Department of Education

Research on the Educational Outcomes of Pre-School Irish Medium Education

Final Report

March 2016

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1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 Introduction

RSM McClure Watters (Consulting) Ltd was appointed by the Department of Education to undertake Research on the Education Outcomes of Pre-School Irish Medium Education. RSM McClure Watters (Consulting) Ltd subcontracted aspects of the research to Dr. Eibhlín Mhic Aoidh (St Mary's University College, Belfast) as Project Manager and to Dr. Laoise Ní Thuairisg (National University of Ireland, Galway) and Aileen Nic Íomhair (St John the Baptist Primary School, Portadown) as research associates.

1.2 Terms of Reference

The research team was appointed to undertake a research project to identify which core components in Irish-medium pre-schools lead to optimum readiness for transition to Foundation Stage in Irish-medium primary schools and the extent to which these components are present in Irish-medium pre-schools in the statutory and voluntary sector in the North of Ireland. The terms of reference addressed by the research are as follows:

a) To conduct a literature review of policy and practice in respect of early years second language acquisition in the context of minority language immersion in a variety of settings, including internationally. The topics to be covered should include how criteria for success are established and how outcomes are assessed.

b) To identify, examine and comment on the learning outcomes, set or expected, for Irish-medium pre-schools, the criteria used to establish these outcomes and the methods used to assess the degree to which the desired outcomes are being achieved in Irish-medium pre-schools.

c) To sample a range of statutory and voluntary IME pre-school settings [no less than 29 out of 40] in the North of Ireland to identify the relevant characteristics of these and the practices and methodology used to contribute to Irish language acquisition.

d) To produce an interim report to update the Steering Group on consideration of the key elements listed above by 6 April 2015.

e) To produce a draft final report addressing each of the key elements above for consideration by the Steering Group.

f) To produce a final report addressing each of the key elements listed above.

In fulfilling action b) the research team were required to identify:

- best practice in pre-schools
- indicators of best practice used to assess quality of provision in Irish-medium pre-schools
- how best practice is measured, including what self-evaluation procedures are used to assess progress and outcomes in Irish-medium pre-schools including the quality standards used by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI)

- language-related best practices and methodology used in Irish-medium pre-schools, and the language development outcomes expected
- any guidance issued by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) to Irish-medium settings including any guidance issued by relevant Irish-medium organisations about the processes and procedures used to assess the progress of pupils in Irish-medium pre-schools.

1.3 Research Questions

Arising from the above terms of reference the following research questions were generated:

1. Which core components in Irish-medium pre-schools lead to optimum readiness for transition to foundation stage in Irish-medium primary schools?
2. What are the learning outcomes, set or expected, for Irish-medium pre-schools?
3. What are the criteria used to establish language-related outcomes and the methods used to assess the degree to which the outcomes are being achieved in Irish-medium pre-schools?
4. What indicators of best practice are used to assess quality in Irish-medium pre-schools?
5. How is best practice measured including what self-evaluation procedures are used to assess progress and outcomes in Irish-medium pre-schools including ETI Quality Standards?
6. What language-related best practices and methodologies have been identified?
7. What guidance has been issued by CCEA to Irish-medium settings including examples of best practice used to assess quality in IM pre-school settings?

These research questions will be addressed within the research methodology including the literature review and will be re-visited in a discussion / conclusions chapter in order to draw conclusions and make recommendations based on the research findings.

1.4 Methodology

The main work streams in the delivery of this assignment included:

- Desk based research;
- Literature review;
- School visits / interviews with school staff (30 visits);
- Collation of findings from school interviews;
- Consultations with key strategic stakeholders in the Irish Medium and Pre-School sector;
- Collation of findings from key stakeholder interviews (13 interviewees); and
- Analysis and reporting.

1.5   Conclusions and Recommendations

Findings from the research indicate that IM pre-school practice is different from monolingual English-medium practice in a number of significant ways including the immersion pedagogies employed to develop pupils' understanding and expression in a language which for most is not a language of the home. In the Irish-medium pre-school sector, there are core-components specific to early years immersion settings which reflect the nature of immersion language learning experiences and the developmental profile of young children learning a new language and engaging in early learning experiences through that new language. The process of second language development is described as progression along a continuum from the development of the receptive skills of listening and understanding to the expressive skills of inserting single words or phrases in English sentences towards an ability to generate spontaneous phrases and sentence. Staff are required to have not only the knowledge and skills of their English-medium peers but also to have two additional skill sets: an appropriate level of fluency in the Irish language and an understanding of immersion pedagogies in order to maximise children's exposure to the language and their linguistic development. It is recommended that curricular guidance, expectations regarding learning outcomes, observation and assessment practices and transition arrangements and frameworks for evaluating quality in IM settings should all reflect the nature of immersion pre-school Irish-medium education experienced by pupils.

Recommendation 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[1].

Recommendation 2: The identification and sharing of good practice across sectors should be promoted within bespoke programmes of CPD available to all IM Pre-school settings. This should also inform a quality assurance framework for CPD provision.

Recommendation 3: A language competence framework and continuing professional development programme for staff working in Irish-medium pre-school settings should be developed in order to enhance provision and secure the best language-related learning outcomes.

Recommendation 4: An agreed fit-for-purpose transition report form which reflects the IM learning experiences and linguistic development of children at the end of their pre-school year should be devised.

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[1] Proposals for new statutory nursery provision are subject to the statutory development proposal process.

Recommendation 5: Given the importance of the key relationship between parents and the pre-school education provision for their children, linguistic resources should be developed to support IM parental partnerships.

Recommendation 6: An exploratory framework of desirable descriptors/indicators of typical IM language development for children in pre-school settings should be developed and piloted. These descriptors/indicators should take cognisance of three key sources: bilingual frameworks in international research; the experience of IM pre-school teachers; and empirical evidence of the typical levels of immersion language observed in settings.

Recommendation 7: Bespoke pre-school curricular guidance which takes cognisance of the IM immersion context should be developed by a collaborative group of stakeholders including practitioners.

Recommendation 8: Quality indicators in IM pre-school settings should be developed to underpin the Together Towards Improvement self-evaluation process.

Recommendation 9: An understanding of the principles and practices of pre-school IM education as well as a reasonable proficiency in the Irish language should be a requirement of all those who evaluate the quality of provision and learning in IM pre-school settings.

2 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Introduction

Irish-medium education is a form of immersion education where pupils are immersed in and educated in a language which for most children is not a language of the home. The Irish-medium pre-school sector in NI is a relatively young sector. The pupils' education is enhanced by the support of educators and of parents who are motivated by the benefits of bilingualism. There are many issues related to the early education of pre-school children which are generic and can be applied equally to Irish-medium and English-medium settings. There are also many specific issues related to Irish-medium pre-school provision which are unique including the nature and pace of pupils' learning and development through an immersion language which contributes greatly to understandings of learning outcomes in Irish-medium pre-school settings.

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In this section we set out the terms of reference for the evaluation and a summary of the methodology.

2.2 Terms of Reference

The research team was appointed to undertake a research project to identify which core components in Irish-medium pre-schools lead to optimum readiness for transition to Foundation Stage in Irish-medium primary schools and the extent to which these components are present in Irish-medium pre-schools in the statutory and voluntary sector in the North of Ireland. The terms of reference addressed by the research are as follows:

g) To conduct a literature review of policy and practice in respect of early years second language acquisition in the context of minority language immersion in a variety of settings, including internationally. The topics to be covered should include how criteria for success are established and how outcomes are assessed.

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k) To produce a draft final report addressing each of the key elements above for consideration by the Steering Group.

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2.3 Research Questions

Arising from the above terms of reference the following research questions were generated:

8. Which core components in Irish-medium pre-schools lead to optimum readiness for transition to foundation stage in Irish-medium primary schools?

9. What are the learning outcomes, set or expected, for Irish-medium pre-schools?

10. What are the criteria used to establish language-related outcomes and the methods used to assess the degree to which the outcomes are being achieved in Irish-medium pre-schools?

11. What indicators of best practice are used to assess quality in Irish-medium pre-schools?

12. How is best practice measured including what self-evaluation procedures are used to assess progress and outcomes in Irish-medium pre-schools including ETI Quality Standards?

13. What language-related best practices and methodologies have been identified?

14. What guidance has been issued by CCEA to Irish-medium settings including examples of best practice used to assess quality in IM pre-school settings?

These research questions will be addressed within the research methodology including the literature review and will be re-visited in a discussion / conclusions chapter in order to draw conclusions and make recommendations based on the research findings.

2.4 Methodology

The main work streams in the delivery of this assignment included:

- Desk based research;
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- Collation of findings from school interviews;
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- Collation of findings from key stakeholder interviews (13 interviewees); and
- Analysis and reporting.

2.5 Format of the Report

The remainder of this report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 3 – Strategic Context
- Chapter 4 – Key Findings from the Literature Review
- Chapter 5 – Key Findings – Strategic Stakeholder Consultations
- Chapter 6 – Key Findings – IME pre-school staff interviews
- Chapter 7 – Conclusions
- Chapter 8 – Recommendations.

3   STRATEGIC CONTEXT

3.1   Introduction

This section provides an overview of the policy and strategic context for this research and key issues relating to Irish-medium Education (IME) in pre-school settings in Northern Ireland.

3.2 IME Pre-School Education in Northern Ireland – Context and Background

3.2.1 Pre-School Education[2]

In Northern Ireland, pre-school education is non-compulsory and historically about 92% of children in their final pre-school year have applied for a funded pre-school place. The aim of the Pre-School Education Programme, which was introduced in Northern Ireland in 1998, is to provide one year of funded pre-school education, in the year before compulsory education, for every child whose parents choose to access it: this is reflected in the Programme for Government commitment 2011/15 to ensure that at least one year of pre-school is available to every family that wants it.

Pre-school provision is not defined according to sectors (e.g. integrated, Roman Catholic maintained, Controlled), meaning all pre-school settings, regardless of location, are considered accessible to children from all backgrounds. Admissions criteria are set by pre-school providers themselves; however legislation requires that first priority is given to children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds

The Pre-School Education Programme was designed as a partnership between the statutory and voluntary/private sectors.   Both follow common curriculum guidelines and subject to the same inspection standards. Places are offered in statutory settings in nursery schools and units attached to primary schools and in non-statutory voluntary playgroups and private settings: nursery units and nursery schools can provide accommodation for voluntary settings within their grounds.

The duration of part-time and full-time pre-school education is set out in Article 22 (4) (b) of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order[3] which describes full-time pre-school education as normally provided for at least 4 hours and 30 minutes on each school day, and part-time pre-school education as provided for less than 4 hours and 30 minutes but for at least 2 hours and 30 minutes on each school day.

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[2] Information provided by Department of Education (Early Years Team) to RSM McClure Watters (June 2015)

[3]   The   legislation   can   be   accessed   via   the   link   below:
http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1998/1759/article/22/made

The staffing of a statutory nursery class is two qualified staff, i.e. a qualified teacher and a qualified nursery classroom assistant: to 26 children: Non-statutory settings must maintain a staff to pupil ratio of 1:8 as required by their registration with the Health and Social Care Trusts under the Children (NI) Order 1995.

The "Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education"(NICCEA 2006) contains guidance on aspects of effective delivery of pre-school education in the early years setting such as good practice in organisation, planning for progression, and involving parents. The Guidance is designed to support and promote good quality pre-school educational provision and outlines the range of learning opportunities which children of this age should have through play and other relevant experiences. The Pre-School Education Advisory Groups (PEAG) of each Region in the Education Authority are responsible for ensuring that there is adequate pre-school provision in local areas

In accordance with the Review of Irish-Medium Education, registered Irish Medium providers with sufficient children can enter the funding programme even where unfilled English-medium provision is available in the area.

In relation to admissions, it is also worth noting that the criteria for pre-school admissions is such that measures of social deprivation take precedence. It is therefore possible that a child who is awarded a place (as a priority) goes through IME pre-school education but does not proceed to IM Primary whereas those with an IM background may not get an IME pre-school place and do not follow on to IME primary. However, in recent years, there has been some flexibility around admissions from DE[4]].

Overall, considering funded places, there are 729 pre-school settings (this includes voluntary and private preschool centres, nursery schools, nursery units within primary schools[5],) and 23,997 pupils in pre-school education in Northern Ireland.

It is worth noting that pre-school settings may change their status in line with the Development Proposal process[6] i.e.: a non-statutory setting may have closed and new statutory provision opened subject to Ministerial approval. At times of such change in status, the staffing levels are likely to change.

3.2.2 IME pre-school education

IME pre-school education is a form of immersion education where pupils are immersed in, cared for and educated in a language which, for most pupils, is not that of the home. The IME pre-school sector in Northern Ireland is a relatively young sector. The pupils' care and education is enhanced by the support of parents who are motivated by the benefits of bilingualism and of a developing an Irish language community and by committed educators.

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[4] See Section 3.2.1 re: Temporary Flexibility policy
[5] Some pupils (approx. 350) also receive their pre-school education in reception provision
[6]   http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85schools/13schools_estate_pg/13schools_estate_lossary_pg/14-schools_estate_devprop_pg.htm

There are many issues related to the education of pre-school children which are generic and can be applied equally to IME and English-medium settings. However, there are many specific issues related to Irish–medium pre-school provision which are crucial in understanding the research context and how factors influence and contribute to pupils' outcomes. These include but are not limited to:

- The nature and growth of the IME pre-school sector;
- Pre-school Curricular Guidance;
- The role of educators as exemplars of the immersion language;
- The availability of research to inform practice in IM settings; and
- Curriculum support and continuing professional development.

Overall, considering funded places, there are 43 pre-school settings and 885 pupils in IME pre-school education in Northern Ireland. Given the figures above for total pre-school provision (funded only), this represents 5.9% of all pre-school settings and 3.7% of all pre-school pupils.

3.2.3 Department of Education– Role and remit in respect of early years

The Department of Education is responsible and accountable for the early years education and learning services it provides to children and their families across a range of programmes, specifically[7]:

- The Sure Start Programme;
- The Pre-School Education Programme;
- Reception; and
- The Foundation Stage (Primary Years 1 and 2).

The Department of Education provides specific guidance on induction and transition[8] aimed to assist teachers and staff in pre-school settings and Year 1 to settle children into their new environments at the start or during the school year; and to help parents understand the purpose of the settling in arrangements and what happens when children start school or pre-school.

This recognises that although settling in times are at the discretion of each school and pre-school, this varies across and between settings and that Learning to Learn - A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning includes an action for the Department of Education to issue guidance on reducing the length of settling in time for pre-school and Year 1 to take account of the child's previous experience. The overall aim of the action is to minimise the settling in period to ensure that all children are settled into, and experience, the full or part

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[7] Department of Education (2013) *Learning to Learn Framework – A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning*
[8] https://www.deni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/de/guidance-on-induction-and-transition-pre-school-education-and-year-1.pdf
https://www.deni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/de/guidance-on-induction-and-transition-pre-school-education-and-year-1-irish.pdf

time day in pre-school settings and Year 1 of primary school as early as possible or appropriate to a child's individual needs from the beginning of September each year.

3.2.4 CCEA – Role and remit in respect of early years

According to its corporate plan, The Council for the Curriculum Examinations & Assessment's (CCEA) remit in relation to early years is to engage with DE to identify / address CCEA's remit for the 0–6/early years framework.[9] In practice, CCEA note that they have engaged with DE in relation to the development of pre-school education to ensure that it supports and is consistent with primary school education (though not providing input to the pre-school curriculum), their responsibilities and remit begin at P1.

With regard to transition from pre-school to primary school, CCEA has made available to all pre-school settings a generic transition form[10], CCEA does not provide a form specific to IM education which allows staff to provide an overview of a child's language outcomes in a second language[11]. However CCEA does provide a translation of the generic transition form used by English-medium schools.

3.2.5 Definitions: Early Years in Northern Ireland and the focus of this study

As defined in the Department of Education Learning to Learn Framework[12], Early Years refers to children aged 0-6 years old. This study is focused on the funded element of pre-schools for children in their final year (i.e. 3-4 year olds) - research and demography data focuses solely on this group. However, information presented in the strategic context and literature review encompasses the entirety of early years, including those in their pre-school year.

3.2.6 Definitions: Assessment and Assessment Tools in the context of Pre-School Settings in Northern Ireland

There are no requirements for formal assessment of learning in pre-school settings. Both the pre-school curricular guidance for NI[13] and the ETI Together Towards Improvement guidance[14] recommend that assessment in the pre-school year should be observation-based and embedded in play and daily routines. For the purpose of this study, the term

[9] http://www.rewardinglearning.org.uk/docs/about/corporate_plan_2013_2015.pdf
[10] The Research Team understands that the CCEA form is not mandatory. However it seems that as it is issued by a statutory body, many pre-school settings are under the impression that it is. There is also an argument that it is useful for primary schools to receive some information about pupils who move on to them from pre-schools.
[11] A brief form is usually provided by the pre-school to the primary school which provides an overview of the child's emotional and physical development, as well as leaning and pre-reading and writing skills.
[12] Department of Education (2013) *Learning to Learn Framework – A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning*
[13] Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) (2006) Pre-school Curricular Guidance. Belfast: CCEA.
[14] Education and Training Inspectorate (2010) Together Towards improvement- a process for self-evaluation; pre-school. Bangor: ETINI.

"assessment" refers to this practice; on a day to day basis, this may be referred to as "informal assessment".

3.3 The nature and growth of the IME pre-school sector

The nature and growth of the IME pre-school sector in Northern Ireland is reflected in legislation and regulations, demographic data and current trend information.

Legislation and Regulations

There are a number of legislative and regulatory documents that set out the need for pre-school IME education in Northern Ireland. At a European level, the Council of Europe (COE) (1992) European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages provides a structure for 'the protection of the historical regional or minority languages of Europe' (p.1).. The Department of Education (DE) has an obligation arising from this Charter to provide pre-school education through the medium of Irish, without prejudice to teaching through the medium of English, where the number of children is considered sufficient.

In addition, Article 89 of the Education Order 1998 places a statutory requirement on DE to facilitate IME education.[15] This states that "It shall be the duty of the Department to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-medium education". Paragraph 2 states that "The Department may, subject to such conditions as it thinks fit, pay grants to any body appearing to the Department to have as an objective the encouragement or promotion of Irish-medium education".

It builds on Part III of the Education Order 1997 which sets out the rights for parents to express a preference for the school they wish their child to attend, and Article 44 of the Education and Libraries Order 1986 which states that pupils shall be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents.

In addition, while participation in pre-school education is not a statutory requirement, the Executive's Programme for Government 2011-15 includes a commitment for Pre-School Education to 'ensure that at least one year of pre-school education is available to every family that wants'. Moreover, the Languages for the Future: Northern Ireland Languages Strategy[16] highlights the importance of language learning, recognising that languages are important for wider economic, social and community reasons, as well as on purely educational grounds.

In December 2006, Sir George Bain published a report examining funding and planning of the schools' estate, including how best to address the Department of Education's (DE) duty to encourage and facilitate IME Education (IME). He recommended, "DE should develop a comprehensive and coherent policy for IME". As such, DE undertook a Review of IME

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[15] Under paragraph 2 of the Order the Department established the body Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) in August 2000 to encourage and facilitate the strategic development of, and provide guidance and advice to, the IME sector
[16] Department of Education (2012) *Languages for the Future: Northern Ireland Languages Strategy*

Education[17] and its report contains the following recommendation that was accepted by the then Minister for Education in March 2009:

Recommendation 5: Research into the educational outcomes of Irish medium pre-school education: "Research on the educational outcome, including linguistic outcomes, of different types of Irish-medium pre-school experience should be taken forward".

In October 2013 the Minister for Education published 'Learning to Learn – A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning'. [18] The Framework contains the following action:

'The Department will ensure that experiences in primary school build more effectively on the child's previous education and learning experiences by: Commissioning research on the educational outcomes of pre-school Irish-medium Education as outlined in the Review of Irish-medium Education'.

Demographics[19]

There are currently 43 IME pre-schools in Northern Ireland: 29 are within voluntary and private settings and attended by 562 pupils (of which 488 are funded places). The remaining 14 pre-schools are attended by 397 pupils within statutory settings. Two of the statutory pre-schools are "Catholic Maintained" schools, with the remaining 12 classified as "other maintained".

Around one third of pre-schools (n=14; nine in voluntary and private settings and five in statutory settings), have been established for a period of at least 16 years. The oldest pre-school was established in 1978 (although none had statutory status until some time later). With regards to more recently established IME pre-schools, three have been established within the last five years, with two of these in voluntary and private settings. The most recent statutory IME pre-school was established in 2012 while the most recent voluntary / private pre-school was established in 2013.

A profile of pre-schools by Education Authority region is helpful to provide an indication of geographic spread. This demonstrates that over half of all IME pre-schools (n=23) are located in the Southern and Western regions. With the exception of the Belfast region, there are a greater number of IME pre-schools in voluntary and private settings than in statutory settings. In the case of former South Eastern region, all four of the IME pre-schools in the board area are within voluntary and private settings.

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[17] Department of Education (2009) *Review of Irish-Medium Education*
[18] Department of Education (2009) *Review of Irish-Medium Education*
[19] RSM IME Pre-schools Database (May 2015). The Department of Education (DE) Statistics and Research Team provided a database of statistics relating to Irish-medium pre-schools which were collated from the 2014/15 annual school census. In addition, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) provided a database of statistics on Irish-medium (IME) pre-schools and primary schools. These databases were collated to establish an up-to-date and coherent picture of both voluntary and private IME pre-schools and statutory IME pre-schools in Northern Ireland.

To put this in context, the current distribution of Irish-medium pre-school settings (including those not funded by DE), primary and post-primary schools in Northern Ireland are illustrated in the map below.

Figure 3:1: Location of all Irish-medium Schools 2015

Source: Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (2015)

Returning to DE-funded pre-school settings, considering where IME pre-schools and primary schools operate, a greater number of those in voluntary and private settings are described as "playgroup not in a school", rather than "playgroup in a school" (55% and 45% of IME voluntary and private pre-schools respectively). Within statutory settings, 13 of the 14 (92.9%) IME pre-schools are nursery units located in IM schools; the other one is an IM unit that is located within an English Medium school.

There are higher numbers of pupils in IME pre-schools in statutory settings than in voluntary and private sector settings. The average number of pupils per pre-school setting in statutory settings is 28 whereas in voluntary and private sector settings, it is 19 overall (average number of funded places in voluntary and private settings is 16) (see Appendix 3 – Section 3.7).

Of the 43 pre-schools, around one in three (30.2%), (n=13 nine in voluntary and private settings and four in statutory settings) have pupils with some level of special educational needs (pupils recorded at stages 1 – 4 on the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice). In addition, two of the IME pre-school settings (one voluntary and private and one statutory) have a number of pupils with a statement of special educational needs – though the number of pupils per setting is not disclosed due to DE non-disclosure requirements.

