitioners” (Hickey and de Meja 2013, p.139).

Teachers’ competence in the immersion language is a factor contributing to the learning outcomes of pupils. The challenge of recruiting staff who have education/childcare qualifications and the required language competence is a common issue (May et al. 2004; Ytsma, Riemersma & de Jong 2007). Combining early years qualifications and language skills is considered “a complex and sensitive task”. (Stephen, Mc Pake, Mc Leod, Pollock & Carroll 2009, p. 39). The wide-ranging language competences of Gaelic-medium staff in Scotland have many commonalities with the Irish-medium experience (Robertson 2006):

“Students enrolling on courses have a wide range of language knowledge and experience. Some are native speakers of the language and some are products of Gaelic-medium school education while an increasing number are adult learners who have achieved a considerable degree of fluency in the language through immersion or other forms of intensive study programmes. The latter are usually highly motivated and their commitment to learn and develop compensates for some deficiencies in vocabulary, idiom and intonation ... It is essential that programmes for minority-language teacher education afford opportunities for students to develop their linguistic skills and that the use of the minority language as a medium of instruction should be maximised (Robertson, 2006, pp. 160-162).”

In the IM context the challenge for the naíscoil sector is identified by Ó Baoill (2007, p. 423), ‘Providing well-trained and linguistically competent teachers is a central priority as they form the backbone of the immersion experience ... A more coherent and wide-ranging programme of training needs to be put in place at several third-level institutions’.

In a similar vein Nig Uidhir (2006) has argued for the development of a more structured pathway for naíscoil teachers within IM teacher education programmes. Researchers in Gaelic-medium education in Scotland (Stephen et al. 2009) have proposed measures to address the similar challenges in Scotland: improving both initial teacher education and continuing professional development for all settings and the development of mechanisms to discuss and share knowledge and practice. However, Riordan (2016) in a study of non-native speaker language teachers in Germany suggests that there is a lack of clarity about what language competence is required, something which is also the case in the IM context.

## *2.2. Transitions from Naíscoil to Primary Education*

There is a substantial body of research related to transitions from pre-school to primary school (see for example Brooker 2008; Whalley and the Pen Green Centre Team 1997). A study of transitions in the north of Ireland from an English-medium perspective (Walsh, Taylor, Sproule & McGuinness 2008) highlights the changes and discontinuities that young pupils experience at this crucial time in their development. The report advocates a planned transition programme with clear objectives. In a study of IM transitions (Mhic Mhathúna 2011) it is noted that there are few references in the literature to the language dimension of transitions. In this study, staff in pre-school settings on the same site as the primary school

felt they were advantaged when managing transitions. However Mhic Mhathúna cautions against the top-down pressure from primary schools to force more formal ‘school work’ on naíscoil settings. Pupil participants shared transition experiences in the study. They liked their naíonra because ‘they had friends and relatives in the same group, they had a big birthday party, that they were learning Irish and there were nice toys’(Mhic Mhathúna 2011, p. 48). When asked to give advice to new pupils moving to primary school they responded that the teacher was nice, that she helped them to speak in Irish and that they had to speak Irish in primary school. The pupils’ responses in this study indicate that language is an important dimension in transitions.

In summary, a number of contextual factors have been identified in the literature which may influence the learning outcomes relating to IM naíscoil settings and successful transitions from naíscoil to bunscoil. These factors include:

- the quality of pupils’ exposure to the target language;
- the qualifications and linguistic competence of teaching staff;
- the practitioners’ understanding and use of immersion methodologies;
- the curriculum support and continuing professional development opportunities available to staff; and
- the nature of transition arrangements from pre-school to primary school.

The research findings will illuminate how these factors, and others identified by participants, impact on the Irish-medium naíscoil context in the north of Ireland and on successful transitions to primary education.

### **3. Research Methods**

Research methods were threefold:

- A desk-based analysis of demographics, policies and relevant literature;
- Semi-structured interviews with 13 stakeholders from IM advisory organisations;
- Semi-structured interviews with participants from 30 IM naíscoil settings.

