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Links between Gaeltacht Primary Schools and *Naíonraí*

Research Report

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Commissioned by An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta
on behalf of the Department of Education

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Abbreviations used in this report

AIM – Access and Inclusion Model

GEU – Gaeltacht Education Unit

NCCA – National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

CNNG – Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta

COGG – An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta

ECCE – Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme

OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

FETAC – Further Education and Training Awards Council

SSE – School Self-Evaluation

CECDE – Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education

OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PGE – Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022

QQI – Quality and Qualifications Ireland

DCHG – Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (until 2020)

DCEDIY – Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (since 2020)

DCYA – Department of Children and Youth Affairs (until 2020)

DE – Department of Education (since 2020)

DES – Department of Education and Skills (until 2020)

DTCAGSM – Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (since 2020)

TnG – Tuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta

Tusla – Tusla, the Child and Family Agency

Executive Summary

This research was carried out at the request of An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG) on behalf of the Department of Education. The research was undertaken in order to fulfil one of the responsibilities of COGG under the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022* (Department of Education, 2016) and the *Action Plan 2018-2022 for the 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030* (Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, 2018).

The research report examines the links between Gaeltacht primary schools and *naíonraí* with the aim of promoting the development of children's Irish-language skills/abilities. It supports language-based criterion 11 of the *Guide for Primary Schools: Indicators of Good Practice for Immersion Education* (Department of Education, 2020): "Establish useful and mutually beneficial language and cultural links with local Irish-medium early years settings (*naíonraí*)".

This research report comprises an introduction and seven chapters. The main findings of the report stem from an analysis carried out on theories and research, state policies, national and international experience, and fieldwork. The recommendations arising from the findings of the research report informed the development of the Guide provided for schools by the Department of Education in order to strengthen the links between *naíonraí* and Gaeltacht primary schools¹.

The **Introduction** provides an outline of the background, the approach to research and the layout of the report. The various organisations and agencies involved in strengthening links between *naíonraí* and primary schools are also detailed. These include An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta, Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta (CNNG), Tuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta (TnG) and the Department of Education.

Chapter 1, **Centrality and engagement of children in their own learning**, discusses the theories of Bronfenbrenner, Vygotsky and Lantolf as they relate to early education and language acquisition and enrichment.

Chapter 2, **Immersion Education: Explanation and Effect**, discusses the benefits of bilingualism and the effect of immersion education and emphasises the importance of the various groups - the family, the *naíonra* staff and the primary school staff - in the transition of

¹ *Guide for Gaeltacht Primary Schools: Strengthening links between primary schools and early learning and care (ELC) settings: A collaborative approach to promoting the use of Irish* (Department of Education, 2021)

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children from the *naíonra* to the primary school. The research also shows that regular engagement between stakeholders is of great assistance in facilitating the transition.

Chapter 3, **Methodology and fieldwork**, describes the approach taken to the research and subsequent findings following discussions with Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta, Tuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta and Gaeltacht principals and teachers.

Chapter 4, **The National Context for Links between *Naíonraí* and Primary Schools**, describes the documents available to enrich children's communication and to foster links between *naíonraí* and primary schools.

Chapter 5, **Government Gaeltacht Policies**, clarifies the importance of continuity and an integrated approach between *naíonraí*, primary schools, families, Gaeltacht communities and state departments, as set out in Gaeltacht and Government policies.

Chapter 6, **National and international experience**, describes the national and international research and initiatives that explore the needs of children as they transition from *naíonraí* to primary schools (*Growing Up in Ireland*). A review is also provided on the literature regarding children transitioning from early learning and care to school (*Transition from Early Childhood Education to School*), on an initiative in Gippsland, Australia, that used networks involving nurseries, primary schools and therapists to facilitate the transition of children between the different settings (*Building Connections Around Transitions: Partnerships and Resource for Inclusion*), and on a report published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (*Starting Strong V*), in addition to further research highlighting the importance of cooperation between the various stakeholder groups. This chapter also contains references to documents that assist *naíonraí* and primary schools in gathering relevant information about the children in order to support them in the transition - *Nasc leis an mBunscoil* (Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta), *Mo Scéal* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)), *Tuairisc Aistrithe* (Altram), *An Traein* (Forbairt Naíonraí Teo.). This information provides material for reflection on how to create and maintain links between *naíonraí* and primary schools.