Current Trends (all IME settings (including those not funded by DE) – See Appendix 4)

Between 2004/05 and 2014/15, there has been a modest increase in the number of IME pre-school settings and staff (<5%) but a substantial increase in the number of pupils (an increase of over 30%) – as follows:

- Number of pre-school settings has increased by 2 (+4.5%) from 44 to 46;
- Number of pupils has increased by 272 (+31.8%) from 855 to 1127; and
- Number of staff has increased by 6 (4.7%) from 129 to 135.

This is also reflected in the substantial increase in both pupil: school and pupil: staff ratios, whilst the staff: school ratio has remained largely unchanged – as follows:

- Pupil: school ratio has increased by 5.1 (+26.1%) from 19.4 to 24.5;
- Staff: school ratio has remained the same at 2.9; and
- Pupil: staff ratio has increased by 1.7 (+26.0%) from 6.6 to 8.3.

While the increases in pupil numbers are reflected in the substantial increase in both pupil: school and pupil: staff ratios, it is important to note that there are no schools operating outside of the required ratios.

Trends in school and pupil numbers are also discussed in Section 4.2.

3.4 Curricular Guidance for Irish-medium Schools

Immersion learning contexts are different from monolingual contexts. Pupils are learning language and learning from expected curriculum experiences simultaneously and particular approaches to learning, teaching and assessment are required. Learning in IME early years settings at both pre-school and primary school level is different from that in English-medium pre-schools. Different learning and teaching approaches are required so that the specific linguistic needs of pupils can be supported as well as their other developmental and learning needs.

The Northern Ireland Primary Curriculum [20] sets out minimum statutory requirements for primary education in all schools and non-statutory guidance on provision for a broad and balanced curriculum.

The Northern Ireland Primary Curriculum (Irish-medium)[21] includes the same minimum statutory requirements as English-medium schools but provides detailed adaptations to the specific needs of IME education in all curriculum areas. This document also contains specific references that, to meet the requirements of all pupils, teachers need to:

- take account of existing Irish language competence; and
- use strategies which promote and consolidate immersion language competence.

In addition, it is stated that children's language immersion should develop gradually and involve an identifiable pattern, from receptive skills, which involve listening and understanding Irish, to production skills, which involve speaking Irish with increasing fluency and accuracy. The revised curriculum for IM primary education states that in order to meet their statutory requirements, schools must provide learning opportunities in relation to Irish Language and Literacy, building on linguistic competencies initiated in the home, and including Listening, Understanding and Talking, Reading, and Writing.

The Curricular Guidance for Pre-school Education in NI[22] provides non-statutory guidance for all pre-school settings. It contains a brief section under the sub-heading of promoting good practice referring to general practice in IM settings. However no specific guidance is given within the sections on curricular areas, including language development, regarding the bilingual dynamic of IM pre-school settings and how pupils learn through the medium of an additional language.

3.5 The role of educators in Pre-school Settings

Irish is a minority language in a society where English is dominant. In some instances, pre-school educators are the pupils' main, if not only, source of Irish. Certain pertinent features of IME early years settings have been identified including the nature of educators' communication in Irish. Pre-school Curriculum Guidance[23] indicates that staff in IME settings should model language appropriately, and fully exploit the learning potential of freely chosen play, routine situations and unplanned activities. However, whereas there are curriculum support resources for staff at primary school level, provision is less extensive at pre-school level.[24]. In addition, the linguistic demands of immersion education require more group activities involving adult participation than would be considered appropriate in a monolingual

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[20] Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) 2007
[21] Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) (2009a) *The Revised NI curriculum: Primary IME*; provides specific guidance and support for the IME sector.
[22] Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) (2006) *Curricular Guidance for Pre School Education*
[23] CCEA (2006) *Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education*
[24] Resources available for primary teachers include the 'Early Literacy Achievement in Irish Medium Schools and Early Interventions'. This details oral language development, phonological awareness and activities to help the development of children's progression.

situation.[25]   However, a report[26] on the quality of pre-school provision in the Irish Medium voluntary and statutory sector during the years from 2008/09-2011/12 found that the quality of the staff interaction with children through the medium of Irish was variable and highlighted the need to use Irish in meaningful contexts and use simple phrases, sentences, rhymes and songs.

Hence the linguistic demands of immersion education impacts on how external agencies should evaluate quality in IME pre-school settings for example the evaluative frameworks of good practice such as those in use by the Education and Training Inspectorate [27] and the Minimum Standards for Childminding and Day Care [28].   The latter is issued by the Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety.   The standards relate to: care; staffing, management and leadership; the physical environment; and monitoring.

3.6   Availability of research to inform practice

The English-medium early years sector can draw on a wide range of funded research which over the last fifteen years has informed practice and policy developments.[29]   To date, there has been very little research commissioned which informs IME pre-school settings.   While major English-medium projects such as Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) had access to standardised tools for measuring outcomes of monolingual pupils, no such tools have as yet been developed for the IME sector.   (Note: these tools had been used by EPPNI as part of their research project.   However it is important to note that there is no form of assessment in pre-schools within Northern Ireland and is no requirement set by DE in this regard).   However an IME DE working group tasked with adapting the Every School a Good School: Literacy and Numeracy proposals to the needs of the IME sector[30] made a number of recommendations, including some relating to pupil assessment.   It states that *'teachers in Irish-medium settings must be supported in identifying underachievement in*

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[25] Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) (2009) *The Revised NI curriculum: Primary Irish-medium*

[26] Education and Training Inspectorate (2013) *Report of an Evaluation of Irish Medium Pre-School Settings 2008-2012*

[27] Education and Training Inspectorate (2010) Together Towards improvement- a process for self-evaluation; pre-school. Bangor: ETINI.

[28] Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) Childminding and Daycare for Children under 12: minimum standards. Available at: http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/early_years_standards_-_july_2012.pdf (last accessed 8th May 2015)

[29] For example: Melhuish, E. Quinn, L. McSheery, K. Sylva, K. Sammons, P. Siraj-Blatchford, I. Taggart, B. Guimares, S. (2002) *Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland: an analysis of observational data*; Melhuish, T. Quinn, L. Sylva, K. Sammons, P.Siraj-Blatchford, I. Taggart, B. (2010) *Effective Pre-school Provision Northern Ireland (EPPNI): preschool experience and Key Stage 2 Performance in English and Mathematics*; Quinn, L . Hanna, K. Melhuish, E. Siraj-Blatchford, I. Taggart, B. Sylva, K. Sammons, P Donnelly, G. (2006) *Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) Project: case studies of early years settings*; Walsh, G. Taylor, D. Sproule, L. McGuinness, C. (2008) *Debating the Transition from play-based to formal practice: implications for Early Years teachers and policy makers*; Walsh, G. Taylor, D. Sproule, L. McGuinness, C. (2008) *Debating the Transition from play-based to formal practice: implications for Early Years teachers and policy makers*

[30] Department of Education (2010) *Literacy and Numeracy IME Education: recommendations*

literacy and numeracy. A wide range of appropriate assessment tools, including standardised tests, should be developed to assist teachers in the monitoring and tracking of pupil progress, early identification of underachievement, benchmarking and target-setting'.

3.7 Curriculum Support and Continuing Professional Development[31]

IME pre-school settings can draw on general curriculum support from a range of English-medium providers depending on whether the setting is statutory or voluntary including, for example, Early Years, Curriculum Advisory Support Services (CASS) provided by the Education Authority. Altram, the IME early years organisation, provides tailored curriculum support and guidance for Irish-medium pre-school settings.

Support from a qualified teacher or suitably qualified early years specialist is regarded as being the most effective way to support continuous improvement in the quality of educational provision in voluntary and private settings. The Role of the Teacher or Early Years Specialist [32 & 33] is to support the setting in, among other things, assessing staff training and development needs. The role of Early Years Specialists is currently under review following an ETI Inspection Report[34].

For September 2014 admissions onwards, the Department of Education increased the number of staff development days from two to a maximum of five for pre-school settings in the voluntary and private sectors - in line with settings in the statutory sector. It is up to individual settings to determine and secure/procure their own CPD.

As with curriculum, there are some generic aspects of early years education which are relevant for both the English-medium and IME sector. For example, the Learning to Learn Framework[35] which aims to ensure that 'every child can access high quality early learning experiences that equip them to develop improved cognitive, social and emotional skills and which lay important foundations for future learning and development'. However there are additional aspects specific to the IME immersion context related to immersion pedagogy and to linguistic enhancement in the immersion language. Moreover, research has shown that a significant challenge for immersion education is the training and retention of effective and experienced educators with qualifications in early years' education, as well as access to effective on-going training in immersion methodology.[36] Within Northern Ireland, an IME DE working group[37] made recommendations on Literacy and Numeracy in IME Education, including the need to increase Irish language expertise and knowledge of immersion

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[31] Sometimes referred to as "Ongoing Professional Learning"
[32] Department of Education The Role of the Teacher or Early Years Specialist
[33] http://www.deni.gov.uk/preschooleducexpanprog.pdf
[34] http://www.etini.gov.uk/index/surveys-evaluations/surveys-evaluations-pre-school-centre-and-nursery-school/surveys-evaluations-pre-school-2014/an-evaluation-of-the-role-of-the-early-years-specialist.pdf
[35] Department of Education (2013) *Learning to Learn Framework – A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning*
[36] Hickey, T. M., & de Mejía, A. M. (2013) 'Immersion education in the early years: A special issue' *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*
[37] Department of Education (2010) *Literacy and Numeracy IME Education: recommendations*

pedagogy among all those providing support for pupils and teachers in the learning and teaching of literacy and numeracy. In addition, it was recommended that relevant and appropriate induction, Early Professional Development (EPD) and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities be available for teachers and classroom assistants in planning for the learning and teaching of literacy and numeracy in IME settings.

3.8 Summary

The provision of IME education is provided for in legislation and regulatory documents, specifically Article 89 of the Education Order 1998 which places a statutory duty on DE to encourage and facilitate IME education. To support this objective, a Review of IME Education[38] was undertaken by the Department of Education in 2009 which highlighted the need for further research into the educational outcomes of Irish medium pre-school education in NI.

The strategic documents reviewed also indicate that immersion learning contexts are different from monolingual contexts and therefore different learning and teaching approaches are required to meet specific pupil needs. In addition, as the linguistic demands of immersion education differ to that of monolingual settings, this should impact on how external agencies evaluate quality in IME pre-school settings. However it is also evident that there is currently a lack of tools for documenting the outcomes of IME pupils to track progression and achievement in NI.

Therefore the current strategic and policy context not only recognises the statutory requirement to encourage and facilitate IME education, but as the IME pre-school sector grows, the specific needs of IME education. Specifically, the role of educators and the nature of their communication in the medium of Irish to aid pupil's progression, the need for the development of assessment tools to aid identification of pupil outcomes, and curriculum support for staff in IME settings. Such issues are explored further in the literature review section of this report (section 3).

As the data on the characteristics of IME pre-school education demonstrate, there is variety in the existing funding models as pupils are educated in both voluntary and statutory settings. There is variety in terms of size, staff-pupil ratios, length of time established, management type etc. Other variations may exist (for example: qualifications and linguistic competences of staff; pay and working conditions; management arrangements; providers of curriculum support and guidance; the extent and quality of accommodation and resources). These factors are considered when investigating the learning outcomes, set or expected, for IME pre-schools – as discussed in later sections of the report.

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[38] Department of Education (2009) *Review of Irish-Medium Education*

4 KEY FINDINGS FROM LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1 Introduction

This literature review will draw on research related to early years education and to the literature related to bilingual education, international models of immersion education and to the literature and research related to Irish-medium education. References to early years education in the literature typically include the experiences of young children from 0-8 years of age[39]. The literature on early years education contains many references to principles and practices which span this age-range including children aged 3-4 in pre-school settings. There is also a body of literature and research related specifically to the pre-school age group. References to 'early years' in this literature review are to literature encompassing all stages of early years education ages 0-8 and references to 'pre-school' are to literature and research specifically related to the age 3-4 phase (see section 3.2).

4.2 Irish-medium education and Irish-medium Early Years Context

Irish-medium education is a form of heritage immersion education[40] where pupils are immersed in and educated through a minority heritage language, Irish, which is for the majority not a language of the home. Immersion education is an international model of additive bilingual education which allows pupils to develop second language (L2) competency whilst maintaining similar levels of competency in their first language (L1) to that of their monolingual peers [41]There are different entrance points in the immersion model: early immersion begins in pre-school education followed by primary education; late immersion begins at post-primary level; 'late late immersion' happens at third level[42] Irish-medium education in the north of Ireland begins in almost all instances with early immersion in early years settings including the pre-school settings (age 3-4) which are the focus of this study.

The first Irish-medium school in Belfast, established and funded by parents, was set up in 1971 initially to meet the educational needs of a community who were raising their children with Irish as a first language (L1). An affiliated nursery class was set up in 1978 allowing children whose home language was English to avail of the immersion education model[43] and develop skills in a second language (L2). The model was based on the Canadian experience

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[39] For example; Bruce, T. (2011) Early Childhood Education.4th Edition. London: Hodder; United Nations (2005) General Comment No. 7: implementing rights in early childhood, Geneva: United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child.

[40] Baker, C. (2011) Foundations of Bilingualism and Bilingual Education 5th Edition, Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

[41] Cummins, J. (2014) 'Rethinking pedagogical Assumptions in Canadian French Immersion Programmes' in The Journal of Immersion and Content-based Education 2(2), pp.3-22.

[42] Swain, M. And Johnstone, R. (Eds) (1997) immersion Education: international perspectives. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[43] Maguire, G. (1991) Our Own Language: an Irish initiative. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

and the Welsh experience[44]. Gaelic-medium immersion education in Scotland followed in 1985[45]. Growth in the sector was initially without state support but through the commitment and fund-raising of parents and language activists[46]. State recognition and funding for schools 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[47] agreeing to encourage and facilitate Irish-medium Education. Peover[48] has described this 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" (2002:125).

There followed a period of substantial growth in the sector at pre-school, primary and post-primary levels. The Irish-medium pre-school sector is considered to be the foundation stone on which further sectoral developments at primary and post-primary level are initiated. Figures for Irish-medium pre-school settings are therefore an indication of current provision and also a prediction of the growth of the sector in future. Further demographic information and statistics on current growth trends are contained in Section 3.

As noted in Section 3.3, between 2004/05 and 2014/15, there has been a modest increase in the number of IME pre-school settings and staff (<5%) but a substantial increase in the number of pupils (an increase of over 30%) – as follows (all including those not funded by DE):

- Number of pre-school settings has increased by 2 (+4.5%) from 44 to 46;
- Number of pupils has increased by 272 (+31.8%) from 855 to 1127; and
- Number of staff has increased by 6 (4.7%) from 129 to 135.

Considering the same characteristics for IME primary and post-primary settings, between 2004/05 and 2014/15, there has been a more substantial increase in the numbers of IME pupils and staff in both types of settings as follows[49]:

- Number of primary pupils has increased by 1,512 (+77%) from 1954 to 3466;
- Number of primary staff has increased by 103 (+89%) from 116 to 219;

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[44] Eagleson, A. (2002) Key Management Issues in Irish-medium Primary Schools in the Twenty-first Century. Masters Dissertation: University of Ulster.

[45] MacIver, M. (2002) 'Structures for Gaelic-medium Education' in Kirk, J. and O Baoill, D. (Eds) Language Planning and Education: linguistic issues in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and Scotland. Belfast: Cló Ollscoil na Banríona, pp56-60.

[46] Ó Baoill, D. (2007) 'Origins of Irish-medium Education: the dynamic core of language revitalisation in Northern Ireland' in The International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 10(4), pp.410-427

[47] Council of Europe (COE) (1992) European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages, council of Europe. Available at: http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/Html/148.htm (Last accessed 16 April 2015).

[48] Peover, S. (2002) 'The Current State of Irish-medium Education in Northern Ireland' in Kirk, J. and O Baoill, D. (Eds) Language Planning and Education: linguistic issues in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and Scotland. Belfast: Cló Ollscoil na Banríona, pp.124-130

[49] Based on data provided by CnaG, October 2015

- Number of post-primary pupils has increased by 391 (+92%) from 427 to 818; and
- Number of post-primary staff has increased by 22 (+47%) from 47 to 69.

4.3 General Early Years Learning

Early years education has experienced considerable expansion in terms of funding and also in literature and scholarship in the last twenty years. A general consensus regarding key principles of what constitutes high quality early years education can be identified in literature[50] which includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- age-appropriate early experiences that lead to the holistic development of pupils in a range of domains[51]. Early years education should help children to develop cognitively, emotionally, physically and socially[52] and outcomes can be measured through their development in relation to levels of confidence and self-esteem and respect for staff, peers and their environment[53];
- early years educators should promote learning through play[54 & 55] and a play-based approach to learning should be based on pupils' interests and choices[56];
- a judicious balance of child-initiated and adult-initiated activities has been identified as leading to positive outcomes [57], with the quality of children's interactions with adults playing an important part in the quality of their learning[58];
- the role of children as active participants in their own learning can play a key role in their development[59];
- a skilled and qualified workforce able to observe and extend pupils' learning experiences can lead to positive outcomes[60], in particular staff should have a clear understanding how children learn and develop as 'skilful adult participation can

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[50] Bruce, T. (2011) Early Childhood Education.4th Edition

[51] Evangelou, M. Sylva, K. Kyriacou, M. Wild, M. and Glenny, G. (2009) Early Years Learning and Development: literature review. London: DCSF.

[52] DE (2013) *Learning to Learn: Framework for Early Years Education and Care*

[53] DE / ETI Together Towards Improvement: A Process for Self-Evaluation (Pre-School) (2010) - ETI Quality Indicators for Pre-schools

[54] Quinn, L. Hanna, K. Melhuish, E. Siraj-Blatchford, I.Taggart, B. Sylva, K. Sammons, P Donnelly, G. (2006) *Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) Project: case studies of early years settings*

[55] DE (2013) *Learning to Learn: Framework for Early Years Education and Care*

[56] BERA (2003) 'Early Years Research: pedagogy, curriculum and adult roles, training and professionalism', British Educational Research Association Special Interest Group. Available at http://www.niched.org/docs/bera_report%20.pdf (Last accessed 23 August 2012).

[57] Sylva, K. Melhuish, E. Sammons, P. Siraj-Blatchford, I. And Taggart, B. (2004) The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education: The Final Report. London: Dfes Sure Start Publications and The Institute of Education

[58] NCCA (2010) *Aistear: perspectives on the relationship between education and care in early childhood*

[59] NCCA (2010) *Aistear: perspectives on the relationship between education and care in early childhood*

[60] Quinn, L. Hanna, K. Melhuish, E. Siraj-Blatchford, I.Taggart, B. Sylva, K. Sammons, P Donnelly, G. (2006) *Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) Project: case studies of early years settings*

extend children's play and thinking'[61]. This understanding helps them to have realistic expectations of what they can achieve[62];

- planning children's learning is important to ensure staff have a clear idea of what children should be learning and how this might be achieved in the learning environment[63];

- early years assessment should be multi-dimensional and focus on pupils' well-being and social development as well as academic outcomes [64] this should also be a focus of any transition reports which should detail the child's personal, social and emotional development[65];

- regular observation and assessment is needed to effectively record children's development[66] as observation of children can provide opportunities / evidence for staff to plan and manage children's learning. In addition, planned observations allow staff to learn about children's strengths and areas for development[67];

- positive partnerships with parents enhance pupils' experiences as they are able to share information about their children to help promote their development[68] as the 'child's first and ongoing educators'[69]. This involvement is important both while at pre-school and during the transition process.[70] (Research related to transitions from pre-school to primary school is discussed further in section 4.6);

- formal and informal opportunities should be used to report to parents and create a dialogue between the pre-school and home setting to highlight achievements and identify areas where more support is needed[71];

- the adult to child ratio can influence the outcomes achieved as where there is more children per adult there is less progress recorded in terms of independence / concentration; cooperation / conformity and sociability[72]; and

- the environment children are in should promote effective learning with a range of activities indoors and outdoors to progress their learning and development.[73 & 74]

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[61] CCEA (2006) *Curricular Guidance for Pre-schools*
[62] DE / ETI Together Towards Improvement: A Process for Self-Evaluation (Pre-School) (2010) - ETI Quality Indicators for Pre-schools
[63] CCEA (2006) *Curricular Guidance for Pre-schools*
[64] Glazzard, J. Chadwick, D. Webster, A. and Percival, J (Eds.). (2010) Assessment for Learning in the Early Years Foundation Stage. London: Sage.
[65] Walsh, G. Taylor, D. Sproule, L. McGuinness, C. (2008) *Debating the Transition from play-based to formal practice: implications for Early Years teachers and policy makers*
[66] Quinn, L. Hanna, K. Melhuish, E. Siraj-Blatchford, I.Taggart, B. Sylva, K. Sammons, P Donnelly, G. (2006) *Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) Project: case studies of early years settings*
[67] CCEA (2006) *Curricular Guidance for Pre-schools*
[68] CCEA (2006) *Curricular Guidance for Pre-schools*
[69] DE (2013) *Learning to Learn: Framework for Early Years Education and Care;* and Whalley, M. And the Pen Green Centre Team (1997) Working with Parents. London: Hodder and Staughton.
[70] Walsh, G. Taylor, D. Sproule, L. McGuinness, C. (2008) *Debating the Transition from play-based to formal practice: implications for Early Years teachers and policy makers*
[71] CCEA (2006) *Curricular Guidance for Pre-schools*
[72] Melhuish, E. Quinn, L. Sylva, K. Sammons, P. Siraj-Blatchford, I, Taggart, B. and Shields, C. (2002) *Pre-school Experience and Cognitive Development at the Start of Primary School*

Reflecting scholarship in the fields of sociology and Children's Rights, views have shifted from one of children as vulnerable adults-in-waiting to one of children as strong competent learners [75], and early years education as a stage in itself rather than a preparation for more important stages of education. A parallel development has been a shift from descriptions of early learning (influenced by Piagetian theories of development) to a multidisciplinary approach to early learning (informed by socio-cultural approaches to learning which emphasise social participation and interaction which are influenced by Vygotskian theories[76]). This has influenced approaches to assessing early learning outcomes from one which focuses on what the individual child can do independently and alone to a broader approach which includes the child's interactions with others and with the learning context[77]. In addition, research suggests that there has been a shift in the approach to education from traditional methods frequently associated with the formal learning in the classroom to one where children are active participants in their learning.