This paper reports on data from the interviews conducted in naíscoil settings. The sample includes long-established and newly-established schools, city schools and schools in small

towns and both statutory and voluntary settings throughout the north. This constitutes a representative sample and therefore there can be confidence in the findings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants. For the most part interviews were conducted with the leader or teacher, in some settings the school principal or chair of the naíscoil committee participated. Participants were asked to give informed consent, were assured that they would be guaranteed anonymity and that they could withdraw from the research at any time (BERA 2011). Participants chose whether to conduct the interview in English or Irish. Responses in Irish have been translated for the purpose of this paper. Some data are reported quantitatively using the following terms:

- Almost/nearly: more than 90%
- Most: 75%-90%
- A majority: 50%-74%
- A significant minority: 30%-49%
- A minority: 10%-29%
- Very few/a small number: less than 10%.

It is of note that pupils were not participants in the research according to the terms of reference set out by the funding body. This is unfortunate as pupil voice would have contributed to the research and to the quality of analysis (UNCRC 1989).

## **4. Findings**

### *4.1. Demographics*

During the timeframe of the research (2014–15) there were 43 IM naíscoileanna in the north of Ireland for pupils aged 3–4 in the school year before they begin primary education. There were 14 settings categorised as statutory nursery classes managed by primary school principals and boards of governors. The teachers in these settings were qualified teachers registered with General Teaching Council for NI (GTCNI). There were 29 voluntary settings managed by voluntary committees and funded for the most part by DE Pre-school education Programme, funding from other early years sources and from voluntary fundraising efforts. Nursery leaders in these settings are required to have a minimum qualification in Childcare at Level 3.

Between 2004/05 and 2014/15, there was a modest increase in the number of IM naiscoil settings and staff (<5%) but a substantial increase in the number of pupils (> 30%). The following table indicates the total number of statutory and voluntary settings and pupil numbers in the academic year 2014–15.

Numbers	Voluntary Settings	Statutory Settings	Total
Number of Settings	29	14	43
Number of Pupils (funded and unfunded)	562	397	959
Number of Pupils (funded only)	488	397	885

*Table 1: Statutory and Voluntary Settings and Pupils in the Academic Year 2014-2015*

#### *4.2. Accommodation*

Responses indicated that 50% of naiscoil settings were in permanent buildings and 50% in mobile accommodation. Some shared premises with other organisations. This can cause difficulties. An ideal situation is where the setting is in an appropriate permanent building or if it shares accommodation with educational organisations (e.g. 0–3-year-old provision or after-schools club) or if it can be used by community groups without disturbing the work of the pre-school setting. This however was not always the case:

“The gaelscoil use our building for assembly and mealtimes”. (Case 6).

“We share with a band and a luncheon club. This creates difficulty as all items belonging to the naiscoil have to be moved and stored away on five nights a week”. (Case 9).

A small number of participants were reluctant to use the term ‘mobile’ and indicated that this had an impact on the way the setting was viewed in the wider community which could impact on marketing and recruitment:

We are happy in terms of IM nursery education but a permanent building would be a help. It is not easy to be in competition with other nursery and primary schools (with temporary accommodation). People say ‘that wee Irish school, sure they only have huts. (Case 4).

#### *4.3. Length of Time Established*

The recent growth of the IM pre-school sector is illustrated in the following table based on participants reporting how long their setting has been established:

Length of Time Established	Number of Settings	Percent	Cumulative Percent
less than 5 years	3	10.0	10.0
6-10 years	4	13.3	23.3
11-15 years	5	16.7	40.0
16-20 years	6	20.0	60.0
More than 20 years	12	40.0	100.0