Chapter 7, **Recommendations**, and the **Appendices**, present activities that could be implemented to strengthen the links between *naíonraí* and primary schools; to help children adjust to the transition from the *naíonra* to the primary school; to cater for children with additional educational needs; to keep parents informed; to provide *naíonraí* and school staff with more information on the next steps in supporting their practice.

1. Context and Approach

1.1 Introduction

The research on Gaeltacht *naíonraí* was established in order to inform COGG in complying with the provisions of the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022* (Department of Education and Skills, 2016).

The aim of the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022* is to ensure the availability of a high-quality and relevant Irish-medium educational experience for all young people living in Gaeltacht areas and in this way to support the use of Irish as the main language of families and of Gaeltacht communities (DES, 2016: 10).

The *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022* contains specific discussion on how to strengthen early-years' education provision, and it is recognised that, in the case of Gaeltacht areas,

quality Irish-medium early-years-educational provision has the potential to socialise children in the Irish language, enhance their cognitive and affective development through Irish and support their transition to learning through Irish in primary school. (PGE, 2016: 41)

Language learning especially 'mother tongue' language acquisition is critically impacted by early life experiences. Therefore it is essential that early learning experiences in settings are supported to optimise positive impact on language acquisition. This research will contribute to this objective by providing insights on how to establish, strengthen, and foster links between *naíonraí* and primary schools.

There are a range of national policies that support the development of high quality early learning and care and these include:

- *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009)
- *Síolta* (DES, 2006/2017)
- *Quality and Regulatory Framework* (TUSLA, 2018)
- *First 5* (DCYA, 2018)
- *Nurturing Skills* (DCEDIY, 2021).

In order to build on this work and strengthen understanding of the critical influence of early learning experiences on language acquisition this research project examines the following areas of theory and practice:

- National and international theories on the cognitive, social and emotional development of the child

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- National and international research on immersion education
- The theory of links between early learning and care settings and primary schools
- Research on framework curricula, curricula and other relevant documents
- Policies relating to the situation of the Gaeltacht in this field
- Information and views from principals and primary teachers, representatives of Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta and representatives of Tuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta
- Charting the implications of the research
- Suggestions emerging from the research on the next steps that could be taken in order to strengthen links between *naíonraí* and primary schools.

1.2 Gaeltacht Education Unit in the Department of Education

The *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022* recognises the complex linguistic situation in Gaeltacht schools and the importance of the education system in promoting Irish as a spoken language in the Gaeltacht.

The Gaeltacht Education Unit (GEU) was established in the Department of Education and Skills in 2017. The GEU is responsible for overseeing the phased implementation of the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022* in order to ensure a high-quality of education through the medium of Irish in schools and to support the extended use of Irish in school communities participating in the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme (the Scheme).

Schools in Gaeltacht language-planning areas were given the opportunity to apply to participate in the Scheme in order to gain recognition as a Gaeltacht school. The GEU is also responsible for the allocation of resources to schools participating in the Scheme.

Information on the GEU's responsibilities, relevant publications and up-to-date information on the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education* is available on the gov.ie website.

In addition to the review of relevant literature, the report has also engaged with a wide range of organisations engaged in the development of high quality early learning and care provision and practice through Irish. The roles and functions of these organisations are detailed below.