Early years researchers have criticised some formal approaches to early years assessment which are too focused on specified goals or expected outcomes, and as a result there is not enough focus on the day-to-day experiences or the 'natural' curriculum of the everyday.[78] ETI quality indicators suggest that as well as showing progressions in line with their age, ability and stage of development, progression can be evidenced by children's enjoyment in their learning and achievements. In addition, they can be viewed as fulfilling their potential when they show signs of being confident, suitably challenged and motivated.[79]

Research detailed in the EPPNI reports on preschool experience and Key Stage 2 performance in English and Mathematics shows that the quality of a pre-school can have a significant impact on later educational outcomes. The research focused on the likelihood of attaining Level 5 at Key Stage 2 and the factors influencing this. This research found that children who attended high quality pre-schools were 2.4 times as likely in English, and 3.4 times as likely in mathematics, to attain level 5 than children without pre-school experience.[80]

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[73] NCCA (2010) *Aistear: perspectives on the relationship between education and care in early childhood*

[74] CCEA (2006) *Curricular Guidance for Pre-schools*

[75] Dahlberg, G. Moss, P. And Pence, A. (1999) Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: postmodern perspectives. London: Routledge Falmer

[76] BERA (2003) 'Early Years Research: pedagogy, curriculum and adult roles, training and professionalism', British Educational Research Association Special Interest Group. Available at http://www.niched.org/docs/bera_report%20pdf (Last accessed 23 August 2012); and Smidt, S. (2009) Introducing Vygotsky: a guide for practitioners and students in early years education. London: Routledge.

[77] Carr, M. (2001) Assessment in Early Childhood Settings: learning stories. London: Chapman; and Dunphy, E. (2010) 'Assessing early learning through formative assessment: key issues and considerations' Irish Educational Studies, 29(1) pp292-327.

[78] Siraj-Blatchford, I. (2003) *Keynote Address to the Annual Meeting of the Irish Preschool Playgroups Association, Maynooth*

[79] DE / ETI Together Towards Improvement: A Process for Self-Evaluation (Pre-School) (2010) - ETI Quality Indicators for Pre-schools

[80] Melhuish, T. Quinn, L. Sylva, K. Sammons, P.Siraj-Blatchford, I. Taggart, B. (2010) *Effective Pre-school Provision Northern Ireland (EPPNI): preschool experience and Key Stage 2 Performance in English and Mathematics*

In addition, the EPPNI summary report states that staff qualifications and training improves the quality of pre-school provision, and that higher staff qualifications is likely to lead to better child outcomes.[81]

4.4 Establishing Early Learning Outcomes: Key Debates

Early learning outcomes emerge as a contested concept in the literature. It is argued that early learning defies narrow definitions of achievement because by its nature it is complex, dynamic and multi-faceted. Young children's rates of maturation and development confound universal descriptions and a greater understanding of cultural diversity contributes to arguments against an inflexible and linear understanding of achievements which may disadvantage many young learners. Consequently debates ensue whether early years learning should focus on the processes of learning rather than outcomes and whether the rich experiences within a play-based approach to learning can be adequately matched by narrowly-defined descriptions of learning outcomes[82]. For example, concerns have been raised about a narrowing in pre-school pupils' literacy experiences as a response to top-down pressures to teach specific items of phonological awareness and phonics rather than the 'big picture' of story, song and rhymes which create a love of reading but which may not register as outcomes on measureable items related to phonological awareness and phonics[83].

Views of the child as an individual and assessment tools which seek evidence only of what the child can do alone and independently may only give a partial picture of outcomes. There is a substantial body of recent research and literature which advocates a rich interpretation of early outcomes which documents what pupils achieve in collaboration with peers and other adults rather than limiting understanding of early outcomes to individual achievements in a narrow range of learning[84].

An alternative approach is the categorisation of learning outcomes as either academic or social in nature. An example of this approach is within the EPPE projects both in UK and Northern Ireland where the use of rating scales focused on both the academic and social aspects of learning.

A further debate on the nature of learning outcomes relates to how early language achievement is constructed.[85] Baker tracks a shift in language education and assessment in

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[81] Melhuish, Edward; Quinn, Louise; Hanna, Karen; Sylva, Kathy; Sammons, Pam; Siraj-Blatchford, Iram; and Taggart, Brenda (2006) *Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) Summary Report*

[82] Broadhead, P. Howard, J. and Wood, E. (eds) (2010) Play and Learning in the Early Years. London: Sage.

[83] Whitehead, M. (2007) 'Hi Granny, I'm writing a novel'- literacy in early childhood: joys, issues, challenges in Moyles, J. (ed) Early Years Foundations: meeting the challenge, Berkshire: McGrawHill/Open University Press, pp.270-281

[84] Broadhead, P. Howard, J. and Wood, E. (eds) (2010) Play and Learning in the Early Years. London: Sage and Evangelou, M. Sylva, K. Kyriacou, M. Wild, M. and Glenny, G. (2009) Early Years Learning and Development: literature review. London: DCSF.

[85] Baker, C. (2011) Foundations of Bilingualism and Bilingual Education 5th Edition, Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

general. The more recent focus is on communicative proficiency rather than on discrete language skills or items such as vocabulary and grammatical rules. Views of language development as a homogenous sequential progression to native-like proficiency have also been challenged. Thus more interactive approaches to establishing and measuring language learning outcomes have become more common[86] focusing on language use in real-life contexts. Such views of the language learner and of language learning will impact on the nature of language-related outcomes identified in pre-school settings.

Emerging from the debates on learning outcomes in general and language-related outcomes in particular is a key message that descriptions of outcomes must reflect some agreed understandings of the nature of early learning and early language learning. Furthermore, measures or descriptions of those outcomes should reflect a broad understanding of the nature of early years learning in general and the nature of the learning experienced by pupils.

4.5 How outcomes are established and assessed in Monolingual English-medium settings

A review of literature has identified that personal, social and emotional development in addition to literacy and numeracy are essential early years' outcomes in English medium settings.[87] A key source of research is 'Supporting Early Learning and Development through Formative Assessment'[88] which highlights the following key aspects of learning from existing research:

- Dispositions: refers to patterns of thinking, behaviours and interactions and can include inclination, sensitivity and ability[89];
- Cognitive Abilities: assessment should include a broader range of cognitive abilities than traditionally assessed;
- Emotional Wellbeing: this is cited as important as emotional well-being enables learning that effects deep structures on which competencies and dispositions are based[90]; and
- Social Skills: this refers to the social nature of cognitive development which can impact on learning and development.

Drummond's research on assessment[91] also highlights that early learning goals and 'stepping stones' are insufficient to provide a full account of children's learning, however they

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[86] Chalhoub-Deville, C. and Deville, C. (2006) 'Old, Borrowed and New Thoughts on Second Language Testing' in Brennan, R. (Ed) Educational Measurement 4th Edition, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, pp517-530
[87] Tickell, C, (2011) *The Early Years: Foundations for life health and learning*
[88] Dunphy, L. (2008) *Supporting Early Learning and Development through Formative Assessment: A research paper.* Dublin: NCCA
[89] Perkins, D., Jay, E. & Tishman, S. (1993) Beyond abilities: A dispositional theory of thinking. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* 39 (1), 1-21
[90] Laevers, F. (1994) The innovative project Experiential Education and the definition of quality in education in F. Laevers (ed.) *Defining and assessing quality in early childhood education*

are often given precedent over other elements of learning such as inventiveness or creativity. Rather, it is suggested that learning capacity should be a recognised outcome in terms of 'thinking, argument, communication, perseverance and care'. For example, the New Zealand Learning Stories approach[92] rejects the idea that learning is easily measured or quantified by a score, grade or level; rather it is something that is continuous and outcomes should not be assessed in relation to only literacy or numeracy. Therefore it is suggested that assessment tools alone are insufficient to record children's outcomes; rather a more varied approach is required based on observing and documenting learning.

Observation is considered the corner-stone of good early years assessment practice and is evident in past and current early-years curricular guidance materials in England[93], Wales[94], Scotland[95], the Republic of Ireland[96] and Northern Ireland[97]. This facilitates the documenting and assessment of pupils' learning in contextualised and multi-sensory activities. It also ensures that the unit of assessment extends beyond an individual child to include the activity, the participation and contribution of peers and adults and the nature and quality of the child's linguistic attainment within contextualised activities. The paper 'Supporting Early Learning and Development through Formative Assessment[98] also states that in the Republic of Ireland traditionally observation is the method used to assess learning and development. Dunphy states that a narrative approach to assessment can portray a fuller picture of early learning and development as well as a focus for reflection and communication with others, including children and parents. It is suggested this can take the form of 'learning stories' (detailed observations) which provide an account of specific instances of learning. This approach is also emphasised by Drummond[99] who states that 'learning stories' are a useful method to record learning and achievement as they:

- Take a 'credit' rather than a 'deficit' approach;
- Recognise the unique, developing individuality of each and every learner;

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[91] Drummond, M.J. (2008) 'Assessment and Values: a close and necessary relationship' in Swaffield, S. (Ed) Unlocking Assessment: understanding for reflection and application, London: Routledge, pp3-19.

[92] New Zealand called Learning Stories which has been adapted and trialled in a range of pre-school contexts including Māori-immersion pre-school settings in New Zealand; Carr (2001), Assessment in Early childhood Settings: learning stories London: Chapman

[93] For example; Department for Education (DfE) (2012) Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage. London; and Qualifications and Curriculum Agency (QCA) (2000) Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage. London: QCA.

[94] Llywodraeth Cymru Welsh Government (LDWG) (2011) Foundation Phase Statutory Assessment and Reporting Arrangements. Cardiff: LDW

[95] For example; Learning and Teaching Scotland (LTS) (1998) Promoting Learning: Assessing Children's Progress 3-5. Dundee: Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum; and The Scottish Government (TSG) Curriculum for Excellence: a framework for assessment (2011) Edinburgh: TSG.

[96] National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2010) Aistear: creatchuraclam na luath-óige /Journey: a curriculum framework for early years, NCCA, Dublin.

[97] Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) (2006) Pre-school Curricular Guidance. Belfast: CCEA.

[98] Dunphy, L. (2008) *Supporting Early Learning and Development through Formative Assessment: A research paper*

[99] Drummond, M.J. (2008) 'Assessment and Values: a close and necessary relationship' in Swaffield, S. (ed.) *Unlocking Assessment: understanding for reflection and application*

- View learning as holistic, not subdivided into areas, skills or aspects of learning;
- Record children's enterprises and enquiries over several days, ranging over every aspect of their experience;
- Record children's learning at home, as well as in the setting;
- Draw families in; and
- Document progression over time as the stories get longer, broader and deeper.

It is proposed that this approach helps children to more actively contribute to their own learning.

This also supports the view that assessment should be somewhat informal, Dunphy[100] stating that there is a general agreement that assessment of early learning and development should be informal, carried out over time, and in the context of the child's interactions with materials, objects and other people. Moreover, it is advised that informal assessments are 'likely to produce the best assessments of early learning and development'.

Research on assessment for learning in early years[101] highlights the importance of involving parents, carers and children in the assessment process. It is considered that:

- parents are children's first and most enduring educators. When parents and practitioners work together in early years' settings, the results have a positive impact on children's development and learning. Accurate assessment requires a two-way flow of information between setting(s) and home and reviews of the child's achievements should include those demonstrated at home.
- informal learning conversations should take place between practitioners and children as these provide an opportunity to review the assessment evidence in learning journeys and to collect children's responses to their learning to date. These conversations also provide children with an opportunity to reflect on their interests, strengths and future learning needs. Such conversations should be recorded and included in individual learning journeys.

Drummond[102] has suggested that the following principles reflect what early years practices are for and how they should be shaped[103], specifically to:

- Enhance children's sense of themselves as capable people and competent learners;
- Reflect the holistic way that children learn;

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[100] Dunphy, L. (2008) *Supporting Early Learning and Development through Formative Assessment: A research paper*
[101] Glazzard, J. Chadwick, D. Webster, A. and Percival, J (Eds.) Assessment for Learning in the Early Years Foundation Stage
[102] Drummond, M.J. (2008) 'Assessment and Values: a close and necessary relationship' in Swaffield, S. (ed.) *Unlocking Assessment: understanding for reflection and application*
[103] Lee, W. and Carr, M. (2001) '*Learning stories as an assessment tool for early childhood*', Paper presented at the 11th European Conference on Quality in Early Childhood Education, EECERA Conference, Alkmaar, the Netherlands

- Reflect the reciprocal relationships between the child, people and learning environment; and
- Involve parents / guardians and, where appropriate, the extended family.

4.6 Nature of Early Learning in Immersion Settings

There are many issues related to the early education of pre-school children which are generic and can be applied equally to Irish-medium and English-medium settings; these issues have been addressed in sections 4.3-4.5. However, there are many specific issues related to Irish-medium pre-school provision which are crucial in understanding the research context and how and what factors influence and contribute to outcomes. Immersion contexts are different from monolingual contexts. Pupils are learning language and learning from the expected curriculum experiences simultaneously and particular approaches to learning, teaching and assessment are required so that the specific linguistic needs of pupils can be supported as well as their other developmental and learning needs. This section of the review of literature explores a range of sources related to immersion education in an international and Irish-medium context in order to establish common themes related to the nature of early learning in immersion settings.

International Research on Immersion Education

Research and practice in IME settings draws on studies of immersion education in international contexts. A key source of research is the Canadian system of immersion education which has been in place since 1965 and which has been informed by a large body of research from its inception[104]. While there are similarities which can be drawn between this French immersion system, there are also key differences of relevance to the current study. Firstly, the French immersion system in Canada involves two major world languages whereas the Irish immersion system involves the heritage minority language of Irish in contrast with the global language of English. This has implications for language dominance and the limited exposure beyond the pre-school setting and school community. Secondly, Canadian immersion typically begins when children are aged 5[105] which is beyond the scope of this study. Therefore this study will explore other immersion systems which have more contextual similarities to Irish immersion settings including early years immersion in Scotland and Wales, other minority contexts in Europe and the Māori immersion context in New Zealand. A key caveat is that no international model of education can be imported and imposed on the Irish-medium system as "*each socio-linguistic context is unique in significant respects and generalizations from one context to another should not be undertaken without*

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[104] Baker, C. (2011) Foundations of Bilingualism and Bilingual Education 5th Edition, Bristol: Multilingual Matters
[105] Cummins, J. (2004) Workshop on pre-school education http://www.gaelscoileanna.ie/assets/Workshop-on-Preschool-Education.pdf last accessed 25 May 2015

specific analysis of the realities of each context"[106]. Nevertheless an exploration of similarities and differences across a range of immersion contexts can lead to greater understanding of effective provision.

International sources of literature on bilingual education agree that the development of academic competence in a second language takes many years and is a complex and iterative process rather than an uncomplicated linear process[107]. Irish-medium pre-school settings and indeed early foundation stage settings in primary school are characterised by a bilingual dynamic. Staff communicate with pupils in Irish, while pupils respond for the most part in English. Responses in English are accepted and respected; responses in Irish are valued and praised[108]. Pupils during the pre-school year develop first the receptive skills of listening and understanding the target language and then gradually the expressive skill of speaking[109]. The phase when children are beginning to understand the target language but not yet speak the language has been described in the past as a 'silent period'[110]. Other authors, however, have framed the foundation of receptive skills as a less than silent period and as 'an interactive and dynamic interpretative process in which listeners engage in the active construction of meaning'[111]. The development of expressive oral skills typically involves pupils initially inserting words in Irish within English sentences, using familiar phrases, followed by the development of more spontaneous and extended phrases and sentences in Irish. This bilingual dynamic has been acknowledged in Foundation Stage guidance within the Revised Curriculum for Irish-medium Primary Schools[112] but has yet to be operationalised in references to the curricular experiences of pre-school pupils across learning areas within the Curricular Guidance for Pre-school Education in any Pre-school guidance from statutory organisations in Northern Ireland[113].

Research on Irish Medium Education

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[106] Cummins, J. (2014) 'Rethinking pedagogical Assumptions in Canadian French Immersion Programmes' in The Journal of Immersion and Content-based Education 2(2), pp.3-22. Quotation included here is taken from page 4

[107] For example May, S. Hill, R. and Tiakwai, S. (2004) Bilingual/Immersion Education: Indicators of good practice. Auckland: Ministry of Education, New Zealand; and Rau, C. (2008) 'Assessment in Indigenous Language Programmes' in Shomany, E. and Hornberger, N. (Eds) Encyclopedia of Language and Education, 2nd Edition New York: Springer Science and Business Media LLC, pp319-330.

[108] Andrews, A. (2006) Two Windows on the World: language immersion education. Belfast: Iontaobhas Ultach; & Mhic Aoidh, E. and Loughran, D. (2005) 'Curaclam Saibhrithe i Scoileanna Lan-Ghaeilge/ an enriched curriculum in IM schools', Taighde agus Teagasc 5 pp139-156.

[109] Mhic Mhathúna, M. (1996) ''Is liomsa é leon': ról na bpáistí agus na stiúrthóirí i sealbhú na Gaeilge i Naíonraí', Oideas, 44, pp113-125

[110] Krashen, S. (1987) Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition. Hertfordshire: Prentice Hall

[111] O' Malley, J. and Valdez Pierce, L. (1996) Authentic Assessment for English Language learners. Virginia: Pearson Ed, p 58.

[112] Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) (2009) The Revised NI curriculum: Primary Irish-medium, Belfast: CCEA/PMBNI

[113] Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) (2006) *Curricular Guidance for Pre School Education*

Common features relevant to Irish-medium immersion settings can be identified from the international literature on immersion education[114] 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 pre-school Irish-medium settings[115]. Key factors include the creation of a comfortable learning environment which encourages the use of the target language. There is an emphasis on contextual understanding through practical activities and 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 frequently take part in shared and guided activities such as songs, stories, rhymes and circletime routines. Language skills are developed in a systematic way through a thematic approach to early learning. 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 pre-school settings in comparison with monolingual early years practices in relation to both styles of communication and teaching strategies. Planning for language development is an important requirement for teachers and other adults. A further additional role required of adults in immersion pre-school settings is that they must constantly observe and monitor the children's developing skills of understanding and speaking in the target language[116] [&117]. Andrews identifies key factors required of immersion teachers, 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 (p. 33).

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[114] Bangma, I. and Riemersma, A. (2011) Multilingual Early Language Transmission. Mercator: Leeuwarden

[115] For example: Andrews, A. (2006) Two Windows on the World: language immersion education. Belfast: Iontaobhas Ultach; Clay, M. and Nig Uidhir, G (2006) Áis Mheasúnaithe sa Luathliteartacht: treoir do theagasc na litearthachta, Dublin: Heinemann Carroll; Hickey, T. (1997) Early Immersion Education in Ireland: Na Naíonraí.Dublin: Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann; Hickey, T. (2003) 'Cad a mheallann Gaeilge ó Phaistí sa Luath-Thumoideachas/What encourages Irish from children in early immersion?', Teagasc agus Taighde 3, pp186-205; Mac Corraidh, S. (2008) Ar Thóir an Deachleachtais/ In search of good practice: Belfast: Cló Ollscoil na Banríona; Mac Einrí (2005) An Tumoideachas/Immersion Education. Belfast Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta; and Mhic Mhathúna, M. (1996) ''Is liomsa é leon': ról na bpáistí agus na stiúrthóirí i sealbhú na Gaeilge i Naíonraí', Oideas, 44, pp113-125; & Neil, P., Nig Uidhir, G. & Clarke, F. (2000) Native English speakers immersed in another language- a review of the literature. Bangor: DE.

[116] Hickey, T. (1997) Early Immersion Education in Ireland: Na Naíonraí. Dublin: Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann.

[117] Andrews, A. (2006) Two Windows on the World: language immersion education. Belfast: Iontaobhas Ultach

A similar focus on teachers' pedagogical knowledge is included in a case study of the practice of storytelling in one pre-school IME setting in Dublin[118]. Mhic Mhathúna highlights how IME teachers support children's initiatives and interests in the early stages of IME 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" (p.306).

There are also some differences in the nature of adults' communication strategies in order to respond to the needs of learners. Baker[119] describes immersion teachers' style of communication as 'caretaker speech'. Mhic Mhathúna's study of children's Irish language development in two Irish-medium pre-school settings in Dublin[120] provides insights into both nursery leaders' use of 'caretaker speech' and how the pupils developed receptive and expressive skills in authentic play-based situations. She noted that the nursery leaders spoke slowly, using natural speech, short simple sentences and repetition which involved minor changes to syntax to extend comprehension. They frequently translated the sentences that pupils spoke from English to Irish. Familiar phrases, sometimes described as formulaic units or chunks were used during routines. Other factors which contributed to the pupils' development and use of Irish were contextual cues, regular familiar routines and positive feedback. A study of Māori-immersion early years settings in New Zealand[121] mirrors many of the features identified by Mhic Mhathúna in Irish immersion including code-mixing, the use of formulaic patterns through stories, songs, rhymes and chants and the role of adults in scaffolding pupils' developing understanding and use of the immersion language. A further feature highlighted in this study is the role of other children in mediating and supporting the language development of their peers. A study of pre-school immersion in the United States[122] identified a range of strategies used by children to support their peers' understanding including: sharing materials; voicing agreement; clarifying; questioning; helping; repetition; code-switching; and non-verbal communication and gesturing.

Adults in pre-school settings are often the only source of exposure to the target language for pupils. This means that the balance of child-initiated and adult-initiated activities is different

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[118] Mhic Mhathúna, M. (2009) 'Supporting Children's Participation in Second-language Stories in an Irish Language Preschool', Early Years, 28(3) pp299-309.

[119] Baker, C. (2011) Foundations of Bilingualism and Bilingual Education 5th Edition, Bristol: Multilingual Matters, p. 301.

[120] Mhic Mhathúna, M. (1996) ''Is liomsa é leon': ról na bpáistí agus na stiúrthóirí i sealbhú na Gaeilge i Naíonraí', Oideas, 44, pp113-125.

[121] Haworth, P. Cullen, C. (2006) 'The role of acquisition and learning in young children's bilingual development: a sociocultural interpretation' The International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 9(3) pp. 295-308

[122] Henderson, K. And Palmer, D. (2015) Teacher Scaffolding and pair Work in a bilingual pre-kindergarten classroom *Journal of Immersion and Content Based Language Education* 3(1) pp.77-101

and more activities guided by adults is considered appropriate than would be in monolingual settings[123]. Hickey[124] conducted a study which identified successful strategies that promote the target language use in pre-school Irish-medium settings. She identified group activities involving adult participation as the most successful. Mhic Mhathúna[125] observed in her study of two Dublin pre-schools that in order to respond to the language needs of pre-school pupils, there were frequently more closed questions in use during group discussions than would be considered best practice in monolingual settings. Mhic Mhathúna did however note a shift in balance during staff interactions with individual children where more open-ended interactions were observed. Andrews[126] suggests that 'the immersion setting, by its nature, requires a more directed and interventionist approach'. She emphasises, however, that although adult presence in activities is more frequent than would be expected in understandings of good practice in English-medium settings, that children must also be given ample time for uninterrupted experiences. Furthermore, as pupils progress in their comprehension and expressive language skills, increased opportunities are afforded for more child-initiated spontaneous interactions.