*Table 2: How long settings have been established*

It is noted that whilst there are 12 schools in the sample which are more than twenty years established this is matched by 12 schools established less than fifteen years. Newly established schools have particular developmental needs. The English-medium sector can draw on a wide pool of experience to support newly established schools. This may be a greater challenge in the IM sector which has additional requirements related to the immersion model of education. A small number of participants commented on the challenges experienced by a young and growing sector, “The Irish-medium sector is still very young. The ages of staff is young. There aren’t many people out there who have the experience or the expertise in the sector”. (Case 30)

#### *4.4. Children’s exposure to the language*

There is diversity in the children’s exposure to the language. Some settings provide a two year programme, some a one year programme.<sup>1</sup> Statutory settings in the main provide a one year programme which is based on the DE Pre-school Education Programme. Some settings enhance provision with playgroups for younger children. The provision for children aged 0-3 years was an issue raised by some participants who believed that maximum exposure to the target language led to better outcomes for pupils, ‘To develop the naiscoil to 0-3 provision, that is the next threshold... we will always be struggling until the school is treated properly and (we have) the two year immersion approach’. (Case 28).

Staff-pupil ratios typically impact on pupils’ exposure to the immersion language. Most settings reported a number of both part-time and full-time staff and many settings also

reported voluntary workers such as childcare students on work placements and parents who enhance the pupil-adult ratio. Respondents from statutory settings observed that they had noted improvements in pupils’ language development since the settings were designated statutory and a qualified teacher was employed. However an associated challenge was in relation to staff-pupil ratios as the funding model covered a teacher and only one assistant. Principal respondents found this was not enough in terms of maximising pupils’ quality exposure to Irish:

There is a need for more staff in IM nurseries. Because we have the same ratio as English-medium nurseries. When you have smaller groups you have time to talk with the children. The way things are now there isn’t the time to talk with the children and we don’t have the budget to recruit extra people. (Case 20).

#### *4.5. Staff Qualifications and Linguistic Profiles*

The table below illustrates the highest education and childcare qualifications of the teachers and leader participants.

Qualifications	Statutory	Voluntary	Total
Postgraduate Certificate in Education	6	0	6
Degree	4	5	9
Level 5 Childcare Management	-	2	2
Level 3 Childcare	-	13	13

*Table 3: Education/Childcare Qualifications of Staff in IM Pre-Schools (sample visited)*

This evidence illustrates contrasts in the level of qualifications staff hold in statutory and voluntary settings. In addition to the above qualifications, five respondents also held the Level 2 Certificate in Immersion Education even though they already held a higher level of qualification in non-immersion specific education. This indicates the relevance of pursuing a qualification which is tailored to the linguistic and pedagogical nature of IM pre-school settings. Quality and Qualifications Ireland equivalencies of Northern Ireland child care qualifications ([www.qqi.ie](http://www.qqi.ie)) are shown in the table below:

Qualifications and Credit Framework/	National Framework of Qualifications
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National Qualifications Framework for England and Northern Ireland <a href="http://www.ofqual.gov.uk">www.ofqual.gov.uk</a> <a href="http://www.ccea.org.uk">www.ccea.org.uk</a>	for Ireland <a href="http://www.qqi.ie">www.qqi.ie</a>
Level 5 Childcare Management	Advanced /Higher Certificate
Level 3 Childcare	Level 5
Level 2 Childcare	Level 4

*Table 4: Qualification and Qualifications Equivalences*

The following table shows the qualifications or Irish language status reported by teachers and leaders.

Qualifications/Status	Statutory	Voluntary	Total
Native Speaker	-	1	<b>1</b>
Degree in Irish	10	-	<b>10</b>
Diploma	-	6	<b>6</b>
A level/Leaving Certificate	-	6	<b>6</b>
AS level	-	1	<b>1</b>
GCSE/Junior Certificate	-	2	<b>2</b>
Beginner Certificate	-	2	<b>2</b>
None	-	2	<b>2</b>