1.3 The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) has responsibility for the provision of early learning and care (ELC), including policies to support the quality, affordability and accessibility of provision. DCEDIY supports the provision of *naíonraí* both inside and outside the Gaeltacht, and provides supports to promote Irish-medium provision of ELC, in partnership with

stakeholders. DCEDIY chairs the National Early Years Oversight Group for the 5-Year Irish Language Action Plan 2018-2022.

1.4 Regulations and inspections

The [Department of Education Inspectorate](#) has a monitoring role in supporting schools participating in the Scheme in relation to the implementation of the language-based criteria for immersion education in order to strengthen the provision of education through the medium of Irish. It also carries out a programme of evaluation of the quality of early education provision and practice in schools and Early Learning and Care (ELC) settings nationally, complementing the statutory inspections of ELC settings carried out by [Tusla, the Child and Family Agency](#). *Naíonraí* services are operated in accordance with the Early Years Services Regulations under the Child Care Act 1991. Tusla carries out inspections of the provision of ELC and school-age childcare (SAC) under the auspices of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. *Naíonraí* are also subject to [Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children 2017](#).

1.5 An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG)

An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta was established under the provisions of Section 31 of the Education Act 1998 so that a specific structure would exist to meet the educational needs of Gaeltacht and Irish-medium schools. Functions for the teaching of Irish in other schools in the country also fall under the responsibility of COGG. COGG's role relates to both primary and post-primary education and there are three main areas of work:

- Provision of teaching resources
- Support services
- Research

Information on the agency and its areas of work can be found on the [COGG](#) website.

1.6 Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta

[Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta](#) (CNNG) provides an infrastructure for the provision of early learning and care services through the medium of Irish in the Gaeltacht, and provides administrative, support and training services for the services, parents, committees and Gaeltacht communities. CNNG provides assistance and guidance to *naíonraí* in complying with the regulations and procedures.

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There are 66 early learning and care settings currently operating in the Gaeltacht language-planning areas. CNNG provides the infrastructure for the provision of early learning and care services in Irish in the Gaeltacht. CNNG receives funding from Údarás na Gaeltachta and the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (DTCAGSM), while the *naíonraí* themselves benefit from a number of funding programmes run by DCEDIY. CNNG's stated vision is to 'give every child in the Gaeltacht an opportunity to attend a quality early education or childcare service through the medium of Irish' (comharnaionrai.ie).

CNNG defines a *naíonra* as follows:

the *naíonra* is an early education facility that promotes the physical, intellectual, emotional, creative and social development of the child. This is done through the medium of fun and the Irish language in an environment that is safe, healthy, stimulating, welcoming, happy and supportive. Children meet in the *naíonra*, under the care of a teacher, five days a week for three hours per day (comharnaionrai.ie).

CNNG provides a lot of practical information on its website to assist parents and early years educators.

CNNG places great emphasis on the use of Irish in all its services. The work is based on *Loinnir*, the organisation's handbook, as well as on *Aistear* and *Síolta*, the two national frameworks for early learning and care.

CNNG uses *Borradh* language-planning manuals to promote the holistic development of the child, including their linguistic development. The children's language needs for the acquisition and enrichment of Irish are met and the natural use of the language in the local dialect is fostered.

CNNG recognises the importance of the role of parents and their attitudes towards the Irish language. Its site states that parents' attitudes have a great influence on the child and that it is important that the child understands that they want him or her to speak Irish. The *naíonraí* will support parents who wish to raise children through Irish and the children will have the opportunity to 'enrich and acquire their Irish in a natural environment through fun, storytelling, speech, gesturing and song' (<http://www.comharnaionrai.ie/cnng.php>).

Naíonraí under the auspices of CNNG have been using the *Nasc leis an mBunscoil* transition form since 2013 and it was being reviewed during the course of this research.

1.7 Tuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta

Tuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta (TnG) was set up in 2011 to provide support for Irish-speaking families in the Gaeltacht. The Department of the Gaeltacht provided funding in 2014 to provide a national base for the organisation. It has been operating nationally since mid-2018.