Transitions

There is a substantial body of research related to transitions from pre-school to primary school.[127] A study of transitions in NI[128] from an English-medium perspective 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. The ETI quality indicator for pre-school transition procedures promotes the sharing of "*comprehensive information about children's needs following discussions with parents*" and that *"relative teachers should be encouraged to visit and become familiar with children's support programmes".*[129] In a study of transitions from IME pre-school to primary in the south of Ireland[130] it is noted that there are few references in the literature to the language dimension of transitions but that this is an issue for the IME sector. 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

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[123] Hickey, T. (1997) Early Immersion Education in Ireland: Na Naíonraí. Dublin: Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann; and Mhic Mhathúna, M. (2009) 'Supporting Children's Participation in Second-language Stories in an Irish Language Preschool', Early Years, 28(3) pp299-309; and Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) (2009) The Revised NI curriculum: Primary Irish-medium, Belfast: CCEA/PMBNI

[124] Hickey, T. (2003) 'Cad a mheallann Gaeilge ó Phaistí sa Luath-Thumoideachas/What encourages Irish from children in early immersion?' Teagasc agus Taighde 3, pp186-205.

[125] Mhic Mhathúna, M. (1996) ''Is liomsa é leon': ról na bpáistí agus na stiúrthóirí i sealbhú na Gaeilge i Naíonraí', Oideas, 44, pp113-125

[126] Andrews, A. (2006) Two Windows on the World: language immersion education. Belfast: Iontaobhas Ultach

[127] For example Brooker, L. (2008) *Transitions in the Early Years.*

[128] Walsh, G. Taylor, D. Sproule, L. and McGuinness, C. (2008) *Debating the transition from Play-based to formal practice: implications for early years teachers and policymakers.*

[129] Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) (2010) *Together Towards Improvement: pre-school education* Available at: http://www.etini.gov.uk/together-towards-improvement-pre-school-education.pdf Last accessed 25 May 2014.

[130] Mhic Mhathúna, M. (2011) *An Traein: ag aistriú ón Naíonra go dtí an Bhunscoil.*

primary schools to force 'school work' on the pre-school settings. The study proposes that each child creates a book documenting experiences in both pre-school and the early days in primary school which can be shared with families and both settings. An interesting dimension to the study is that the pupils who had recently moved on to IME primary school participated and shared their experiences. They liked their *Naíonra/*pre-school setting 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'. 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.

A key message emerging from the literature is that the methodologies used in Irish-medium pre-school education are substantially different from those of monolingual pre-school settings. In consequence, understandings of what constitutes good practice should not be the same, as Hickey cautions:

"Naíonraí (playgroups*)*[131] should not be expected to do everything that is done in mother-tongue pre-schools or play-groups in exactly the same way, as though the use of what is a second language for the majority of children as a medium were merely one additional factor added to mother-tongue pre-schooling. Instead the methodology and balance of activities needs to reflect the twin aims of fostering children's overall development and their acquisition of Irish as L2 or L1, with the stiúrthóir (leader) in the majority of cases as the sole speaker of Irish in the child's daily life. Thus, the methodology used in non-immersion play-groups needs to be re-assessed in the immersion situation, in order to maximise target-language input and interaction"[132].

Irish Medium Professional Development

Pre-service and in-service professional development is a further key theme emerging from discussions on the pedagogies related to good practice in immersion early years settings. This is highlighted in a study of good practice in Māori-medium education commissioned by the Department of Education in New Zealand[133] which states:

"How effectively teachers understand and address the complex issues that attend teaching in an L2 as an instructional language...is pivotal to the success or otherwise of bilingual/immersion programmes. Specifically, teaching in a bilingual programme requires specialist training in immersion pedagogy, curriculum, materials and resources and L2 target language assessment. This must include preservice and ongoing in-service in:

- bilingual theory and research;
- the bilingual programme the school uses;

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[131] A Naíonraí is an Irish-medium playgroup for pre-school children

[132] Hickey, T. (1997) Early Immersion Education in Ireland: Na Naíonraí. Dublin: Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann, p. 85.

[133] May, S. Hill, R. and Tiakwai, S. (2004) Bilingual/Immersion Education: Indicators of good practice. Auckland: Ministry of Education, New Zealand

- second language acquisition and development;
- instructional strategies in second language development;
- multicultural and educational equity training; and
- cooperative learning strategies"

In a study of immersion practices in Fryslan, Finland, Brittany and Wales, a further contributing factor to best practice is the exchange and dissemination of knowledge and good practices in immersion across different regions of Europe [134]. Hickey and de Mejía[135] argue that in-service provision is also necessary as is career structures 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*".

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 levels of language competence is an issue highlighted in the literature across international immersion settings: in the case of First Nation in the US and Maori immersion in New Zealand[136]; in the context of Frisian immersion in the Netherlands[137]; and in Gaelic-medium in Scotland[138] research describes combining early years qualifications and language skills as 'a complex and sensitive task.' The wide-ranging language competences of Gaelic-medium staff in Scotland have many commonalities with the Irish-medium experience[139]:

"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"

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[134] Bangma, I. and Riemersma, A. (2011) Multilingual Early Language Transmission. Mercator: Leeuwarden.

[135] Hickey, T. And de Mejía, A. (2013) Immersion Education in the Early Years: a special issue, International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, pp131-141

[136] May, S. (2013) Indigenous Immersion Education: international developments in *Journal of Immersion and Content-based Language Education 1(2), pp. 34-69.*

[137] Ytsma, J. Riemersma, A. and de Jong, S. (2007) *The Frisian Language in Education in the Netherlands*

[138] Stephen, C. McPake, J. McLeod, W. Pollock, I. and Carroll, T. (2009) *Review of Gaelic-medium Early Education and Childcare.*

[139] Robertson, B. (2006) 'Issues in Minority Language Teacher Education: a Scottish Gaelic prespective in O Riagáin, D. (ed) *Voces Diversae: lesser-used language education in Europe,* Belfast: Cló Ollscoil na Banríona, pp.157-162.

Robertson[140] argues that the status of initial and continuing development is key. If the state formally recognises and supports the minority language sector, then:

"there will normally be benchmarks and performance indicators which set the standards to be met. These will specify the competences, skills and knowledge that student teachers must demonstrate".

The challenge for the IME pre-school sector is identified by Ó Baoill[141] in his statement that;

"providing well-trained and linguistically competent teachers is a central priority as they form the backbone of the immersion experience. At present, the number of suitably trained teachers, well-qualified and trained in the various sub-disciplines appropriate to minority language education, is far short of the number needed to sustain a well-balanced educational programme. 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[142] has argued for the development of a more structured pathway for pre-school teachers within IME teacher education programmes. Researchers in Gaelic-medium education in Scotland[143] have proposed measures to address the similar challenges in Scotland: improving both initial teacher education and continuing professional development for all pre-school settings and the development of mechanisms to discuss and share knowledge and practice.

One example of a response by the provincial government in Fryslận is described by Ytsma *et al.*[144] In efforts to promote the use of the immersion language, an early years organisation was tasked with developing a quality framework related to: language command, language environment, didactics and language policy. Pre-school settings which met the criteria of accreditation were given additional funding. An evaluation of the project concluded that:

"the professional qualifications of the playgroup leaders has increased greatly and that the qualification structure is transparent and on a level comparable with other provisions in Fryslận"

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[140] Robertson, B. (2006) 'Issues in Minority Language Teacher Education: a Scottish Gaelic prespective in O Riagáin, D. (ed) *Voces Diversae: lesser-used language education in Europe,* Belfast: Cló Ollscoil na Banríona, pp.157-162.

[141] Ó Baoill, D. (2007) 'Origins of Irish-medium Education: the dynamic core of language revitalisation in Northern Ireland' in The International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 10(4), pp.410-427

[142] Nig Uidhir, G. (2006) Coláiste Ollscoile Naomh Muire agus Túsoideachas do mhúinteoirí Lán-Ghaeilge/ St Mary's University College and Irish-medium Teacher Training in O Riagáin, D. (ed) *Voces Diversae: lesser-used language education in Europe*

[143] Stephen, C. McPake, J. McLeod, W. Pollock, I. and Carroll, T. (2009) *Review of Gaelic-medium Early Education and Childcare.*

[144] Ytsma, J. Riemersma, A. and de Jong, S. (2007) *The Frisian Language in Education in the Netherlands,* 4th Edition

To date no benchmarks or framework of quality has been devised for IME settings in NI. However one possible starting point is a recommendation within the Department of Education's *Review of Irish-medium Education*[145] that:

"Professional staff in pre-school centres should have opportunities for IPD and CPD through courses adapted and developed to match their particular needs in immersion education for young children."

4.7 Identifying and Assessing language-related outcomes in immersion settings

By the end of the pre-school stage, many pupils are competent at listening, understanding and responding to the Irish language but may not be at the stage where they are speakers of the language. This issue has implications related in particular to identifying an agreed set of pupil outcomes in the target language expected at the end of the pre-school stage and the need for a responsive approach to assessing young pupils' immersion language development. This section of the review will look at research and literature related to the factors influencing language-related learning outcomes and descriptions of the processes and outcomes related to language learning in pre-school immersion settings.

McKay[146], writing in general terms on young language learners, identifies factors influencing learning outcomes including: 'starting age; the amount of contact time (with the target language); the appropriateness of the curriculum; the language proficiency and teaching skills of staff and the wider opportunities to use the language. Hickey[147] conducted a multivariate analysis of factors influencing Irish language achievement of pupils in Irish-medium *Naíonra* in the Republic of Ireland. She identified the following factors relevant to L2 immersion:

- General cognitive ability;
- Parents' Irish ability;
- Irish spoken to the child as a baby and toddler;
- Current frequency of Irish use at home'
- Staff's Irish ability;
- Naíonra located in a school; and
- Class size (p.142).

Mhic Mhathúna[148] has also included pedagogical factors influencing the acquisition of Irish at pre-school stage: the quality of adult speech; contextual clues; a supportive atmosphere; regularity in pre-school routines; and creating opportunities to give children a real need to

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[145] Department of Education (DE) (2009) *Review of Irish-medium Education*
[146] McKay, P. (2006) Assessing Young Language Learners. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 3
[147] Hickey, T. (1997) Early Immersion Education in Ireland: Na Naíonraí. Dublin: Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann
[148] Mhic Mhathúna, M. (1999) 'Early Steps in Bilingualism; learning Irish in Irish-medium pre-schools' Early Years, 19(2), pp.38-50 (pp. 47-48)

speak in L2. The factors cited by the authors above are complex and are influential when establishing and documenting pupils' language learning outcomes at pre-school stage. In an account of the development of a norm referenced test for Welsh-medium pupils aged 7-11[149] (Mueller Gathercole *et al.,* 2011); the authors describe the challenge of accounting for some the factors above related to language exposure when measuring outcomes. The argument is also relevant for pre-school immersion settings: "*if a language measure treats all children with different types of exposure in exactly the same way, it can provide a skewed picture of appropriate expectations for a child's knowledge of the language, given the conditions under which he or she is learning the language*".

Descriptions of early years learning in general and immersion education in particular indicate that identifying language-related learning outcomes and agreeing consensus among practitioners may be a complex task. A survey of some descriptions in early language attainment points to common themes which are typically described as continua. McKay [150] outlines steps in young pupils' language development as:

- understanding new language uttered by the teacher or spoken by students (using strategies to guess what has been said from the context);
- responding appropriately to directions (perhaps with physical movement);
- creating own utterances , substituting their own word in a practised sentence; or form their own vocabulary based on vocabulary and structures they have learned or heard; and
- using language appropriately in non-rehearsed interactions (p.27).

Andrews[151] observes the following progression from her experience in Irish-medium pre-school settings:

- interspersal of single words here and there in home language structures;
- use of fixed phrases associated with regular or daily routines;
- increased use of single words and phrases in what is still largely home language usage; and
- use of short simple sentences; increased use of simple sentences (p.41).

Mhic Mhathúna has analysed pupils' understanding and spoken Irish in two Dublin *naíonra* using a continuum of L2 acquisition, formulated by Hatch[152]:

Understanding → Code-Mixing → Formulaic Speech → Creative Speech

Understanding: this refers to the stage before children begin to speak the language but can show understanding by, for example, gestures or movement or by responding in English.

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[149] Mueller Gathercole, V., Thomas, E. and Hughes, E. (2008) 'Designing a Normed Receptive Vocabulary Test for Bilingual Populations: a model for Welsh' in The International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 11(6), pp678-720.
[150] McKay, P. (2006) Assessing Young Language Learners. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
[151] Andrews, A. (2006) Two Windows on the World: language immersion education. Belfast: Iontaobhas Ultach.
[152] Hatch, E (1978) Second Language Acquisition. Rowley Mass.: Newbury house

Code-mixing: at this stage pupils begin to insert single Irish words in English sentences.

Formulaic Speech: Children begin to repeat and use routine phrases appropriately during guided activities.

Creative Speech: At this point on the continuum children begin to produce spontaneous unprompted phrases or sentences which are deemed acceptable whether they are grammatically accurate or not at this stage[153].

Hickey devised three instruments to measure learning outcomes of Irish-medium pre-school settings in Dublin [154] which are:

1. an objective Irish test of the children's comprehension, production and imitation in Irish, administered entirely through Irish, but with many examples and checks completed to ensure that the child understood the test;

2. a test of general cognitive development which was administered in the child's native language, English or Irish; and

3. an assessment (rating scale) of the child's overall development in terms of linguistic, social and physical skills by the s*tiúrthóir* (nursery leader) (p.101).

The study includes descriptions of the tests and an evaluation of the validity and reliability of the outcomes of the tests. However, the tests themselves are not included which means it is not possible to determine if they would be suitable for IME pre-school settings in the North. It would be important that the suitability (or otherwise) should be examined if there were proposals to introduce these tests considering that there are marked differences in the demographics of IME settings north and south and some differences in dialect. The study does indicate however a potential possible way of identifying and measuring outcomes which appears to be responsive to the linguistic needs of young language learners.

The above studies show a range of ways to describe and document pupils' developing language. There is also agreement across a wide body of literature on immersion practices that both comprehension and expressive immersion language are deeply embedded in contextualised activities which include auditory, visual and tactile cues to support understanding and production in the immersion language[155]. This suggests strongly that any approach for assessing language-related learning outcomes should also be deeply embedded in context and include multiple ways for pupils to show understanding. This

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[153] Mhic Mhathúna, M. (1999) 'Early Steps in Bilingualism; learning Irish in Irish-medium pre-schools' Early Years, 19(2), pp.38-50 (pp. 40-46)
[154] Hickey, T. (1997) Early Immersion Education in Ireland: Na Naíonraí. Dublin: Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann
[155] Andrews, A. (2006) Two Windows on the World: language immersion education. Belfast: Iontaobhas Ultach; & Bangma, I. and Riemersma, A. (2011) Multilingual Early Language Transmission. Mercator: Leeuwarden & Mac Corraidh, S. (2008) Ar Thóir an Deachleachtais/ In search of good practice: Belfast: Cló Ollscoil na Banríona; & Mhic Aoidh, E. and Loughran, D. (2005) 'Curaclam Saibhrithe i Scoileanna Lan-Ghaeilge/ an enriched curriculum in IM schools', Taighde agus Teagasc 5 pp139-156.

section of the review has identified a range of descriptions of the trajectory of pupils' language development in immersion settings including Irish-medium settings with various degrees of nuance. The next section will explore descriptions of good practice in IME pre-school settings.

4.8 Good Practice and Areas for Development in IME preschool settings (based on ETI reports)

One body of evidence on what constitutes good practice in IME pre-school settings is contained in Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) reports.

The ETI inspects organisations that receive funding for education and training, including Irish-medium pre-schools.[156] Pre-school inspections evaluate the quality of provision across the range of activities and focus on:[157]

- The quality of the children's development and learning across the areas of the pre-school curriculum;
- The pre-school programme, including the quality of the teaching, planning and assessment;
- Pastoral care and safeguarding; and
- Leadership and management.

The ETI Chief Inspector's Report 2012-14[158] notes that the Irish-medium pre-school sector has continued to grow and improve during this timeframe. To identify areas of good practice and areas for development in Irish language outcomes, RSM McClure Watters (Consulting) reviewed 14 of the most recent ETI reports for voluntary and private Irish-medium pre-schools[159] and six of the most recent ETI reports for statutory Irish-medium pre-schools[160], which spanned the period 2012-2015. The key findings relating to areas of good practice and areas for development in Irish language outcomes are summarised below. Having reviewed the ETI reports in detail, it is evident that there are many areas of commonality between these types of settings. For transparency, findings from both types of settings are included and then a summary is presented.

4.8.1 Identified Areas of Good Practice in relation to Irish Language Outcomes

Voluntary & Private Settings

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[156] ETNI: http://www.etini.gov.uk/index/what-we-do.htm.

[157] ETNI: http://www.etini.gov.uk/index/what-we-do/types-of-inspection-2015.pdf.

[158] Chief Inspector's Report 2012-14 http://www.etini.gov.uk/index/inspection-reports/the-chief-inspectors-report/ci-report-2012-2014.pdf

[159] Four of these inspections were Pre-school Inspections, the remaining ten were General Inspections. For more information on inspection types see: http://www.etini.gov.uk/index/what-we-do/types-of-inspection-2015.pdf.

[160] Two of these inspections were Baseline Inspection Visits, one was a Short Inspection and the remaining three were Focused Inspections. For more information on inspection types see: http://www.etini.gov.uk/index/what-we-do/types-of-inspection-2015.pdf.

For voluntary and private settings, the most frequently cited example of good practice relating to Irish language outcomes was the consistent use by staff of high quality spoken Irish during sessions. For example, one report noted that:[161]

"the quality of the staff's spoken Irish is of a high quality. They make very good use of songs and rhymes to develop further the children's language and consistently use the Irish language in their interactions with the children"

In settings where staff created a language-rich environment and made effective use of songs and stories to support the children's acquisition of the Irish language, children were generally recorded as having a good understanding of the Irish language and in some cases were beginning to respond to the staff in Irish. The importance of listening to and acting upon children's ideas to extend and develop their learning was also highlighted.

More generally, several reports highlighted the importance of the support pre-school staff receive from early years' specialists (EYS)[162] from ALTRAM[163]. In most cases, the EYS were recorded as providing focused advice which enabled staff to better plan and improve provision in pre-schools. For example, another report concluded that:[164]

"the early years specialist (EYS) from Altram provides effective and regular support to develop the provision in the naíscoil and has identified appropriate areas for development, such as planning and the provision for children who require additional support with aspects of their learning. The management committee are very appreciative of the support of the EYS and have made improvements in the provision based on her advice".

Another area of good practice was the development and maintenance of meaningful links with parents to encourage them to take an active role in their children's development, including Irish language development. This was achieved through the distribution of regular newsletters and 'Show and Tell' events.

Overall, to ensure positive learning outcomes – including Irish language outcomes – the majority of the reports highlighted the importance of staff being able to skilfully facilitate children's creativity in play by listening carefully to the children, responding appropriately to their ideas and by allowing the children the freedom to continue independently with their play without adult intervention.

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[161] ETINI: Irish Medium Pre-School Inspection (2014)
[162] An EYS provides ongoing support and advice to playgroups, day cares, créches, parent and toddler groups and after school groups on an individual, group or peer network basis. They assist providers in assessing their needs through self-evaluation programmes, planning, implementing and managing all aspects of high quality service provision in Early Years Care and Education.
[163] Altram is a community-based regional support organization representing the 48 Irish-language early years and naiscoils across Northern Ireland. It provides a wide range of services and publications including training materials, certification training, immersion education, nursery books, homework and support publications as well as support packs for parents who are not bilingual.
[164] ETNI Pre-School Inspection

Statutory Settings[165]

The identified areas of good practice relating to Irish language outcomes in statutory settings were very similar to those identified above in voluntary and private settings. These included:

- Consistent use of high quality Irish language during sessions;
- Consistent high quality of staff interaction with the children, particularly in relation to modelling good play;
- Developing the children's language skills through open-ended discussions; and
- Good links and communication with parents to encourage them to take an active role in the education of their children (in some cases, pre-schools provided Irish language courses for parents).

The reports for statutory settings generally included information on the primary school in which the pre-school setting is situated as well. As a result, they included less information on Irish language outcomes at pre-school level.

4.8.2   Identified Areas for Development in Irish Language Outcomes

Voluntary & Private Settings

In the reports that were reviewed, identified areas for development in Irish Language outcomes included the ability of staff to consistently speak high quality Irish while interacting with the children. For example, one report noted that:

"the quality of the staff's spoken Irish during the inspection was variable. An improvement in the Irish language skills of the staff is therefore crucial in order to enable the staff to exploit more effectively the learning opportunities arising from the play activities".

It was suggested in some reports that staff need appropriate support to develop and improve their Irish vocabulary so that they are able to interact appropriately with the children and develop their language and learning.

Developing a systematic approach to planning and assessment to meet the individual needs of all the children was also identified as an area for development in some settings. Another report concluded:

"as the staff continue to develop their short-term planning, they need to focus further on identifying the learning expected from each activity and to record accurately in their planning the appropriate terminology and structures in Irish they intend to use to support the children in their learning. They also need to refine their observations of the children's learning and development and use the information to inform their future planning".

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[165] As noted previously, the findings here are based on six of the most recent ETI reports for statutory Irish-medium pre-schools: two of these inspections were Baseline Inspection Visits, one was a Short Inspection and the remaining three were Focused Inspections

In some cases, it was suggested that staff needed to work more closely with an EYS to further develop their understanding and approaches to planning and assessment.

Statutory Settings

Identified areas for development in Irish language outcomes in statutory settings were very similar to those identified in voluntary and private settings. These included:

- The approach to observing, recording and assessing the children's learning in order to provide clear evidence of their progress; and
- The use of more open-ended questions in order to extend and develop further the children's understanding and to build effectively on the children's prior learning.

As stated above, the reports for statutory settings generally included information on the attached primary school as well. As a result, they included less information on Irish language outcomes at pre-school level.

4.8.3   Summary of findings from ETI reports

In summary, identified areas of good practice in Irish language outcomes for the majority of settings included the following:

- The provision of a rich immersion environment through the consistent use of high quality spoken Irish to facilitate children's Irish language development;
- The development of a good working relationship with EYS to ensure a systematic approach to planning and assessment; and
- The development and maintenance of meaningful links with parents to encourage them to take an active role in their children's Irish language development.

Identified areas for development in Irish language outcomes for some settings included the following:

- The ability of all pre-school staff to speak high quality Irish when interacting with the children to exploit more effectively the learning opportunities arising from play activities; and
- The approach to observing, recording and assessing the children's learning in order to provide clear evidence of their progress in relation to Irish language outcomes.

4.9 Conclusion

The literature and research reviewed shows that:

- IME pre-school settings are different from monolingual English-medium settings. Although there are many aspects of learning, teaching and assessment that IME pre-school settings have in common with English-medium settings, there are

unique characteristics which must be accounted for when designing curriculum and assessment approaches and when devising educational policies;

- A number of factors have been identified which influence the learning outcomes relating to IME pre-school settings:
  - The nature of the early immersion learning context reflects pupils' needs in terms of their early immersion language development, therefore Curriculum guidance should reflect these unique characteristics and teaching approaches in IME settings;
  - Assessment approaches are also different from those in monolingual settings and therefore assessment guidance for IME pre-school settings should reflect best practice in immersion assessment and be sensitive to pupils' developing language on a continuum of development which acknowledges both receptive and expressive skills.
  - the provision of a language-rich learning environment
  - 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 continuing professional development opportunities available to staff; and
  - the nature of transition from pre-school to primary school.