Table 5: Qualifications/status related to Irish Language competence

This table illustrates contrasts between the statutory and the voluntary settings and provides evidence of a wide range of language competence among staff particularly within the voluntary sector. A small number of settings reported that they had appointed staff with limited fluency in the Irish language. Some staff in statutory nurseries conveyed their concerns about lack of consistency regarding Irish language competence and how this may impact on pupils’ learning outcomes. Some also attributed consistency to statutory status:

“Teachers have to have a qualification in childcare and at least a degree in Irish. I have noticed a big difference since we changed from a playgroup to a statutory naiscoil”. (Case 4). Figure 1 reports on a more detailed self-evaluation of staff Irish language profile which shows that staff in IM pre-school settings learnt the language in a wide variety of ways beyond academic qualifications:

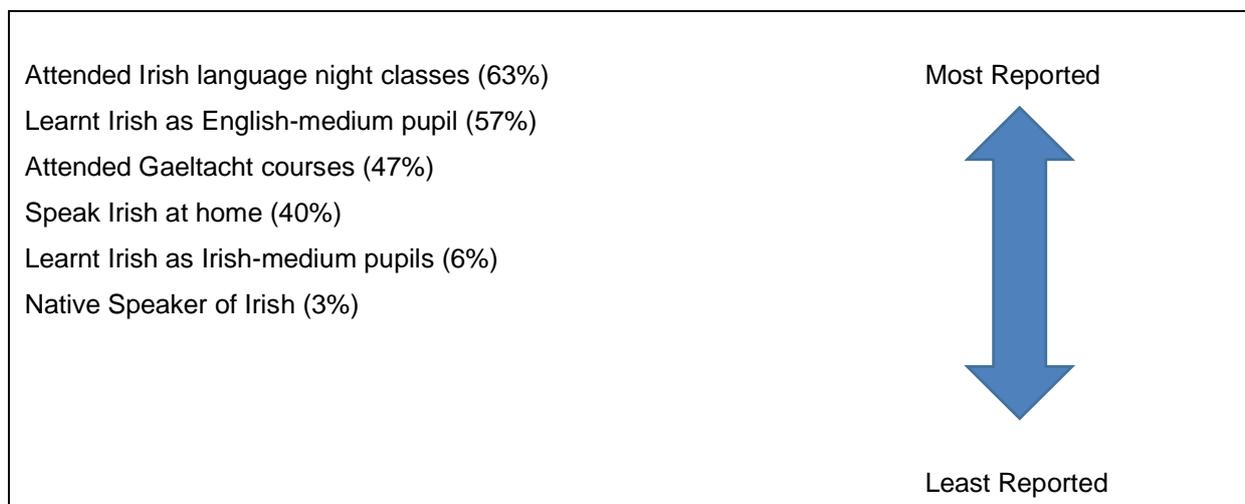


Figure 1: Staff Irish Language Profile

Further information was elicited on language competences based on a variety of immersion practices ranging from basic greetings and routine conversations to using Irish in unplanned play and language activities. Almost all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they could use Irish competently during daily nursery routines. All respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they could:

- Use social language to meet and greet pupils;
- Read and tell stories to the pupils;
- Engage in routine songs and rhymes;
- Talk with children during play routines;
- Ask questions during discussions.

However when asked if they were satisfied with their current level of Irish a majority replied that they were not. This included a number of respondents who had achieved degree level qualifications in Irish. A significant minority were attending Irish language classes and many more expressed a desire to attend classes if they were available locally at the required level. This is an indication that there is a healthy disposition towards life-long learning within staff in the pre-school sector particularly as it relates to the Irish language.

Respondents frequently commented on the impact on recruitment and retention of staff. A significant minority of respondents spoke of the challenges of recruiting and retaining qualified and skilful staff particularly for the voluntary settings. “It is very difficult to get staff who are fluent in Irish and qualified in childcare. That is the biggest difficulty for the sector at present” (Case 8).

Some participants saw it as an issue related to career guidance in schools. “People must be encouraged to go ahead and get an Irish ‘A’ level and that there are jobs available in childcare if you have an Irish ‘A’ level” (Case 4).