5 KEY FINDINGS – STRATEGIC STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATIONS

5.1 Introduction

Thirteen key stakeholders from the statutory education and IM sectors were contacted and asked to participate in a brief interview relating to educational outcomes of children in IM pre-schools. Six stakeholders represented statutory education organisations, one stakeholder represented a specialist organisation for young children, three stakeholders represented Irish Language organisations and three represented third level institutions with a specific role in supporting Irish-medium education (see Appendix 8). Six stakeholders agreed to be interviewed face-to-face and seven stakeholders agreed to complete telephone interviews. The following paragraphs summarise the key themes that emerged from these interviews. Most of those who were interviewed at this stage were strategic stakeholders and were not involved in IME pre-schools at an operational level. Their comments for the most part refer to strategic and macro-issues related to the IM pre-school sector rather than the specifc practices of individual schools. The key themes discussed in the interviews are set out in Appendix 7.

5.2 Good practice in IM Pre-school Settings

Each stakeholder was asked if they were aware of any examples of good practice in relation to assessing language related outcomes in IM Pre-schools.

A significant minority of stakeholders noted that there are a number of good practice activities that immersion pre-schools should be implementing. The most frequent activity that was noted by stakeholders was good communication between staff and children, which would include lots of non-verbal clues, (including gestures and exaggerated intonation). A significant minority of stakeholders also noted that good practice in IME pre-schools includes creating a language rich environment, which would not only include good communication between staff and children and also other factors such as lots of clear labelling in Irish of everyday objects about the classroom and making language development the focus of all activities.

In addition to the good practice noted above, a small number of stakeholders also noted that as staff in IM pre-schools have a very limited period of time with children (typically two to three hours, five days a week during term time), therefore it is important to maximise this time by repeating key phrases and vocabulary frequently and in a number of different contexts.

A minority of stakeholders also noted that Irish is a second language for around 90% of children in IM pre-schools and therefore providing parents with support and resources to support language development in the home is also good practice.

In terms of ETI, best practice in IME pre-schools (as with all other pre-schools) is identified through the assessment against the Together Towards Improvement (TTI) and the DE Pre-school Curricular Guidance document; there is no IME specific framework.

Inspectors from the Irish-medium Core Group within ETI are deployed on all Irish-medium inspections in all phases. They evaluate: leadership and management; quality of provision; and achievements and standards in all pre-schools using Together Towards Improvement (TTI), with particular reference to the Pre-school Curricular Guidance document.

5.3   Transitions from IM Pre-school to Primary

A small number of those interviewed noted that whilst CCEA has made available to all pre-school settings a generic transition form[166], CCEA does not provide a form specific to IM education which allows staff to provide an overview of a child's language outcomes in a second language[167].   However CCEA does provide a translation of the generic transition form used by English-medium schools. Furthermore, most of those interviewed believed that there was a lack of consistency about what information was provided to primary schools on transition, as the CCEA form is not mandatory and pre-schools are free to use whatever form of report they see fit.

Altram have also developed an IME pre-school Transition Form[168], which includes an additional section on competence in Irish. However, as one stakeholder noted the use of this form is not compulsory and it is possible that not all IME pre-school are aware of it.

A minority of stakeholders believed that the information that is currently being provided to primary schools (such as that on the CCEA form) is likely to be heavily focussed on monolingual language development and does not take account of the language development in the second language (in this case Irish).   These stakeholders also noted that this process is somewhat eased when the pre-school is a statutory pre-school attached to, or, in close proximity to, an IM primary school. It was the perception of these stakeholders that this allowed staff in the pre-school and primary school to develop close links and can help ensure that primary one teaching staff are better informed of the progress made by each child during their pre-school year.   A majority of those interviewed noted that whatever information is passed from pre-schools to primary schools it should include the pre-schools' perceptions on

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[166] The Research Team understands that the CCEA form is not mandatory. However it seems that as it is issued by a statutory body, many pre-school settings are under the impression that it is. There is also an argument that it is useful for primary schools to receive some information about pupils who move on to them from pre-schools.

[167] A brief form is usually provided by the pre-school to the primary school which provides an overview of the child's emotional and physical development, as well as leaning and pre-reading and writing skills.

[168] This includes an overview of attendance, punctuality and an assessment of the child's competence in a range of areas including: Emotional Personal and Social Development; Physical Development; Learning skills; Communication skills (judged on the basis of 1st language competence); Competence in Irish; Pre-reading skills; Pre-writing skills; Pre-mathematical skills.

whether or not they think that the child is developing appropriate with their age and stage of development.

5.4   Language Related Outcomes in Pre-school IM Settings

5.4.1   Current basis for language related outcomes

Stakeholders were asked what their understanding of language related outcomes was in IM Pre-school settings. Almost all of those interviewed believed that language outcomes are dependent on the child's developmental stage and are more than just the size of a child's vocabulary but also about the ability of a child to listen and comprehend in any language. A number of stakeholders noted that it is also important to consider and understand the child's linguistic abilities in their first language in order to understand where the child is starting from.

These stakeholders also highlighted that the immersion pedagogy at pre-school stage is about more than just spoken Irish. Teachers are expected to use a wide range of communication techniques to ensure that they are understood and the extent to which children comprehend and respond to spoken Irish can be dependent upon the quality of teaching as well as the child's development. Furthermore, language related outcomes include following instructions given in Irish, as well as responding to questions spoken in Irish in either Irish or English.

However it was the perception of most stakeholders that there is a great deal of inconsistency across the IM pre-school sector in terms of planning teaching sessions around the potential language outcomes for each child and that most IM pre-schools would benefit from additional training and support in this regard. For example one stakeholder noted:

"IM pre-school staff need additional training in observation assessment to ensure that teaching sessions are planned around language outcomes for each pupil's developmental stage".

Given the diversity within the IM pre-school sector (capacity), there is a requirement for a variety of support: with some settings requiring more than others. Those that are more developed may require specific support in specific areas whilst others may require a broader range of supports in many areas.

Around half of the stakeholders noted that Altram can provide advice and support to IME pre-schools in this regard. However, it was also noted that some pre-schools may not be aware of this support and also because Altram is a voluntary organisation schools are not required to follow any guidance given.

5.4.2   How are language related outcomes currently measured and reported

Around half of the stakeholders noted that there is no formal linguistic assessment in any pre-schools. Those stakeholders who had a detailed knowledge of current inspection processes and transition forms (four people) noted that the quality of the language environment provided to children in IM pre-schools and how staff and children interact with

each other is an important aspect of the inspection process as this will impact upon the children's knowledge and understanding of Irish. These stakeholders noted that both Staff and Inspectors need to consider how children are developing/progressing with their language skills along a continuum, rather than assessing them against a fixed point or scale, which would not take account of the child's developmental stage. Staff and Inspectors should use observation, which should be informed by the DE pre-school guidance. Around one third of stakeholders noted that Altram[169] have also developed resources[170], that may be of use to IM pre-schools in this regard.

The stakeholders who had an understanding of the transition process noted that pre-schools should provide primary schools with an indication of how the children are developing. One stakeholder, noted that Altram have already developed a simple form (see Section 5.3) that IME pre-schools can use to provide primary schools with an overview of the child's linguistic development in their pre-school year, although not all IME Pre-schools may be aware of this.

The remaining stakeholders noted that whilst they were not aware of the current processes they would be concerned if an observational assessment tool designed for a monolingual education setting was being used in the IME sector.

5.4.3   Consistency across the sector

All of those interviewed noted the lack of consistency across the IM pre-school sector in how all educational outcomes are assessed, including language. Around half of those interviewed were not aware of any sources of support or resources for IM pre-schools in relation to assessing the language outcomes of pupils in IM Pre-schools. Whilst the remaining stakeholders noted that there are some sources of support /guidance in this regard (most notably from Altram (Irish medium) and Early Years (English medium)), it was believed that the support / guidance issued by these organisations is not used consistently across the sector. One stakeholder noted that because the guidance has not been issued by a statutory educational body (e.g. the Education Authority) it is possible that the guidance that is available is not a widely known or regarded.

General inconsistency across the sector was a common concern amongst those interviewed. For example, around three quarters of interviews noted that the quality of teaching is likely to vary greatly across the IM pre-school, due to the very small pool of suitably qualified people. It was noted that teaching in an immersion setting requires a high level of skill and language competence in a second language which is not required of those teaching in an English-medium early years setting. Around one third of those interviewed expressed concern about the standard of spoken Irish amongst those in IME pre-schools, for example two stakeholders noted examples of staff talking to the children in Irish and to each other in English. One stakeholder noted that staff in IM pre-schools should have access to a

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[169] *Altram* is the regional support group for Irish medium early years' projects.
[170] Altram has recently developed an accredited course for IME education - Certificate in Irish Immersion Education: Early Years. This focuses on the practical skills required to work with children in Irish medium early years settings (validated by University of Ulster)

language mentor that would allow them to continually develop and refresh their language skills.

On a related issue, around half of the stakeholders also noted that staff training is an important element of quality pre-school provision and that access to training and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) was not consistent in the IM sector. These stakeholders noted that it was often easier for staff in pre-schools attached to statutory IME primary schools to access training and development and that staff in pre-schools attached to statutory IME primary schools often had greater opportunities to practise their language skills with a greater range of staff. One stakeholder noted "there is a variation in the quality and level of Irish across settings".

Around one third of those interviewed noted that in addition to training in language skills there was a need to ensure that staff in the IM pre-school sector had access to training that would allow them to effectively observe the needs of the children and to plan the lessons accordingly; this is a requirement of all good pre-schools not just those in the IME sector. By way of example, this would include observations on how well children responded to instructions in Irish and answering questions that were asked in Irish (whether the response was in English or Irish).

5.4.4   Views on types of guidance required

There was a common agreement amongst those consulted that the IM pre-school sector requires additional guidance on effective immersion pedagogies and observational assessment of children in IM pre-schools. Any guidance provided to the sector should be very practical; by way of example this would include the provision of practical resources and step-by-step guidance for teaching or assessment. The guidance should focus on effective approaches and techniques when teaching through immersion and pre-school staff should be supported to implement good practice, such as that noted in section 5.2, which would include techniques such as lots of non-verbal cues, sequential repetition, labelling of items in the classroom and language focused play activities, in order to develop greater levels of understanding among children. Guidance should also be provided on how to observe the overall development of children in IM pre-schools. It was the perception of a majority of stakeholders that children in IM settings may develop their language skills at a different rate from monolingual children and that any guidance in relation to observational assessment should be cognisant of this.

5.4.5   Views on who should develop this guidance

All stakeholders believed that a statutory educational body (such as DE or CCEA) should be responsible for the development and distribution of any new guidance. All stakeholders also noted that any further guidance that is developed should take cognisance of existing publications that have been developed to support IM pre-schools in assessing the development of children and guidance relating to quality pre-school provision and English as

a second language in pre-schools (for example IM specific material developed by Altram and early years material developed by Early Years[171])

5.4.6 Stakeholders' descriptions of the processes and products of language development in IM pre-school settings

A significant minority of those interviewed had a detailed knowledge of immersion education and noted that second language development should be considered as a continuum that the children progress along. They also noted that there are a number of good practice pedagogies that are considered essential in IM pre-school to immerse the children in the language education. These are consistent with those noted in section 5.2 and include the need to provide a language rich environment, which would include lots of labelling in the class room, using lots of expression, visual clues and gestures when talking to children and repeating key phrases (sequential repetition). Staff also should use lots of different resources to help put the language and vocabulary into context and should be looking for opportunities to promote language in all aspects of the curriculum. These stakeholders also noted that good quality engagement and interactions between children and adults are also important aspects of language development.

These stakeholders also noted that staff should then observe the development in children's receptive and expressive language development, for example this would involve a child understanding instructions in Irish, but answering in English then moving to answering in Irish and then moving into using key words and phrases in every day speech.

A minority of stakeholders noted that the observation skills of the staff are key in order to ensure that the sessions are appropriate to the children's developmental need, but that effective observational assessment is a challenge for staff across the pre-school sector.

5.5 Desirable factors leading to improvement in IM pre-school provision as identified by stakeholders

As not all stakeholders had recent operational experience (they were strategic stakeholders in the Early Years and Irish Language sector), not all of them had a detailed knowledge of how IM pre-schools are currently performing and therefore were unable to note what specific factors would lead to improvements. However, a significant minority of stakeholders noted that there some elements that are core to effective pre-schooling that all IM pre-schools should have in place. They included the quality of the teaching environment, the quality (and consistency) of the staff and the level of parental engagement. There was concern amongst a minority of stakeholders that some IME pre-schools were too focussed on language development and less focussed on the overall quality of the pre-school provision.

Based on the interviews completed, a majority of stakeholders also believed that the overall quality of provision varied greatly across the IM pre-school sector and that those pre-schools

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[171] Early Years is a non-profit making organisation which works to promote high quality childcare for children aged 0 - 12 and their families. Provides information and training for parents, childcare providers, employers and local authorities. http://www.early-years.org/services/

that were attached to a statutory primary school tended to provide the best quality. It was believed that the statutory pre-schools who had close links with IM primary schools had greater access to additional support, training and resources via the primary school and that staff in statutory pre-school tended to be educated to a higher level (degree level).

It was the perception amongst the majority of stakeholders that not all staff in IM pre-schools have a sufficiently good standard of Irish. For example, a small number of stakeholders noted examples of staff talking to each other in English in the classroom and in Irish to the children. One stakeholder noted that in order to teach in IM pre-schools teachers need to be experts in the grammar, structure and phonics of Irish as well as understanding the holistic developmental needs of young children. However, some stakeholders (albeit a minority) felt that not all staff would have as high a level of competence in Irish as may be desirable. It was noted that: *"We are asking a lot of NVQ III staff".* It was the perception of many stakeholders that all staff need CPD to enable them to continually develop and enhance their language skills.

Furthermore, as noted above, all stakeholders noted great inconsistency in the IM pre-school sector in relation to access to training and CPD opportunities[172]. The majority of stakeholders noted that greater and more consistent access to training and development opportunities relating to language skills and observational assessments of children developmental needs would allow IM pre-schools to become more effective and support better educational outcomes for pupils. A significant minority of stakeholders noted the IM pre-school sector is relatively new and that it has expanded rapidly in the past ten years, therefore many staff are relatively new to the sector, which would emphasise the need for greater access to training and CPD for staff. These stakeholders also noted that highly experienced staff need access to CPD to continue to develop and re-fresh both their linguistic skills and immersion pedagogies.

A number of stakeholders noted that IM pre-school need greater access to resources such as story books, rhymes and songs that are in Irish and can help re-inforce the key words and phrases that they children are expected to know.

5.6   Conclusion

In summary, the key points arising from the consultations were:
- Whilst the majority of those interviewed were strategic stakeholders and therefore did not have a detailed knowledge of current practices and processes, there was general concern expressed that the current assessment processes do not adequately take account of immersion pedagogy and are too focused on monolingual language outcomes. That said, it was also acknowledged by a significant minority of stakeholders that a number of factors associated with good pre-school outcomes are not language specific (such as quality learning environments and quality staffing), therefore language should only be one aspect of assessing pre-school outcomes.

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[172] Provision of CPD discussed in Section 3.7

- All stakeholders noted high levels of inconsistency across the IM pre-school sector in relation to how assessments are undertaken (and then used to plan sessions). There also appeared to be no consistent approach to the information that was provided to primary schools on transition.

- Stakeholders also noted variation in the quality of teaching across the IM pre-school sector. Issues relating to quality included the proficiency of Irish amongst staff and access to training and CPD for staff. Almost all stakeholders also noted that these differences were most marked between statutory and voluntary settings. The majority of stakeholders noted that statutory pre-schools who tended to have greater access to support, resources and training via primary schools provided the best quality IM pre-school environments.

- In general, stakeholders considered that additional support and/or bespoke pre-school curriculum guidance designed for the needs of children learning through the medium of Irish is required for IM pre-schools and also that this guidance should be issued by a statutory body. Whilst it was acknowledged that some guidance was already available to the sector (provided by Altram), it was either not well known or it was not regarded as having sufficient authority as it was not issued by (or endorsed by) a statutory provider. The development of any new guidance should make use of what already exists within the sector and should help to support greater levels of consistency and good practice in the IM pre-school sector.

6 KEY FINDINGS – IME PRE-SCHOOL STAFF INTERVIEWS

6.1 Introduction

At time of publication there are 43 Pre-school settings in NI providing education through the medium of Irish for pupils aged 3-4 in the academic year before they begin primary education. 14 settings are categorised as statutory nursery classes managed by primary school principals and board of governors. The teachers in these settings are qualified teachers registered with General Teaching Council of NI (GTCNI). 29 settings are voluntary settings managed by voluntary naíscoil committees and funded for the most part by PEAGs funding, 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[173].

The following table indicates the total number of statutory and voluntary settings in the academic year 2014-15 in terms of settings and the number of pupils in their pre-school year based on figures provided by the Department of Education and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta.

Figure 6:1: Statutory and Voluntary Settings and Pupils in the Academic Year 2014-2015

	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

From this IM pre-school population in NI, a sample of thirty settings participated in this stage of the research project. The sample included both long-established and newly established schools, city school and schools in small rural towns throughout NI and both statutory and voluntary settings. The research sample is a good reflection of the overall IM pre-school population (see Appendices 1, 2 and 3).

Most interviews involved one teacher/nursery leader. A few interviews were carried out with the principal of the setting or by the chairperson of the nursery committee. A few interviews involved both principal and nursery teacher or leader. The interview schedule for these interviews is in Appendix 6. This chapter will report and analyse findings from these interviews with teachers, leaders, chairpersons and/or principals in thirty IM pre-school settings. Participants were informed of the aims of the project and in accordance with BERA (2011) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (www.bera.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/BERA-Ethical-Guidelines-2011.pdf) were asked to give informed

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[173] Minimum Standards for Childminding and Day Care DHSSPS http://www.hscboard.hscni.net/publications/Policies/031%20DHSSPS%20Early%20Years%20Standards%20-%20July%202012%20-%20PDF%20879KB.pdf

written consent before being interviewed. A copy of the bilingual information/consent letter is in Appendix 5.

Some of the data generated by the research are quantified. A substantial amount of qualitative data was also generated by interviews and adds richness and contextualisation. When quantifying responses the following terms are used and should be interpreted as follows:

- 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%.

6.2 A Snapshot of IM Pre-schools: general information

There is noted diversity within the IM pre-school sector. There is variety in the funding models for settings with pupils being educated in both voluntary and statutory settings. Other differences include: staff-pupil ratios; qualifications and linguistic competences of staff; pay and working conditions; management arrangements; providers of curriculum support and guidance; the extent and quality of accommodation and resources. There is also diversity between newly established schools and well-established schools which may have different development priorities. These factors must be taken into consideration when investigating the learning outcomes, set or expected, for Irish-medium pre-schools. This section will explore findings related to the nature and funding sources of schools as background to inform the analysis of the learning outcomes set or expected, in IM pre-school settings.

Factors influencing language-related learning outcomes have been highlighted in the literature review. Based on a sample of thirty IM Pre-school settings (n=30) detailed contextual information was provided on the following factors:

- staff-pupil ratios;
- accommodation;
- how long the setting has been established;
- staff qualifications in education and/or childcare;
- staff qualifications and competences related to the Irish language;
- the amount of exposure to the target language experienced by pupils;
- the nature of the accommodation and resources available;
- the level and nature of professional development support provided by statutory and non-statutory organisations;
- current continuing professional development in which staff are engaging;
- pay and working conditions experienced by staff.

6.2.1 Staff-Pupil Ratios

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. Funding in statutory settings was a challenge in relation to appropriate staff-pupil ratios. The LMS funding model covered a teacher and one assistant. However, principal respondents found this was not enough in terms of addressing needs and maximising the pupils' quality exposure to Irish from adult speakers:

Tá ga le foireann níos mó i naíscoil lán-Ghaeilge. Mar atá tá an cóimheas céanna againn agus atá i naíscoileanna lán-Bhéarla. Nuair atá grúpaí níos lú tá am agat labhairt leis na páistí. An dóigh a bhfuil rudaí anois níl am labhairt leis na páistí. Ach níl an buiséad againn (le) daoine breise a chur isteach. 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).

6.2.2   Accommodation

IM pre-school settings are situated in permanent accommodation or mobile accommodation. Some settings share premises with other organisations. This sometimes can cause difficulties if all pre-school resources have to be put away at the end of the session or if other aspects of the building (for example outdoor play facilities) are less than ideal. Within the sample of settings exactly 50% were in permanent buildings and 50% in mobile accommodation.

An ideal situation is where the setting is in an appropriate permanent building and if it shares accommodation with other organisations, that it is with educational organisations (e.g. 0-3 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 is not always the case. The following comments illustrate some of the difficulties for settings who do not have purpose built accommodation:

We have a permanent building although it's not ideal and we have very little outside space (Case 5).

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 naíscoil 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:

Táimid sásta ó thaobh na naíscolaíochta de ach bheadh foirgneamh buan ina chuidiú. Níl sé éasca a bheith ag dul i gcomórtas le naíscoileanna agus bunscoileanna eile (leis an chóiríocht neamhbhuan atá ag an scoil lán-Ghaeilge). Deir daoine 'that wee Irish school, sure they only have huts.' *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).*

6.2.3   How long the setting has been established

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

Figure 6:2: How long settings have 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
20 plus years	12	40.0	100.0

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 – therefore it is clear that there is diversity within the sector. 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 pre-school sector which has additional requirements related to the immersion model of education (for example resources required to facilitate Irish language acquisition). 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)

A conclusion which can be drawn is that the sector needs to be able to draw on that experience in a structured and planned way in order to ensure the best learning outcomes for its pupils.

6.2.4   Children's exposure to the immersion language

There is diversity in the children's exposure to the language. Some settings provide a two year programme, some a one year programme[174]. Statutory settings in the main provide a

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[174] DE funds one year of pre-school provision for the majority of the pre-school cohort - see Section 3.2.1. 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.

one year programme which is based on the funding they receive for the pre-school year. Some settings enhance provision with Sure-Start playgroups for younger children. The provision of early years IM education for children aged 0-3 was an issue raised by some participants who believed that maximum exposure to the target language led to better outcomes for pupils:

An naíscoil a fhorbairt chuig soláthar 0-3, naíolann, sin an chéad tairseach eile…go dtí go gcaitear leis an scoil agus an cur chuige tumoideachais dhá bhliain beimid i gcónaí ag streachailt. To develop the naíscoil 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).

Ba chóir go mbeadh dhá bhliain naíscolaíochta ar fáil ar a laghad mar rogha ag tuismitheoirí. Two years IM nursery provision should be at least available as a choice for parents. (Case 20).

Tá ga le foireann níos mó i naíscoil lán-Ghaeilge. Mar atá tá an cóimheas céanna againn agus atá i naíscoileanna lán-Bhéarla. Nuair atá grúpaí níos lú tá am agat labhairt leis na páistí. An dóigh a bhfuil rudaí anois níl am labhairt leis na páistí. Ach níl an buiséad againn (le) daoine breise a chur isteach. 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).

6.2.5   Staff Qualifications and Linguistic Profiles

The literature review has identified the linguistic competence of staff and the nature of pre-service and in-service support as factors contributing to learning outcomes. In IM settings staff are expected to have not only appropriate qualifications in either childcare or education but are also expected to have an appropriate level of linguistic competence in Irish. A further desirable element identified in the literature is an understanding of bilingual language development and the pedagogies of immersion education. In this section the qualifications of IM nursery teachers and leaders, as reported by respondents, will be analysed. In addition, information on their linguistic profile will be analysed in order to provide more nuanced detail on the linguistic profiles of staff in pre-school settings.

The table below illustrates the highest education and childcare qualifications of the teachers and leaders who teach in the thirty IM pre-school settings (sample in this stage of the project).

Figure 6:3: Education/Childcare Qualifications (Non Irish Medium Specific) of Staff in IM Pre-Schools (sample visited)

Qualifications	Statutory	Voluntary	Total
Postgraduate Certificate in Education	6	0	6
Degree	4	5	9

Qualifications	Statutory	Voluntary	Total
Level 5 Childcare Management	-	2	2
Level 3 Childcare	-	13	13

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.

In addition to qualifications in education and childcare, a high level of linguistic competence is expected in order to provide a stimulating IM learning environment with maximum exposure in the target language. The following table shows the qualifications or Irish language status reported by teachers and leaders in settings.

Figure 6:4: Qualifications/status related to Irish Language competence

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

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. This led to descriptions of practice which do not match current understandings of good practice in immersion early years education:

The manager sets out a language specific plan for the staff who are not proficient in the language. In this plan the topics are spelt out phonetically for the staff to facilitate the use of Irish when the manager is not in the room. Current staff have a very low proficiency in Irish and when the Naíscoil manager was on maternity leave no Irish was spoken in the Naíscoil. This plan was drawn up to prevent that from happening again and also to allow the manager to use time effectively. (Case 9).
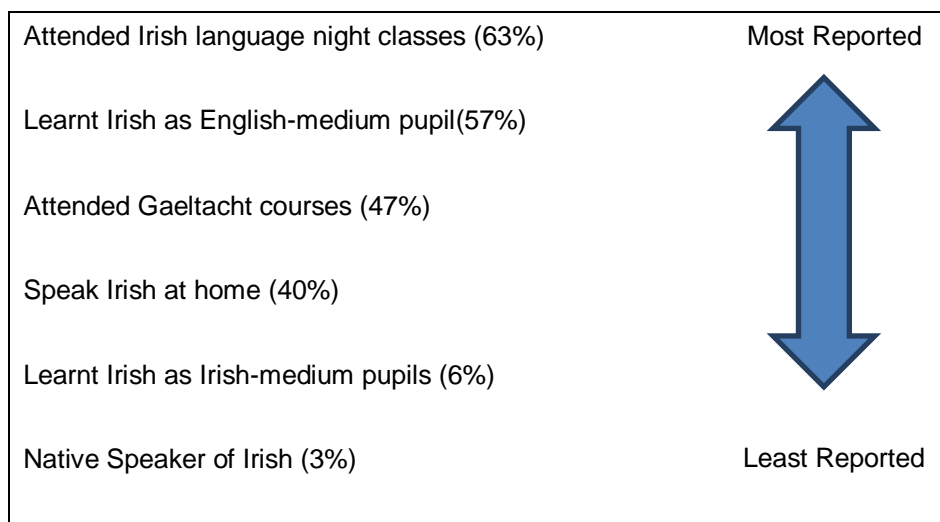
Some staff in statutory nurseries conveyed their concerns about lack of consistency regarding Irish language competence and how this may impact on pupils' learning outcomes. Some also attributed consistency to statutory status:

Sílim go bhfuil neart naíscoileanna agus leibhéal Gaeilge na múinteoirí, níl leibhéal comhsheasmhach amuigh ansin agus measaim féin gurb é sin an rud is mó...tá sé deacair freisin daoine a choinneáil, foireann a choinneáil sna naíscoileanna. *I think there are plenty of naíscoileanna and the teachers' level of Irish, there is no consistent level out there and I think that that is the biggest thing…it is difficult also to retain people, to retain staff in the naíscoileanna. (Case 29).*

Caithfidh múinteori cailíocht a bheith aige/aici sa chúram leanaí agus céim ar a laghad a bheith acu sa Ghaeilge. Sin an rud a dhéanann difear. Tá difríocht mhór tugtha faoi deara agam ón uair a d'athraigh muid ó ghrúpa súgartha go naíscoil reachtúil. *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 naíscoil. (Case 4).*

The teachers and leaders interviewed were asked to provide a more detailed self-evaluation of their Irish language profile. Answering a multiple-response type question, the following details were provided.

Figure 6:5: Staff Irish Language Profile

Attended Irish language night classes (63%) — Most Reported

Learnt Irish as English-medium pupil (57%)

Attended Gaeltacht courses (47%)

Speak Irish at home (40%)

Learnt Irish as Irish-medium pupils (6%)

Native Speaker of Irish (3%) — Least Reported

This shows that staff in IM pre-school settings learnt the language in a wide variety of ways beyond academic qualifications. 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 (57%) 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 additional expectations required of IM staff in pre-school settings. Not only are they required to have appropriate qualifications in either childcare or education but they are also expected to have high levels of fluency in Irish. This impacts 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:

Ta sé iontach doiligh foireann a fháil atá líofa sa Ghaeilge agus cáilithe sa chúram leanaí. Sin an deacracht is mó san earnail faoi láthair. Ní féidir an dá chritéar earcaíochta sin a shásamh. 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. We cannot satisfy those recruitment criteria. (Case 8) .

Some Naíscoileanna struggle to find staff with Irish and the required childcare qualifications.Different levels of Irish in Naíscoileanna –this means that all Naíscoileanna are not developing children's Irish to the same level. Some staff do not have the level of Irish to provide the immersion approach (Case 12).

Some participants saw it as an issue related to career guidance in schools:

Caithfidh daoine an cinneadh a dhéanamh. Tá Gaeilge iontach tabhachtach agus caithfidh an curaclam bheith tábhachtach freisin ach teastaíonn an dá rud. Tá gá daoine a spreagadh dul ar aghaidh agus ardleibhéal Gaeilge a bhaint amach agus a chur ar an eolas go bhfuil poist ar fáil sa chúram leanaí má tá ardleibhéal Gaeilge agat. People have to make a decision. The Irish language is very important and the curriculum is also important but both things are needed. 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).

Respondents identified a range of additional courses which would benefit the staff in their settings as outlined in the following table:

Figure 6:6: Courses of benefit to staff in IM Pre-school Settings

Irish Language Courses (63%)	Most Reported

Immersion Education (53%)

Early Years (23%)

Special Educational Needs (10%)

Least Reported
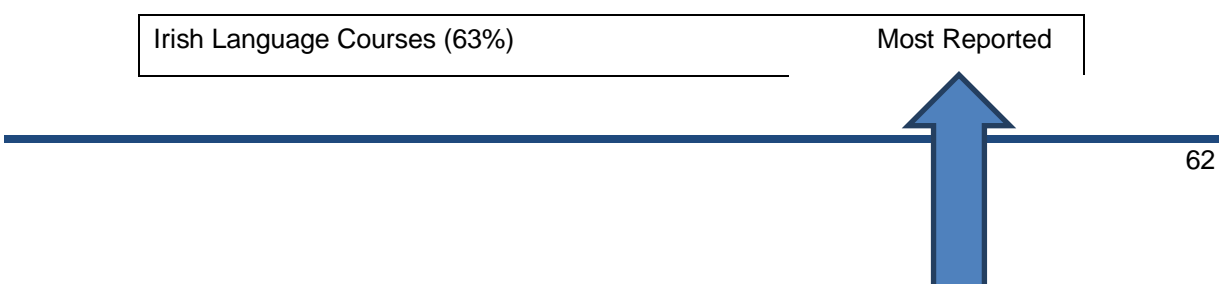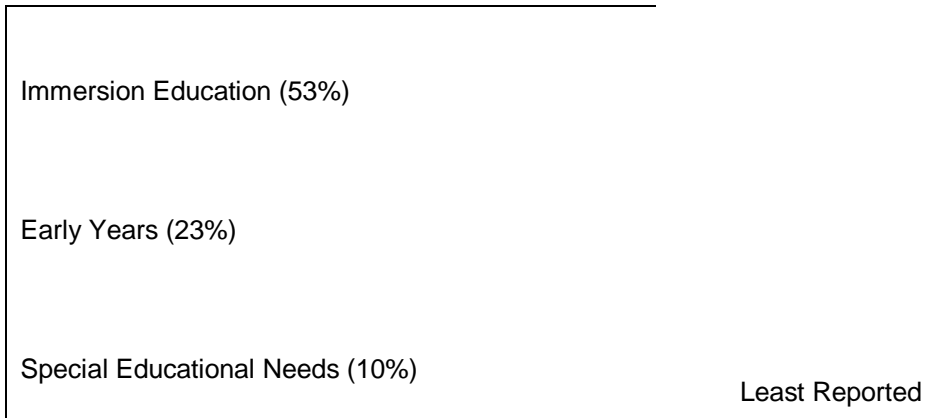
Many respondents identified both courses on immersion issues and Irish language courses. Some respondents commented that general Irish language classes did not meet the requirements of pre-school staff:

More pre-school-related Irish language courses. The courses available are great but they are very general-something more specific to this sector is needed. (Case 11).

General Irish classes are not geared to immersion education. The language taught is not the language you need every day in the Naíscoil (Case 23).

The importance of having courses delivered through the medium of Irish was another emerging theme:

I ndáiríre chuirfinn fáilte roimh chúrsa ar bith sa naíscolaíocht, tumoideachas, riachtanas speisialta, ach go mbéidis ar fáil trí mheán na Gaeilge. Níl na cúrsaí sin ar fáil trí mheán na Gaeilge. Seriously I would welcome any courses in nursery education, immersion education, special needs as long as they were available through the medium of Irish. Those courses are not available through Irish. (Case 22)

6.2.6   Continuing Professional Development

Participants in a majority of voluntary pre-school settings reported on continuing professional development that staff were currently undertaking at the time of the study. This provides further evidence that there is a culture of improvement and life-long learning among some staff in voluntary settings. The following table illustrates the type of courses participants are currently undertaking.

Figure 6:7: Current Continuing Professional Development (within sample of 30 pre-schools)

Type of Course	Number of participants
Degree in Irish	1
Degree in Early Childhood Studies	1
Level 5 Management in Childcare	5

Type of Course	Number of participants
Level 3 Childcare	2
Certificate in Immersion Education (Altram, accredited by Ulster University)	5

6.2.7 Professional development support provided by statutory and non-statutory organisations

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 is fit for purpose and high quality. All but one pre-school setting interviewed (i.e. 97%) 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, storytelling. Staff in some settings also pursued the Certificate in Immersion Education and positive comments were made about the quality and usefulness of this course for pre-school settings:

That course really helped bring consistency in language use in the Naíscoil and planning. I think the course should be rolled out for everybody working in naíscoileanna. It helped us focus on what we were doing. Before that we were all over the place, not knowing actually what. (Case 5).

One nursery leader found not only the content of the course useful but the opportunities to make professional contacts with other nursery leaders was valuable:

Through the Altram immersion course we now collaborate with staff from other naíscoileanna. (Case 3).

Altram early years advisors were cited as providing support with planning, with 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. I have actually seen her come in and roll her sleeves up and actually get stuck in. Altram helps with planning and with any new legislation that comes in. (Case 5).

Some participants in statutory settings noted that Altram support was targeted at the voluntary sector due to limited funding. Other participants commented on their concerns that Altram funding may be withdrawn due to changes in funding arrangements.

Things aren't looking good as regards funding for voluntary pre-schools. (We are) worried that funding and support, especially Altram support, will go. Altram is the glue/link that keeps us together. (Case 16).

Many participants also engaged with the English-medium organisation Early Years. 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. Altram visit once a month and we attend cluster training once every three months with Altram (Case 10).

Teachers in statutory pre-school settings reported that they could draw on the advice and curriculum support from CASS. They cited support with special educational needs advice, general support and advice regarding child safeguarding. One respondent reported getting initial support from the CASS early years team when they first received statutory status but that that level of support has been reduced since then. Some settings engage with CASS by participation in particular projects related to special educational needs or behavioural support.

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:

Níl polasaí láidir, daingean go leor ag an Roinn Oideachais…Tá an t-Údarás oideachais úr anois ann agus Altram mar chomhairle agus tacaíocht acu, ach caithfidh an t-Udarás oideachais polasaí níos éifeachtaí a bheith acu. The DE does not have a policy which is strong or consistent enough. There is the new Education Authority now and Altram to give them advice and support and the new EA has to have a more effective policy (Case 28).

We have done an awful lot of in-school material and assessment because what is being provided by statutory agencies isn't suitable at all. What we have produced is beneficial in a way that DENI or CCEA material isn't. We are meeting the needs of the children in a way that other schools aren't able to. Statutory agencies with responsibility in the sector aren't meeting the needs of children (Case 30).

6.2.8 Pay and Working Conditions

Many participants noted differences between statutory and voluntary nursery settings. 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 and marketing and recruitment to ensure adequate numbers of pupils come on a yearly basis. Leaders in voluntary settings commented on the burden of expectations placed on them and the staff in their setting in light of differences in pay and working conditions in comparison with qualified teachers in statutory settings. The following comments are indicative:

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)

There is a lot of pressure on us at the moment and it is becoming very difficult to do the work that you signed up for with all the pressures of money, fundraising and staff. It's nearly too much and extra funding is badly needed. 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 pre-school employee) for the same work, if not more paperwork, as a primary teacher. (Case 8)

We work longer than we are paid for-translating and fund-raising. (Case 3)

6.3 Learning Outcomes for IM Pre-school Settings

This section of the report will address issues related to the IM learning context and the nature of language-specific learning outcomes, as set or expected during the pre-school experience in immersion settings.

6.3.1 Current Frames of Reference for Language-specific Learning Outcomes

Most respondents based language-specific learning outcomes on their medium-term plans within schools. A majority reported using guidance provided by Altram. A majority also reported that they adapted the CCEA (2006) *Pre-school Curricular Guidance* to their immersion setting. A minority of respondents reported using an IM adaptation of the COMET resource provided by an IM CASS advisor. Two respondents cited a resource called WELCOME which although created for English-medium schools was deemed useful because of its categorisations of receptive and expressive language. In general, language-related learning outcomes were described as being embedded in a thematic approach to language development. The following comments reflect responses:

(We) use naíscoil planning documents and pre-school guidance in conjunction with the Altram Early Years Specialist (Case 17).

We have a book from Altram and the language is set out for each theme. There is nothing really in the curricular guidance for Irish immersion and that's something that needs to be looked at. We would use curricular guidance for other areas of the curriculum (Case 5).

A common theme was that the Pre-school Curricular Guidance (CCEA, 2006) did not contain adequate advice or guidance for pupils in IM settings learning through an early immersion model of education. In the absence of such guidance, settings adapt the curriculum to the needs of their young immersion language learners. This is done either by guidance from Altram or the staff in individual settings:

We use books given to us by Altram. We use these and the Pre-school Curricular guidance to guide us with planning...Guidance gives us useful information but there isn't enough in it for immersion language outcomes (Case 24)

6.3.2   Description of Good Practice

Respondents described many aspects of good practice in their settings in response to an open question. The following table shows the main themes emerging from descriptions by respondents of good practice in IM pre-school settings.

Figure 6:8: Descriptions of Good Practice in IM Pre-school Settings

Quality of Irish language provision (47%)   Most Reported

Partnerships with parents (33%)

Quality and dedication of staff (20%)

Quality of care and interactions with children (17%)

The immersion model of education (17%)   Least Reported
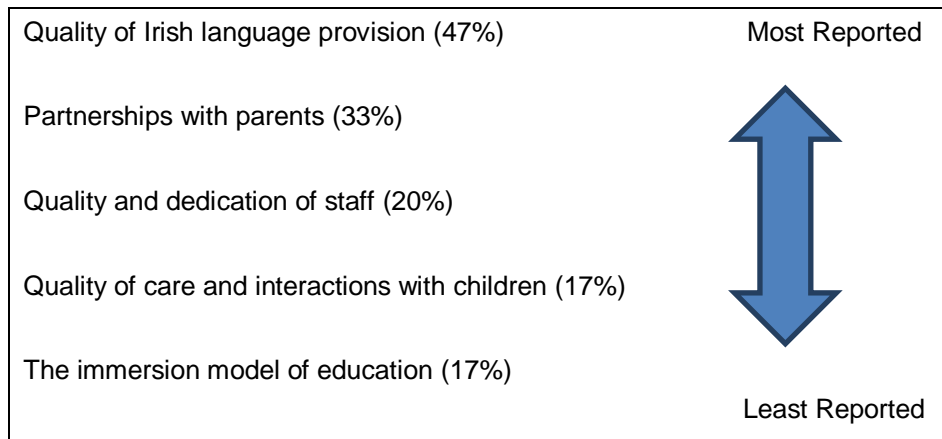
Indicative comments are illustrated by the following:

I think we are good role models because we understand the importance of immersion. We keep the language simple and age-appropriate. We plan well if we need props or visual aids so that everything is to hand. There is a lot of singing and rhymes. (Case 11)

I think we provide a really good service and we know that because families are bringing their children to us and they are bringing their children and grandchildren and wider family to us so it has a generational effect. (Case 10)

We are very lucky in that the principal has worked in the Irish-medium early years sector for forty years.It is where her specialism lies. We have a mentor who can train us within the school. There is a high level of understanding within the school regarding Irish-medium education and a high regard given to the impotance of the early years sector. (Case 30)

Go bhfuil aithne againn ar thuismitheoirí sula dtagann na páistí isteach agus caidreamh iontach láidir agus fáilteach againn leo. Táimid measúil daofa agus tá siadsan measúil ar ais...Is iar-dhaltaí mórchuid na foirne de bhunscoileanna lán-Ghaeilge agus is tuismitheoirí den earnáil iad uile (ar tuismitheoirí iad). Táimid tiománta agus paiseanta faoin earnáil, chan just an Ghaeilge ach an pobal ina bhfuilimid. Tchíonn tuismitheoirí sin agus creideann siad sin. We know the parents before the children come in and we have a strong and welcoming relationship with them. We show them respect and they return that respect…Most of the staff are past-pupils of the IM schools and those who are parents are parents in the sector. We are motivated and passionate about the sector, not just the Irish language but the community in which we live. Parents see that and they believe that. (Case 28)

6.3.3   Self-evaluation Processes to judge quality

Participants described a range of self-evaluation processes which allowed them to identify the strengths and areas for improvement within their provision and to adhere to the guidelines set out in the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) policy Together Towards Improvement (TTI)[175] for the pre-school sector.   Descriptions convey a collaborative approach involving many partners in the process. Participants described drawing on a range of sources of information as illustrated in the following table.

Figure 6:9: Evidence Sources for Self-Evaluation of Provision

Observations of learning   Most Reported

Observation of children's responses in Irish

Parental feedback

Education and Training Inspectorate

Primary One teacher feedback

Altram Early Years Specialist feedback

Minimum Standards

COMET assessment tool   Least Reported
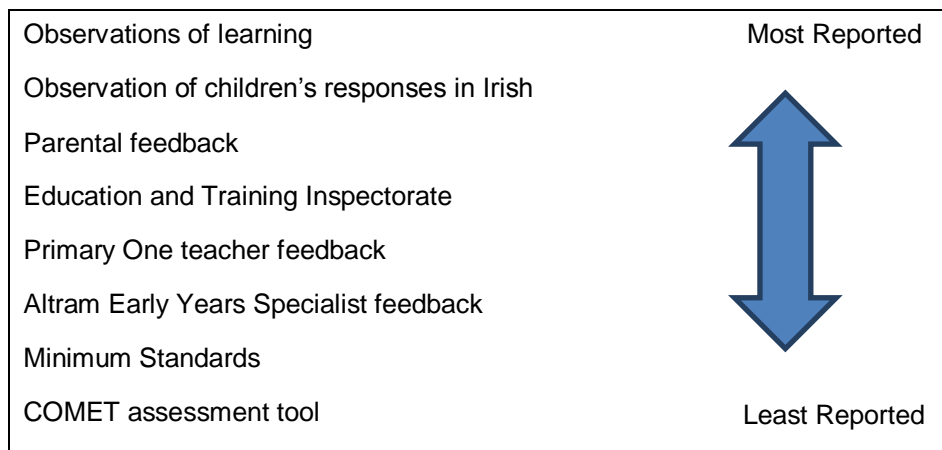
6.3.4   Transitions from Pre-school to Primary School

There is a noted variation in the percentage of children transferring from pre-school settings to IM primary settings. Some reasons were suggested by respondents including the travel distance to an IM primary school and how long IM primary provision had been available in the area. The following graph shows differences in the number of pupils moving from IM pre-school to IM primary settings.

[Note this section reflects the perceptions of staff in pre-school settings who may or may not have been aware of any flexibility in admissions criteria.   The criteria for pre-school admissions is such that measures of social deprivation take precedence.   It is therefore possible that a child who is awarded a place (as a priority) goes through IME pre-school education but does not proceed to IM Primary whereas those with an IM background may not get an IME pre-school place and do not follow on to IME primary.   In recent years, there has been some flexibility around admissions from DE[176]].

Figure 6:10: Transfer Rates of Pupils to Irish-medium Primary Schools (from sample of 30 IM pre-school settings)

Number of Schools	Percentage of Pupils

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[175] http://www.etini.gov.uk/together-towards-improvement-pre-school-education.pdf
[176] See Section 3.2.1 re: Temporary Flexibility policy

Number of Schools	Percentage of Pupils
9	90%-100%
12	75%-89%
5	50%-74%
4	Less than 50%

The literature on early years education in general highlights the importance of managing transitions carefully between pre-school and primary settings. Respondents in the present study described a range of transition practices which can be plotted along a continuum from minimal to enhanced transition practices. With one exception, the most minimal contact consisted of sharing the CCEA Transition Form. At the other end of the continuum were descriptions of comprehensive transition programmes involving children visiting the primary school on occasions and the primary one teacher visiting the nursery setting to read stories, meet and observe the children and engage in discussions with staff. Figure 6.11 illustrates the cumulative degrees of transition on a continuum from minimal communication to a full transition programme.