#### *4.6. Curriculum Support and Continuing Professional Development*

Participants in a majority of voluntary settings reported on continuing professional development that staff were undertaking at the time of the study. This provides further

evidence that there is a culture of improvement and life-long learning among a significant minority of staff in voluntary settings.

Type of Course	Number of participants
Degree in Irish	1
Degree in Early Childhood Studies	1
Level 5 Management in Childcare	5
Level 3 Childcare	2
Certificate in Immersion Education (Altram, accredited by Ulster University)	5

*Table 6: Current Continuing Professional Development in Voluntary Settings*

A strong theme emerging from the findings is that the nature and level of curriculum support and advice provided by the IM early years organisation Altram ([www.altram.org](http://www.altram.org)). All but one naiscoil setting that took part in an interview cited Altram as the main source of IM support and spoke in positive terms about the quality of that support. Short courses provided by Altram included courses on child safeguarding, planning, observation, investigations, creative arts, behaviour management and storytelling. Staff in some settings also pursued the Altram Level 2 Certificate in Immersion Education. “That course really helped bring consistency in language use in the naiscoil and planning. I think the course should be rolled out for everybody working in naiscoileanna”. (Case 5). Another setting said “Through the Altram immersion course we now collaborate with staff from other naiscoileanna”. (Case 3).

Altram early years advisors were cited as providing support with planning, self-evaluation processes, lending expensive play equipment on a monthly basis and in one case providing Irish language support in a setting which was struggling to recruit a language specialist:

We have an early years specialist and she is great. She gives us all sorts of support, over and above her job. She helps us prepare for inspections... Altram helps with planning and with any new legislation that comes in. (Case 5).

Many participants also engaged with the English-medium organisation Early Years (<http://www.early-years.org/>). They reported that the nature of the support was different.

“Altram give IM support and curriculum guidance. Early years gives general guidance relating to early years stuff, policies and vetting”. (Case 10)

Teachers in statutory pre-school settings reported that they could draw on the advice and curriculum support from the Education and Library Boards, now referred to as the Education Authority. They cited support with special educational needs advice, general support and advice regarding child safeguarding.

A small number of participants suggested that there was a need for a more strategic approach to improve IM professional development in order to support schools. Both strategic direction from statutory organisations and improvements in the coordination of IM representation and quality of advocacy were required at strategic and administrative levels.

#### *4.7. Pay and Working Conditions*

All settings are expected to carry out similar requirements in terms of education and care, record-keeping and administrative duties, communicating and developing partnerships with parents as well as marketing and recruitment to ensure an adequate number of pupils on a yearly basis. Leaders in voluntary settings commented on the burden of expectations in light of differences in pay and working conditions in comparison with qualified teachers in statutory settings:

I feel that staff are undervalued in the voluntary pre-school Irish-medium sector as in comparison with IM statutory and this is reflected not only in salary but in expected record-keeping, monitoring and observations. (Case 18)

I don't think this sector is recognised for the importance of its role of the work we do. They would pay a minimum wage (to a preschool employee) for the same work, if not more paperwork, as a primary teacher. (Case 8)

#### *4.8. Transitions Arrangements from Naíscoil to Bunscoil*

There is a noted variation in the percentage of children transferring from pre-school settings to IM primary settings. Some reasons suggested by respondents included the travel distance to an IM primary school and how long IM primary provision had been available in the area. The following table shows the transfer rates from naíscoil to IM primary settings. The

settings with the lowest transfer rates are those most recently established and those with the highest rates of transition are the longest established settings, which indicates that optimum rates of transition are established gradually. The data also indicate that both voluntary and statutory settings were successfully achieving high transition rates >75%.