Figure 6:11: Continuum of Transition Practices
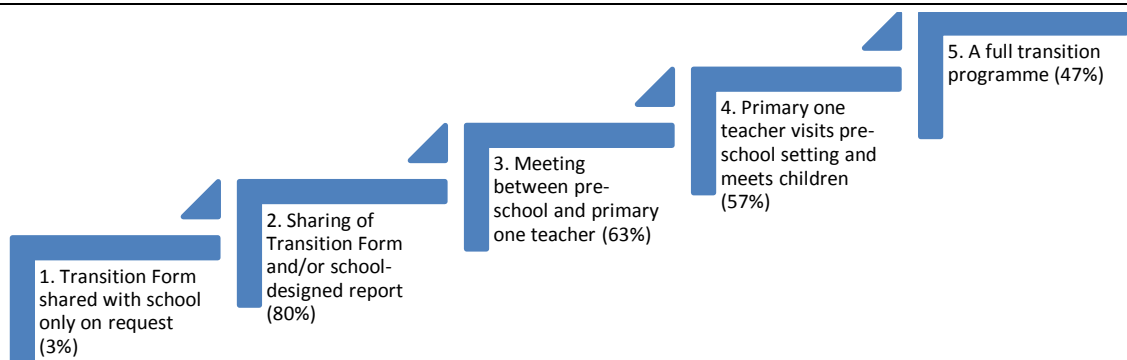
The following comments illustrate how the various points on this continuum are enacted:

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. *Tuairisc scríofa amháin. ..Tá teagmháil idir an Naíscoil agus an bhunscoil fíorthábhachtach sa cheantar seo mar is bunscoil lán-Bhéarla í ach curaclam Gaeilge acu. Go dtí go mbíonn scoil lán-Ghaeilge againn caithfear comhoibriú. 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. *Tig an múinteoir anall agus pléann sí na tuairiscí. 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.*

5. *We meet with the Rang a hAon 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. 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:

Téann muinteoir Rang 1 síos chuig an Naíscoil ag déanamh breathnóireachta. Bíonn cúpla maidin súgartha againn freisin anseo (ie sa Bhunscoil) agus thíos sa Naíscoil. Bíonn cúpla

rud ann leis an aistriú a dhéanamh níos fusa agus go gcuireann na múinteoirí aithne ar na páistí. Is buntáiste mór é go bhfuil an naíscoil ar an suíomh céanna. 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).

6.3.4.1 Transition Reports

The CCEA Transition 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 of 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.

6.3.5 Identifying Language-specific Outcomes

Planning, as described above, involves adapting curricular advice to the needs of young immersion language learners. A thematic approach to planning for early learning and early language development was described by almost all respondents and for most respondents planning forms the basis of their current understandings of language-related outcomes. Respondents were aware of differences in the pace and depth of language development for individual children:

We work in themes and we have target language every week and then of course we have social language. We extend that throughout the day...We have target words and make

observations from that. Their level of understanding is quite good but it depends on the child and the group of children. (Case 6).

Through themes there would be different outcomes but some children pick up the language quicker than others. (Case 7)

A practice in some settings is the sharing of language-specific plans with parents by newsletter:

For each theme there is a newsletter for parents with songs attached. This means that parents can also reinforce the language at home (Case 24).

6.3.5.1 The Nature of language-related learning outcomes

Respondents were asked to give examples of language-related learning outcomes expected in the pre-school phase as a targeted question during interview. Responses to other questions during interviews have also contributed to the data related to expected language-related outcomes. Responses focused on both the processes of early immersion language development and the products of early immersion language development. Almost all respondents described the language development processes related to receptive language and expressive language. Most placed great emphasis on the development of understanding in the pre-school settings and participation in shared activities:

Good understanding of the Irish language. Children are not ready to learn if they don't have good understanding. Understanding is important at this stage. (Case17)

Able to sing songs and say/sing rhymes. Children get so much language from singing. (Case 14)

Some respondents described a continuum in the children's language development as they progressed from developing understanding of the language to beginning to speak Irish:

There is a continuum outlined of the level of understanding and speaking expected at the end of the year. Understanding on a contextual level and heavily dependent on language clues and moving away from that...the development of speaking, production of routine phrases, to the children using a single Irish word in an English sentence, to a phrase in an English sentence to a full Irish sentence. (Case 30).

An important factor for a significant minority of participants was that pupils enjoy speaking the language, have fun and feel confident. A further factor identified by a minority of participants was the pupils' use of Irish beyond the classroom:

That children don't think of Irish as a language to be used in school only, that it is used out-of-school as well. Parents on board- using Irish at home through good staff-parent relationships. (Case 13).
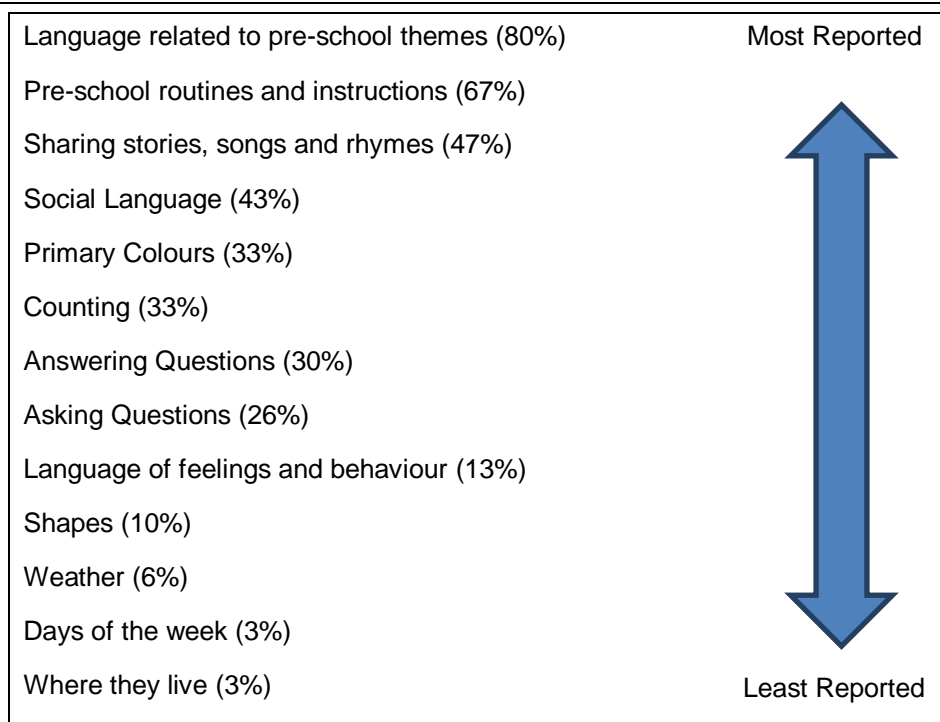
In terms of what would be expected from children as the product of language-related learning outcomes there was consensus among most respondents that this would be related to the

thematic approach to early learning which was the approach described by almost all respondents. Language planning was identified consistently as taking place within monthly themes, an approach which is advocated by Altram and supported by planning materials:

We have themes and we have stories, songs, jigsaws and bingo to go with each theme. Altram gives us examples and then we develop our own plans (Case 3).

The following table accounts for the examples of expected language-related learning outcomes as cited by participants answering an open question about appropriate expectations for pre-school children in terms of their developing receptive and expressive skills in Irish. Commonalities may suggest a starting point for discussions on an agreed approach.

Figure 6:12: Examples of Expected Language-related outcomes

Language related to pre-school themes (80%)	Most Reported
Pre-school routines and instructions (67%)	
Sharing stories, songs and rhymes (47%)	
Social Language (43%)	
Primary Colours (33%)	
Counting (33%)	
Answering Questions (30%)	
Asking Questions (26%)	
Language of feelings and behaviour (13%)	
Shapes (10%)	
Weather (6%)	
Days of the week (3%)	
Where they live (3%)	Least Reported

6.3.5.2 Assessing early immersion language outcomes

The vast majority of participants described observation-related practice as the way they assessed language-related outcomes in pre-school settings. This included the language of learning themes and also language and understanding during routines such as break-time, participation in songs and stories, role-play situations and listening to the use of Irish when pupils are talking among themselves. A small number of schools reported using a key-worker system where one member of staff is responsible for observing and recording pupils' attainments. A number of participants described keeping a portfolio-type record of the children's achievements, using different terms to describe this including a folder, scrapbook, observation book, and an end-of-year book. This portfolio was shared with parents.

Táimid ag brath cuid mhór ar luacháil laethúil a dhéanaimid ar gach uile pháiste We depend a lot on the daily evaluations we make about each child. (Case 22)

We observe the children during each session and we do daily observations. We also do individual planning helping children with specific outcomes, be they language-based or behavioural. Those recorded observations then we use for further planning. (Case 21)

Four settings used the COMET assessment tool. Two settings used the WELCOME resource. Two settings used an English-language assessment test the British Picture Vocabulary (BPVS) and another setting used pupils' competence in the English language as a predictor of their Irish development:

We also look at their level of English as an indicator of how they will deal with the second language. Their exposure could be less in the second language (Case 30).

Some respondents commented on the lack of assessment tools available for IM pre-school settings:

Sin an fhadhb. Níl áis ar bith againn go foirmealta leis na torthaí a mheas. Déanaimid go hinmheánach é le breathnóireacht leanúnach. That is the problem. We have no tool to formally assess outcomes. (Case 20).

Input from parents contributed to the observation data in some cases:

Parental feedback on songs, words etc. Used by children outside school (Case 18).

6.3.6   Consistency in the sector

Participants were asked if they thought there was consistency in practice within the IM pre-school setting. Responses were mixed as illustrated in the following table.

Figure 6:13: Consistency in Practice within the IM Pre-school sector

Consistency in practice within IME pre-school settings?	Number of Participants
Yes	4
Don't know	6
No	19

Those who spoke of consistency in practice within the sector attributed this to the advice and guidance provided by Altram:

Going by Altram cluster days we all try and follow the one set of planning and observation and assessment. But when it comes to sitting down we have said we would like a more language-focused approach (Case 10)

Those who did not know if there was consistency within the sector explained that they did not have many communications with other IM settings. The majority of responses indicated that there was not consistency in practice and outlined a number of issues to be addressed:

- Consistent guidance would identify goals and ensure quality of provision;
- The quality of Irish language provision could be monitored and improved if necessary;
- Opportunities for sharing of good practice should be available.

Most respondents agreed that guidance to ensure a degree of consistency was needed for a variety of reasons including reassuring practitioners that their practice was good, to reduce teachers' workload and for staff morale:
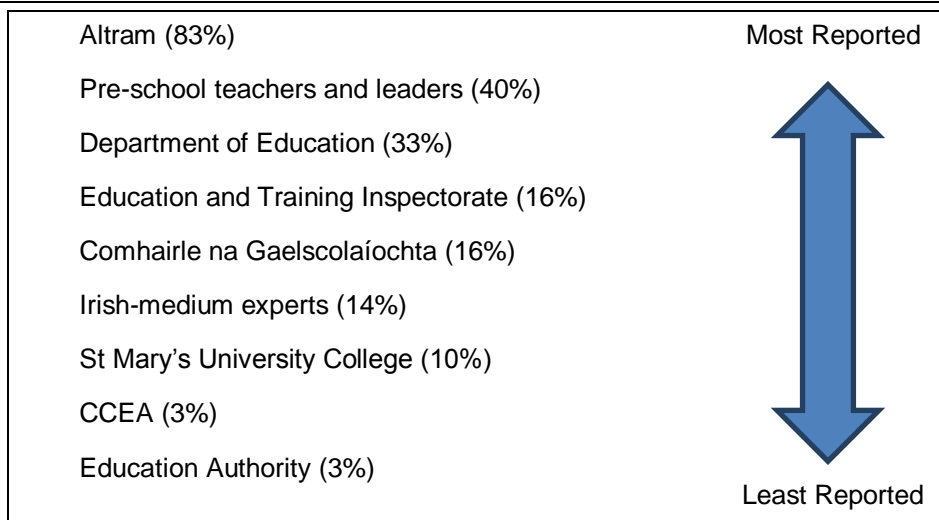
Níl rud ar bith faoi láthair. Roimh an chigireacht ní raibh a fhios agam cad é a ba mhaith le Roinn an Oideachais nó na cigirí. Ní raibh a fhios agam an raibh mé ar an bhóthar ceart. There is nothing at present. Before the inspection I did not know what the Department of Education or the inspectors wanted. I did not know if I was on the right road. (Case 1)

Níl a fhios ag na naíscoileanna cén cur chuige atá sna naíscoileanna eile agus gach duine 'ag treabhadh a ngort féin'. IM naíscoileanna don't know what approach other naíscoileanna have. Everyone is 'ploughing their own field' (doing their own thing). (Case 8)

A consistent approach would help everyone- for confidence and staff morale and for staff to know what to focus on (Case 14)

When asked who should design this guidance the majority indicated it should be a collaborative effort between a number of stakeholders and certain stakeholder organisations were suggested as illustrated in the following table:

Figure 6:14: Stakeholders who should devise guidance

Altram (83%) — Most Reported

Pre-school teachers and leaders (40%)

Department of Education (33%)

Education and Training Inspectorate (16%)

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (16%)

Irish-medium experts (14%)

St Mary's University College (10%)

CCEA (3%)

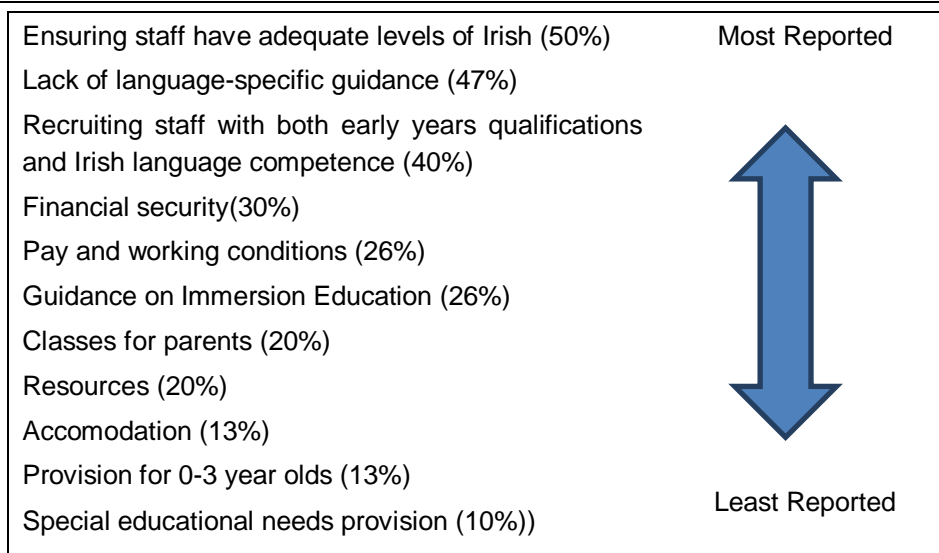Education Authority (3%) — Least Reported

Most respondents suggested that guidance should include information related to expected levels of Irish language receptive and expressive skills and guidance on immersion approaches.

6.3.7   Recommendations for improving Practice

Participants highlighted a number of challenges related to the IM pre-school sector which need to be addressed in order to improve practice and consequently the learning outcomes for IM pre-school children. These challenges were raised and discussed in response to an open question about strengths and areas for development in provision and also in relation to other topics raised and discussed during the interview process. Many of these challenges have already been explored in detail in this chapter. However, it is useful to identify the most common challenges raised are outlined in the following table.

Figure 6:15: Challenges for the IM Pre-school Sector

Ensuring staff have adequate levels of Irish (50%)	Most Reported
Lack of language-specific guidance (47%)	
Recruiting staff with both early years qualifications and Irish language competence (40%)	
Financial security(30%)	
Pay and working conditions (26%)	
Guidance on Immersion Education (26%)	
Classes for parents (20%)	
Resources (20%)	
Accomodation (13%)	
Provision for 0-3 year olds (13%)	
Special educational needs provision (10%))	Least Reported

In addition individual participants raised further issues which they viewed as challenges including difficulty in finding substitute teachers/leaders and entry requirements which prioritise children experiencing socio-economic disadvantage before Irish-speaking families.[177]

6.4   Summary of Findings

A picture emerges from the research data of a dynamic IM pre-school sector. This includes busy children, committed parents as partners and motivated and creative teachers, leaders and managers who adapt curriculum guidance to the needs of pupils. In addition to the accountability roles of governors and naíscoil committee members they have an additional voluntary role as fund-raisers and as developers of further stages of IM provision in their local areas.

A number of key findings emerged from participant responses to both closed and open-ended questions and discussion points which are presented in summary here, not however in any order of priority:

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[177] See Section 3.2.1 re: Temporary Flexibility policy which seeks to mitigate against this situation

- There are marked differences between statutory and voluntary settings including the quality of accommodation, qualifications of staff, the linguistic competence of staff, pay and working conditions and the professional development opportunities available.

- Those working in the IM pre-school sector need additional qualifications and competences in the Irish language and understanding of immersion methodology as well as the educational/early years requirements of their English-medium colleagues.

- Staff in both statutory and voluntary settings are open to continuing professional development and participants have identified particular aspects of practice where they would like additional support including Irish language development, immersion education, early years education and special educational needs.

- The Irish-medium organisation Altram is the source of support for IM voluntary settings and participants spoke highly of the quality of that support.

- Statutory pre-school settings noted improvements that came with statutory status. However challenges were identified relating to the staff-pupil ratio, the level of curriculum support available, and a 2 year IM early years programme.

- Pre-school Curricular Guidance (CCEA, 2006) is used as general guidance but is not considered entirely suitable for immersion settings. Participants suggested that specific guidance which accounts for the nature of immersion learning and the nature of immersion language development is needed.

- Understanding is key in pupils' development in the immersion language in pre-school settings. Expressive skills follow according to pupils' individual rates of progression and development. This must be accounted for in guidance related to language-specific learning outcomes.

- Immersion approaches to learning and teaching are play-based, interactive and embedded in a thematic approach to early learning. This must be accounted for in guidance related to language-specific learning outcomes and in observation-based assessment approaches.

- Transition from pre-school to primary school is important and should be managed effectively as a shared programme between pre-school and primary school, both Irish-medium and English-medium destinations.

- There are unique dimensions to IM parental partnerships and communication with parents.

- The CCEA pre-school transition form is not considered fit for purpose and should be adapted to the educational and linguistic characteristics of IM pre-school children.

- Appropriate guidance for IM pre-school settings is needed and should comprise all aspects of the immersion experience. Guidance should be produced by a collaborative group including statutory organisations, Altram and other IM experts.

7 CONCLUSIONS

7.1 Introduction

The aim of this research project is to identify which core components in Irish-medium pre-schools lead to optimum readiness for transition to Foundation Stage in Irish-medium primary schools and the extent to which these components are present in Irish-medium pre-schools in the statutory and voluntary sector in the North of Ireland. This involved the following:

- a literature review of policy and practice in respect of early years second language acquisition in the context of minority language immersion in a variety of settings;
- Interviews with teachers or nursery leaders in a sample of IM pre-school settings (n=30) and interviews with strategic stakeholders (n=13) who support the sector in order to identify, examine and comment on the learning outcomes, set or expected, for Irish-medium pre-schools, the criteria used to establish these outcomes and the methods used to assess the degree to which the desired outcomes are being achieved in Irish-medium pre-schools.

In addressing these aims the following research questions were generated and will be addressed in this chapter:

1. Which core components in Irish-medium pre-schools lead to optimum readiness for transition to foundation stage in Irish-medium primary schools?

2. What language-related best practices and methodologies have been identified?

3. What are the learning outcomes, set or expected, for Irish-medium pre-schools?

4. What are the criteria used to establish language-related outcomes and the methods used to assess the degree to which the outcomes are being achieved in Irish-medium pre-schools?

5. What indicators of best practice are used to assess quality in Irish-medium pre-schools?

6. How is best practice measured including what self-evaluation procedures are used to assess progress and outcomes in Irish-medium pre-schools including ETI Quality Standards?

7. What guidance has been issued by CCEA to Irish-medium settings including examples of best practice used to assess quality in IM pre-school settings?

7.2 Which core components in Irish-medium pre-schools lead to optimum readiness for transition to foundation stage in Irish-medium primary schools?

Some of the core-components leading to optimum readiness for transition to primary school are generic components common to both English-medium and Irish-medium pre-school settings. The literature review has identified that age-appropriate play-based learning experiences contribute to children's development across a range of domains[178]. The qualifications and skills of staff, their understanding of early learning processes and their contributions to high-quality interactions with children have been identified as core components[179]. Higher staff qualifications are likely to lead to better outcomes. Qualified teachers in settings had the greatest impact on quality in the EPPE study in the UK[180]. Nursery schools /classes with qualified teachers were found to have the best outcomes in Northern Ireland. Observation-based assessment processes and realistic expectations inform appropriate planning for learning[181]. Positive partnerships with parents and both formal and informal opportunities for dialogue between parents and pre-school setting and between pre-school and primary setting enhances both children's pre-school experiences and their transition experiences[182]. Information shared between pre-school, parents and primary setting which focuses on social development and well-being as well as curricular outcomes is desirable. Pre-school teachers and leaders who participated in the research identified many of these components in their practice including partnerships with parents, the quality of care and the quality of interactions with children. Stakeholders identified the quality of the pre-school environment, the quality of staff and the level of parental engagement as key factors.

In the Irish-medium pre-school sector, there are also core-components specific to early years immersion settings which reflect the nature of immersion language learning experiences and the developmental profile of young children learning a new language and engaging in early learning experiences through that new language. Staff in Irish-medium pre-school settings reported that they are expected to have not only the knowledge and skills of their English-

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[178] BERA (2003) 'Early Years Research: pedagogy, curriculum and adult roles, training and professionalism', British Educational Research Association Special Interest Group. Available at http://www.niched.org/docs/bera_report%20.pdf (Last accessed 23 August 2012); & Evangelou, M. Sylva, K. Kyriacou, M. Wild, M. and Glenny, G. (2009) Early Years Learning and Development: literature review. London: DCSF

[179] Quinn, L. Hanna, K. Melhuish, E. Siraj-Blatchford, I.Taggart, B. Sylva, K. Sammons, P Donnelly, G. (2006) *Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) Project: case studies of early years settings.* Belfast: The Stranmillis Press.

[180] Sylva, K. Melhuish, E. Sammons, P. Siraj-Blatchford, I. And Taggart, B. (2004) The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education: The Final Report. London: Dfes Sure Start Publications and The Institute of Education.

[181] Glazzard, J. Chadwick, D. Webster, A. and Percival, J (Eds.). (2010) Assessment for Learning in the Early Years Foundation Stage. London: Sage.

[182] Walsh, G. Taylor, D. Sproule, L. and McGuinness, C. (2008) *Debating the Transition from Play-based to Formal Practice: implications for early years teachers and policymakers.* Belfast: CCEA.

medium peers but also to have two additional skill sets: an appropriate level of fluency in the Irish language and 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. Stakeholder participants also noted that the quality of teaching is likely to vary because of the limited pool of suitably qualified staff. The majority of strategic stakeholders reported that statutory pre-schools attached to primary schools provided the greatest opportunity to ensure high quality IM pre-school experiences because of the presence of qualified teachers, the stability afforded by mainstream funding and the ability to draw on the resources of the primary school. Teachers in statutory pre-school settings reported improvements in pupils' language development since the settings were designated statutory.

Overall, emerging findings suggest a need for more consistency across the sector in relation to the following factors which may impact on language-related learning outcomes:

- qualifications of staff;
- the linguistic competence of staff;
- lack of guidance from statutory agencies related to immersion pedagogies;
- the nature and quality of information shared by pre-schools with primary schools;
- curriculum support and professional development opportunities.

Stakeholder participants and 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 from pre-school settings also show that qualified teachers 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 ETI reports and in the most recent Chief Inspector's report[183]. Nevertheless, the literature review on both English-medium and Irish-medium pre-school settings indicate that the above factors may impact on learning outcomes. A strong message emerging from the findings is that 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 a number of ways: by ensuring appropriate continuing professional development and linguistic support for all pre-school settings and by increasing the number of statutory nursery settings.

Recommendation 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

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[183] Chief Inspector's Report 2012-2014. http://www.etini.gov.uk/index/inspection-reports/the-chief-inspectors-report/ci-report-2012-2014.pdf

settings, both voluntary and statutory. Another way is to consider extending the number of statutory nursery settings[184].

Recommendation 2: The identification and sharing of good practice across sectors should be promoted within bespoke programmes of CPD available to all IM Pre-school settings. This should also inform a quality assurance framework for CPD provision.

Recommendation 3: A language competence framework and continuing professional development programme for staff working in Irish-medium pre-school settings should be developed in order to enhance provision and secure the best language-related learning outcomes.

Successful transition experiences for children as they move from pre-school to school settings have been identified in the literature as desirable aspect of good practice. In Irish-medium research the language dimension of transitions has been identified as an important issue[185]. 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 pre-school setting and visits to the primary setting. Both stakeholder participants and teachers in statutory pre-school settings felt that transition arrangements were better facilitated in statutory pre-school settings. Stakeholder respondents noted a lack of consistency in the information shared with primary schools and that the CCEA transition form did not take account of second language development which is a key dimension of learning in IM pre-school settings. Pre-school teacher and leader participants also reported that the CCEA transition form was not fit for purpose and did not allow an adequate account of pupils' developing language competence in the immersion language. Staff adapted the form or created their own to reflect the language-related learning outcomes of IM settings. Whereas these adaptations allow individual settings to create fit-for-purpose information for sharing with primary settings it means that consistency across settings is less likely. DE policy-makers report that the CCEA Transition form is not a statutory requirement for either English-medium or Irish-medium settings and that many English-medium settings also adapt the form or design their own form. However, in practice it appears that staff believe its use is a mandatory requirement. For the purpose of consistency within the IM pre-school sector it would be reasonable to suggest that an agreed form outlining the early learning and linguistic development of pre-school pupils would be desirable.

Recommendation 4: An agreed fit-for-purpose transition report form which reflects the IM learning experiences and linguistic development of children at the end of their pre-school year should be devised.

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[184] Proposals for new statutory nursery provision are subject to the statutory development proposal process.
[185] Mhic Mhathúna, M. (2011) *An Traein. Eolas agus Moltaí do Stiúrthóirí Naíonraí agus do Mhúinteoirí* Gaelscoileanna. Baile Átha Cliath: Gaelscoileanna agus Forbairt Naíonraí Teo.

Participants reported additional elements related to parental partnerships in Irish-medium pre-school settings. Staff in pre-school settings reported that they encourage parents to attend Irish classes and use the language as much as possible in interactions. They communicated language-related learning intentions in parental newsletters containing key vocabulary related to learning themes, songs and rhymes. Improving partnerships with parents and in particular providing language classes and supporting parents in learning and using the immersion language was an area for development highlighted by pre-school teachers and leader participants. In a similar vein, strategic stakeholder participants identified the support and provision of resources to support language development in the home as an aspect of good practice in IM pre-school settings.

Recommendation 5: Given the importance of the key relationship between parents and the pre-school education provision for their children, linguistic resources should be developed to support IM pre-school parental partnerships.

7.3 What language-related best practices and methodologies have been identified?

Findings emerging from the literature review identify a range of factors that contribute to understandings of language-related best practices and methodologies in IM pre-school settings. Key educational aims relate to both the holistic education of children and the specific immersion language development of children[186]. Understanding of immersion language development processes is a key requirement for staff who should allow time for the development of initially receptive skills of listening and understanding followed by expressive skills[187]. These skills are developed in a language-rich environment through play-based learning, songs, stories and rhymes and within modelled,shared and guided interactions[188]. Initial teacher education which includes immersion language-related methodologies is highly desirable[189], as is continuing professional development and the sharing of best practices[190] in order to secure the complex skill-set required of staff in pre-school IM settings.

Teachers and nursery leader participants identified a range of good practices related to their settings including the quality of Irish language provision, partnerships with parents, the quality and dedication of staff, the quality of care and interactions with pupils and the

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[186] Hickey, T. (1997) *Early Immersion Education in Ireland: Na Naíonraí.* Dublin: Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann.

[187] Mhic Mhathúna, M. (2009) 'Supporting Children's Participation in Second-language Stories in an Irish Language Preschool', Early Years, 28(3) pp299-309

[188] Hickey, T. (2003) Early Immersion Education in Ireland: Na Naíonraí. Dublin: Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann.

[189] Nig Uidhir, G. (2006) 'St Mary's University College and Irish-medium Teacher Training' in O Riagáin, D. (ed) *Voces Diversae: lesser-used language education in Europe.* Belfast: Cló Ollscoil na Banríona, pp.145-156; and

Robertson, B. (2006) 'Issues in Minority Language Teacher Education: a Scottish Gaelic perspective in O Riagáin, D. (ed) *Voces Diversae: lesser-used language education in Europe.* Belfast: Cló Ollscoil na Banríona. pp.157-162.

[190] Hickey, T. And de Mejía, A. (2014) Immersion Education in the Early Years: a special issue, International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, pp131-141.

immersion model of education practiced in settings. An emergent theme from these interviews was that there were specific methodologies associated with good practices in IM pre-school settings which are unique to immersion education including the nature of interactions between staff and pupils to facilitate the development of receptive and expressive skills, the observation of pupils' language development in the immersion language and the linguistic dimension to parental partnerships. Some participants noted that it was important that this was recognised by statutory agencies in both policies, in the support provided to IM pre-school settings and in the interpretations of quality provision by statutory agencies.

The analysis of ETI reports in the literature review provides a useful indication of elements of desirable practice. Reports highlight the creation of a language-rich environment, the effective use of songs and stories to promote language development, the linguistic competence of staff, staff skills in supporting pupils' play and responding appropriately to their ideas. Strong partnerships with parents and the support of Altram early years specialists were further examples of best practice cited in ETI reports. The main areas for development identified in ETI reports related to the linguistic competences of staff and approaches to observing, recording and assessing children's learning in order to provide clear evidence of progress. Teachers and pre-school leaders cited observation as the practice they used for monitoring and reporting on children's development. A strong theme emerging from interviews was that teachers and leaders had no agreed framework or guidance on descriptions of IM language-related progress. Descriptions of expected progress in the *Pre-school Curricular Guidance* (CCEA, 2006) document were based on expectations for monolingual English-medium settings. This was considered not fit for purpose by both stakeholder and teacher/leader participants. These findings suggest that descriptions of desirable or expected outcomes related to immersion language development and reflecting immersion language methodologies as highlighted in the literature review and participant responses should be developed and may lead to improvements in IM pre-school provision.

7.4 What are the learning outcomes, set or expected, for Irish-medium pre-schools?

The literature review identified a number of descriptions of continua of early second language development[191] and of Irish-medium immersion development[192]. These descriptions highlight the process of second language development as progression along a continuum from the development of the receptive skills of listening and understanding to the expressive skills of inserting single words or phrases in English sentences towards an ability to generate spontaneous phrases and sentences[193]. Findings emerging from interviews with pre-school teachers and leaders and relevant stakeholders resonate with these descriptions

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[191] McKay, P. (2006) Assessing Young Language Learners. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[192] Andrews, A. (2006) Two Windows on the World: language immersion education. Belfast: Iontaobhas Ultach.
[193] Mhic Mhathúna, M. (1999) 'Early Steps in Bilingualism; learning Irish in Irish-medium pre-schools' Early Years, 19(2), pp.38-50.

from the literature review. They describe language-related learning outcomes for pupils on a continuum in the development of receptive and expressive skills in Irish. Staff in pre-school settings describe using a range of visual and other paralinguistic cues including gestures, repetition and extension strategies and shared activities involving routine language to develop children's understanding in the target language. They describe the development of expressive skills as stages on a continuum where children use initially individual words in Irish in English sentences, followed by familiar phrases towards the ability to use Irish phrases and sentences spontaeneously. An important factor identified in the literature and in interviews with both teachers and leaders in pre-schools settings and strategic stakeholder participants is that children's progression along this continuum is dependent on a number of factors including the age and developmental stage of the children, the amount of exposure in the target language and the quality of staff interactions.

In addition to descriptions of the processes of language development in pre-school settings, teacher and leader participants also gave examples of the nature of expressive language they typically expect from children in IM pre-school settings. Their descriptions reflected interactive learning experiences where pupils used the target language in shared and guided activities with peers and adults. Expected language outcomes were embedded in the thematic approach to early learning practices in IM pre-school settings. The most common descriptions related to the language of set themes and to pre-school routines and instructions, sharing songs, stories and rhymes and the use of social language in everday interactions.

A strong message emerging from the findings is that a majority of participants identified a need for guidance on typical language development expectations in IM pre-school settings. This guidance should be age-appropriate and include the nature of immersion language development on a continuum of receptive and expressive skills development. There are a number of sources which should inform the development of an agreed framework or continuum of development. Experienced practitioners should be involved in the development of such a framework. Cognisance should also be taken of bilingual frameworks available in international settings. A third and crucial source informing such a development is empirical evidence of pupils' receptive and expressive language development across a range of pre-school settings.

Recommendation 6: An exploratory framework of desirable descriptors/indicators of typical IM language development for children in pre-school settings should be developed and piloted. These descriptors/indicators should take cognisance of three key sources: bilingual frameworks in international research; the experience of IM pre-school teachers; and empirical evidence of the typical levels of immersion language observed in settings.

7.5 What are the criteria used to establish language-related outcomes and the methods used to assess the degree to which the outcomes are being achieved in Irish-medium pre-schools?

A strong theme emerging from the review of policies and from the literature review is that observation is considered the most appropriate and most effective way of assessing pupils' learning at the pre-school stage[194]. Rich descriptions of what pupils do and say and how they engage with the learning context and with their peers and adults captures a broad range of achievements including learning dispositions, cognitive abilities, social and emotional development and language development and reflects the richness and the complexities of early learning processes[195.] Both the pre-school curricular guidance for NI[196] and the ETI Together Towards Improvement guidance[197] recommend that assessment in the pre-school year should be observation-based. The former provides descriptions of learning opportunities children should experience and a brief outline of the progression of learning typically expected in the pre-school year within learning areas. This however relates to monolingual learning contexts where experiences are built on a language that has already been established in pupils' lives. This guidance provides a general description of IM contexts but no specific descriptions of how the immersion language should be developed across learning areas and what progression is typically expected in those learning areas for children, the vast majority of whom are learning through a new language.

Responses from participants indicate that although the pre-school curricular guidance was a starting point, it did not provide the descriptions of immersion language development that practitioners needed. In the absence of appropriate guidance from any statutory organisation, practitioners extended and adapted the pre-school guidance to the needs of their young immersion language learners. This was based on practitioners' experience and understandings of immersion language development and early learning. Findings indicate that this causes uncertainty and inconsistencies in practice. This is compounded by the fact that many IM pre-school settings are relatively new and that there are challenges in recruiting and retaining staff with both language skills and appropriate childcare qualifications. In the absence of guidance from statutory bodies many settings drew on advice from Altram and they spoke very positively about the quality of this support. The majority of teacher/leader participants reported a lack of consistency in IM practices and that appropriate guidance would enhance practice in a variety of ways. It would ensure consistency and quality of IM pre-school provision. It would provide a mechanism for monitoring and improving the quality of Irish language provision and would also provide an

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[194] Tickell, C. (2011) The Early Years: foundations for life, health and learning, London: DES.
[195] Drummond, M.J. (2008) 'Assessment and Values: a close and necessary relationship' in Swaffield, S. (Ed) Unlocking Assessment: understanding for reflection and application, London: Routledge, pp3-19.
[196] Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) (2006) Pre-school Curricular Guidance. Belfast: CCEA.
[197] Education and Training Inspectorate (2010) Together Towards improvement- a process for self-evaluation; pre-school. Bangor: ETINI.

appropriate tool for the sharing of good practice. It would enhance staff morale by reducing the workload on staff and reassure practitioners that their provision was good.

A clear theme emerging from the findings is that guidance for IM pre-school settings should be agreed and designed by a group of stakeholders. Most respondents proposed that Altram be involved. The input from experienced teachers and nursery leaders who understood the practicalities of IM pre-school learning was also considered desirable. Participants cited a number of statutory bodies and non-statutory IM organisations who could contribute to agreed guidance.

Recommendation 7: Bespoke pre-school curricular guidance which takes cognisance of the IM immersion context should be developed by a collaborative group of stakeholders including practitioners and disseminated across all pre-school settings within a programme of continuing professional development.

7.6 What indicators of best practice are used to assess quality in Irish-medium pre-schools?

The literature review and findings from interviews indicate that IM pre-school practice is different from monolingual English-medium practice in a number of significant ways including the immersion pedagogies employed to develop pupils' understanding and expression in a language which for most is not a language of the home. This requires specific teaching strategies, more teacher-input and specific language-related learning outcomes all of which have different emphases than practice in English-medium pre-school settings.

In the absence of official guidelines practitioners and stakeholders alike draw on a range of sources which inform understandings of best practice. They draw on their own professional experiences and those of their colleagues, on initial and continuing professional development opportunities in both IM and English-medium contexts and on their understandings of immersion research. These experiences lead to the generation of tacit understandings of what constitutes best practice. However, practitioners and stakeholders were in agreement that agreed guidance on best practice designed by those with experience in the IM pre-school sector is needed to ensure consistency and quality of both practice and outcomes.

Recommendation 8: Quality indicators in IM pre-school settings should be developed to underpin the Together Towards Improvement self-evaluation process.

7.7 How is best practice measured including what self-evaluation procedures are used to assess progress and outcomes in Irish-medium pre-schools including ETI Quality Standards?

The Education and Training Inspectorate[198] provide a self-evaluation resource for pre-school settings in NI. This document focuses on three key aspects of quality; leadership and management; provision; achievements and standards. Key questions and quality indicators are included and it is stated that these indicators can be amended as required, suggesting a degree of flexibility to adapt the resource to the needs of settings. This evaluative framework has been designed for monolingual English-medium settings. The literature review and responses from both pre-school teachers and leaders and from stakeholders indicate that although there are commonalities between monolingual and immersion settings that there are also significant differences which should be taken into account within evaluative frameworks.

A further evaluative framework of relevance to pre-school settings is Childminding and Daycare for Children under Twelve: minimum standards issued by the Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety[199]. The standards relate to: care: staffing, management and leadership; the physical environment; and monitoring. Whilst there is a perception within DE that this evaluative framework is primarily concerned with health and safety issues, in practice, the remit is broader[200]. For example during evaluation, comments were made regarding quality of curriculum planning in IM settings. Based on the message emerging from the literature and from participant interviews, it can be concluded that DHSSPS staff involved in this evaluation process should at the least have an understanding of the nature of immersion early years education and the unique features of quality in IM settings when

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[198] Education and Training Inspectorate (2010) Together Towards improvement- a process for self-evaluation; pre-school. Bangor: ETINI.

[199] http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/early_years_standards_-_july_2012.pdf.

[200] The standards against which voluntary and private pre-schools settings are measured by HSCTs are set out in the DHSSPS Minimum Standards document (http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/early_years_standards_-_july_2012.pdf). The introduction identifies the four headings under which the 16 minimum standards are grouped, none of which refers to the education provision. Education is referenced in terms of observational sessions and provision of appropriate space and educational qualifications are reflected in the wider list of appropriate qualifications for the various levels of practitioners.

The DHSSPS published Minimum Standards document contains the following extract regarding the evaluation of educational standards within DE funded pre-school provision:

"*Sessional Care: There are informal observations of children used to identify their stages of development and to plan future activities that meet their needs. Where settings are funded by the Department of Education, more formal observations may be required in order to meet the standards of the Education and Training Inspectorate.*"

This suggests that the HSCT role is one of observing general development while the evaluation of educational provision is a role for the ETI.

making judgements about the quality of provision. Fluency in Irish is a further desirable factor for all those evaluating IM pre-school settings.

Pre-school teacher and leader participants described their self-evaluation processes as a collaborative one involving discussions with many partners and evidence from a wide range of sources including their observation of pupils' learning in general and their responses in the Irish language in particular. Other sources of evidence they drew upon included parental feedback, feedback from ETI reports, discussions with primary one teachers and with Altram early years specialists. The positive support provided by Altram early years specialists in developing sef-evaluation processes was highlighted by some participants. Most participants who had undergone recent ETI evaluations reported that at least one member of the team spoke Irish and that this was an important aspect of the inspection process.

Recommendation 9: An understanding of the principles and practices of pre-school IM education as well as a reasonable proficiency in the Irish language should be a requirement of all those who evaluate the quality of provision and learning in IM pre-school settings.

7.8 What guidance has been issued by CCEA to Irish-medium settings including examples of best practice used to assess quality in IM pre-school settings?

Information provided by CCEA to the research team stated that there are no statutory curriculum or assessment requirements for pre-school children. Pre-school providers are however required to pass on transition information to schools. While CCEA has provided a Pre-School Transition Form and Record, providers are free to use their own. Neither this pro-forma nor the above-mentioned guidance are mandatory. CCEA does not provide a form specific to Irish-medium education. However the organisation indicated that should a translation be requested of CCEA it would be happy to provide it. IM pre-school teachers and leaders indicated in their responses that rather than a translation of the form available for English-medium schools that a fit-for-purpose form which describes pupils' developing immersion language competence is needed.

The CCEA participant also referred to the Curricular Guidance for Pre-school Education. This 2006 document contains a section with advice on 'Children in Irish-Medium Settings'. While primarily a Foundation Stage resource – CCEA have also had requests from pre-schools for its *Learning Through Play* resource which has been translated for IM primary settings.

7.9 Strengths and Limitations of the Study

The Irish-medium pre-school sector is a small but growing aspect of the education sector in Northern Ireland. The parameters of the research population are small in relation to the large population of the English-medium pre-school sector. Furthermore, the English-medium sector can also draw on a wide range of NI research, some of which has been funded by

statutory bodies[201] to inform practice. In order to address the constraints associated with small-scale studies, the research team applied particular care and attention to the research methodology to ensure it was fit for purpose. Consequently, this study has incorporated a range of sources to inform and analyse the issues framed within the terms of reference of the research report. The review of literature draws on international immersion scholarship in a range of socio-linguistically similar contexts as well as on research and policy documentation on early years Irish-medium settings in jurisdictions both north and south. The issues analysed in the literature review have been complemented by the perspectives of both practitioner stakeholders and strategic stakeholders. Research instruments were designed and piloted to ensure that a broad range of data could be captured from practitioner and strategic stakeholders. The bilingual research approach ensured that the Irish-medium ethos within schools was respected and that all participants were able to communicate in the language of their choice. There are some inconsistencies and contradictions within participants' perspectives and responses at times did not reflect the most up-to-date policy initiatives. This can be considered a limitation of the study. It can be argued however that such inconsistencies are also an indication of how policies are interpreted and enacted in school settings[202] which can inform understandings of both current and future policy and practice.

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[201] See for example:

Melhuish, E. Quinn, L. McSheery, K. Sylva, K. Sammons, P. Siraj-Blatchford, I.Taggart, B. Guimares, S. (2002) *Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland: an analysis of observational data.* Belfast: The Stranmillis Press.

Quinn, L. Hanna, K. Melhuish, E. Siraj-Blatchford, I.Taggart, B. Sylva, K. Sammons, P Donnelly, G. (2006) *Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) Project: case studies of early years settings.* Belfast: The Stranmillis Press.

Melhuish, T. Quinn, L. Sylva, K. Sammons, P.Siraj-Blatchford, I. Taggart, B. (2010) *Effective Pre-school Provision Northern Ireland (EPPNI): preschool experience and Key Stage 2 Performance in English and Mathematics.* Belfast: NISRA.

[202] Ball, S. Maguire, M. And Braun, A. (2012) How Schools Do Policy. Oxon: Routledge

8 RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has completed a literature review of policy and practice in respect of early years' second language acquisition in the context of minority language immersion in a variety of settings. This was complemented by interviews with teachers or nursery leaders in a sample of IM pre-school settings (n=30) and interviews with stakeholder stakeholders (n=13) who support the sector in order to identify, examine and comment on the learning outcomes, set or expected, for Irish-medium pre-schools, the criteria used to establish these outcomes and the methods used to assess the degree to which the desired outcomes are being achieved in Irish-medium pre-schools.

Arising from the findings from the above-mentioned sources and the discussion and analysis of those findings in the previous chapter, the following recommendations are made.

Recommendation 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[203].

Recommendation 2: The identification and sharing of good practice across sectors should be promoted within bespoke programmes of CPD available to all IM Pre-school settings. This should also inform a quality assurance framework for CPD provision.

Recommendation 3: A language competence framework and continuing professional development programme for staff working in Irish-medium pre-school settings should be developed in order to enhance provision and secure the best language-related learning outcomes.

Recommendation 4: An agreed fit-for-purpose transition report form which reflects the IM learning experiences and linguistic development of children at the end of their pre-school year should be devised.

Recommendation 5: Given the importance of the key relationship between parents and the pre-school education provision for their children, linguistic resources should be developed to support IM pre-school parental partnerships.

Recommendation 6: An exploratory framework of desirable descriptors/indicators of typical IM language development for children in pre-school settings should be developed and piloted. These descriptors/indicators should take cognisance of three key sources: bilingual frameworks in international research; the experience of IM pre-school teachers; and empirical evidence of the typical levels of immersion language observed in settings.

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[203] Proposals for new statutory nursery provision are subject to the statutory development proposal process.

Recommendation 7: Bespoke pre-school curricular guidance which takes cognisance of the IM immersion context should be developed by a collaborative group of stakeholders including practitioners.

Recommendation 8: Quality indicators in IM pre-school settings should be developed to underpin the Together Towards Improvement self-evaluation process.

Recommendation 9: An understanding of the principles and practices of pre-school IM education as well as a reasonable proficiency in the Irish language should be a requirement of all those who evaluate the quality of provision and learning in IM pre-school settings.