Percentage of Pupils	Voluntary Settings	Statutory Settings
90%-100%	5	6
75%-89%	5	4
50%-74%	5	1
Less than 50%	4	0

*Table 6: Transfer Rates of Pupils to Irish-medium Primary Schools*

The Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) recommend that nursery schools complete and share a transition form with primary schools although this is not a statutory requirement. This form was cited by the vast majority of respondents as part of the transition communication arrangements but a strong theme emerging from respondents was that it was limited in value and did not include information on immersion language-related outcomes. Therefore additional information was shared either in writing or during meetings with the IM primary settings:

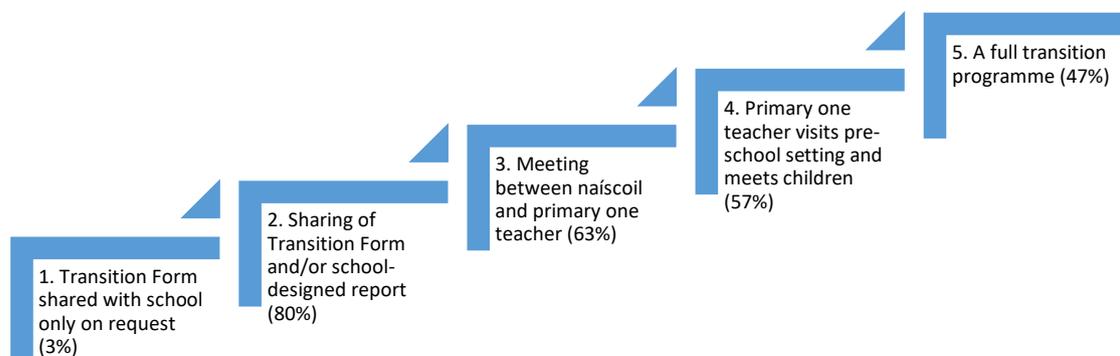
On that form there is no area or space for language specific issues. There is a box for ‘other comments’ and we use that for issues relating to the Irish language. A question on Irish language would be of benefit. (Case 11).

Some settings also devise their own report form:

We use the other format to give a better overview and there is a space dedicated to the Irish language as well on it. It would be better if there was a dedicated space on the transition form for the Irish language. (Case 5).

A majority of respondents discussed the fact that the CCEA Transition form was not fit-for-purpose.

Participants described a range of transition practices which can be plotted along a continuum from minimal to enhanced transition practices. Figure 3 illustrates the cumulative degrees of transition on a continuum from minimal communication to a full transition programme.



*Figure 3: Continuum of Transition Practices*

The following comments illustrate how the various points on this continuum are enacted:

1. “Parents are given two copies of the transition form and are advised to give a copy to the P1 teacher. Naíscoil doesn’t report pupils’ achievements to primary school/primary one teacher unless parents give permission to do so in certain circumstances if Bunscoil staff ask about certain pupils”. (Case 16)
2. “Only a written report... contact between the naíscoil and the primary school is extremely important because the primary school is an English-medium school although it has an Irish language curriculum. Until we have an IM primary school in the area there must be cooperation”. (Case 8)
3. “The teacher comes across and we discuss the reports”.(Case 2)
4. “From May onwards Rang 1 (Year 1) teacher visits Naíscoil. Teacher reads a story to the children, speaks to leader and workers and takes notes. Rang 1 teacher receives a copy of the transition form. General early years outcomes and language-specific outcomes are reported on”. (Case 17)
5. “We meet with the Rang a hAon (First Class) teacher and go through the form. There is a transition programme in the school. We go over for an hour a week on Fridays. They get a story, they play and they eat their sos (break). The teacher also comes to see the pupils in their own settings”. (Case 3).

Statutory nursery classes on the primary school site noted that there were particular advantages when it came to managing transitions and ensuring interactions between primary one children and primary one teachers and the pre-school teachers:

The P1 teacher goes down to the naíscoil to observe. We also have a few play mornings here (in the Bunscoil) and down in the naíscoil. There are a few things which make the transition easier and that the teachers get to know the children. It is a big advantage that the naíscoil is on the same site. (Case 20).

One respondent noted that English-medium schools did not participate in transition procedures, something which is desirable if a low number of pupils transfer to IM primary provision. “Only the Irish-medium teachers visit, but a visit from all P1 teachers would be very beneficial”. (Case 7).

## **5. Discussion**

The data illustrate that there are core-components specific to early years immersion settings which contribute to optimum readiness for transition to Foundation Stage in IM primary schools including the following:

- the quality of pupils’ exposure to the target language
- the qualifications and linguistic competence of teaching staff,
- the practitioners’ understanding and use of immersion methodologies,
- the curriculum support and continuing professional development opportunities available to staff; and
- the nature of transition arrangements from pre-school to primary school.

Staff in IM naíscoil settings reported that they are expected to have not only the knowledge and skills of their English-medium peers but also to have two additional skill sets: firstly an appropriate level of fluency in the Irish language and secondly an understanding of immersion pedagogies, in order to maximise children’s exposure to the language and their linguistic development. They reported that these additional skill-sets pose challenges in terms of recruitment and retention of staff and the need for fit-for-purpose continuing professional

development. Overall, emerging findings suggest a need for more consistency across the sector which may impact on learning outcomes and positive transition experiences.

Participants in statutory pre-school settings identified advantages associated with statutory status as staff were able to draw on the experience and management structures of the primary school. The findings also show that qualified teachers in statutory settings had higher Irish language qualifications than those in voluntary settings. This study did not compare pupils' linguistic achievements or language-related outcomes between statutory and voluntary settings. Both strengths and areas for development were highlighted by participants in both voluntary and statutory settings, in Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) reports and in the Chief Inspector's report (ETI 2014). Differences in provision and associated inconsistencies should be ameliorated in order to ensure equality in provision and the best outcomes possible for young Irish-medium learners. This could be facilitated in two ways: firstly, by ensuring appropriate continuing professional development linguistic support for all naiscoil settings and secondly, by increasing the number of statutory nursery settings.

Successful transition experiences for children as they move from pre-school to primary school settings have been identified in the literature as a desirable aspect of good practice. In Irish-medium research the language dimension of transitions has been identified as an important issue (Mhic Mhathúna 2011). A range of transition experiences were described by participants and in the majority of settings this included opportunities for Primary One teachers to meet pupils and observe their learning in the preschool setting and visits to the primary setting. Teachers in statutory pre-school settings felt that transition arrangements were better facilitated in statutory pre-school settings although Mhic Mhathúna (2011) has cautioned against the top-down pressure from primary schools to force 'school work' on the preschool settings. Given the importance of positive transition experiences as outlined in the literature all naiscoil settings and primary schools should be encouraged to foster partnerships and local English-medium schools should be encouraged strongly to engage with IM feeder naiscoileanna.

Based on the findings reported in this paper, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1: The perceived variation between statutory and voluntary IM pre-school settings noted by participants should be addressed in order to ensure consistency of experience for all pupils. One way of addressing these differences is to provide the required levels of curriculum and

linguistic support and continuing professional development for all settings, both voluntary and statutory. Another way is to consider extending the number of statutory nursery settings.

2: The identification and sharing of good practice across sectors should be promoted within bespoke programmes of professional development.

3: A language competence framework and Irish language professional development programme for staff working in naíscoil settings should be developed in order to enhance provision and secure the best language-related learning outcomes. The European framework *Teastas Eorpach na Gaeilge* ([www.teg.ie](http://www.teg.ie)) is a useful starting point for an exploration of this ‘complex and sensitive task’ (Stephen, Mc Pake, Mc Leod, Pollock and Carroll 2009, p. 39).

4. Agreed fit-for-purpose transition arrangements which reflect the IM learning experiences and best transition practices should be encouraged with local English-medium and Irish-medium primary schools.

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<sup>1</sup> DE funds one year of pre-school provision for the majority of the re-school cohort. Funding for an additional year (for example a two year programme) would be made available from the resources within the setting; this is not funded by DE.