The aims of TnG are to provide assistance, support and advice to families who are raising their children with Irish in the Gaeltacht or those who wish to do so. TnG has its headquarters in An Cheathrú Rua, as well as regional offices in Gaoth Dobhair and Corca Dhuibhne. It has development officers in all Gaeltacht areas.

TnG organises events aimed at meeting the needs of children. Two playgroups are organised for young children from birth to around five years of age and, for their parents:

- A 'Gligíní' Group, which provides an opportunity for native Irish speakers to use the language
- A Conversation Circle for families learning Irish or using Irish and English in the home.

It involves language management and aims to meet different language needs. It is a language sanctuary for native speakers in which Irish is spoken and enriched naturally, and a language learning opportunity and a fun atmosphere is fostered in the Conversation Circle. TnG understands that organising two groups is difficult and challenging, as when one person reverts to English, others often follow suit.

TnG places great emphasis on reading as a language acquisition and enrichment aid and occasionally organises sessions involving the dramatic readings of books, for example, a new play for children was recently performed and children also participated.

TnG also seeks to assist families in the Gaeltacht who speak little Irish in the home. For example, antenatal workshops are available for new parents. Emphasis is placed on the Irish language vocabulary for children as part of an awareness campaign taught to new parents - focussing on the type of language ('motherese') that they will be using with the young children.

1.8 Funding and Support Programmes provided by DCEDIY

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) offers a number of funding programmes for Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC) services, as well as funding and overseeing a range of support structures (including supports provided by Better Start, the City/County Childcare Committees, and National Voluntary Childcare Organisations) for ELC/SAC services and for the early years

educators and school-age practitioners working in those services. Programmes and supports include:

1.8.1 Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme

The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme is a universal programme available to all children between the ages of 2 years 8 months and 5 years 6 months. It provides children with free access to an early learning and care programme prior to commencing primary school. The programme is provided for three hours per day, five days per week over 38 weeks per year, and children can avail of ECCE for up to two years. Services taking part in ECCE must provide an appropriate pre-school educational programme which adheres to the principles of *Síolta*, the national quality framework, and *Aistear*, the national curriculum framework

1.8.2 Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)

The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) was launched in 2016, led by DCEDIY on an inter-departmental and inter-agency basis. This child-centred model of support is designed to ensure that children with disabilities can access the ECCE programme. Its goal is to empower ELC providers to provide an inclusive experience and to ensure that every eligible child can meaningfully participate in the ECCE programme and benefit from high quality early learning and care.

AIM includes both universal and targeted supports. The supports provided respond to the needs of the child in the early learning and care setting context, and do not require a diagnosis. Universal supports, which include staff training, are designed to create a more inclusive culture in ELC settings. Where universal supports are not enough to meet the needs of an individual child, targeted supports are available, including specialist advice (through Better Start) and funding for additional staffing and equipment.

1.8.3 National Childcare Scheme

The National Childcare Scheme provides financial support for participation in ELC and SAC through universal and income-related subsidies, for children from 6 months up to the age of 15. The aims of the scheme are to improve children's outcomes, support lifelong learning, reduce child poverty and tangibly reduce the cost of quality ELC/SAC for thousands of families across Ireland.

There are three categories of subsidies that families are eligible for as part of the National Childcare Scheme:

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- Universal subsidies for families with children under three years of age, or with children over three years who have not yet qualified for the ECCE programme. The subsidy is paid at a rate of €0.50 per hour, up to a maximum of 45 hours per week, for each child.
- Income-assessed subsidies for families with children aged between 24 weeks and 15 years. These means-tested subsidies are calculated based on the family's individual circumstances, including family income, the child's age and educational stage and the number of children in the family.
- Subsidies supported by a statutory body (sponsor) are available for families with high levels of need for whom ELC/SAC is required on child welfare or child protection grounds or for whom childcare is a necessary element of family support.

1.8.4 Supports for professional development

The level of qualifications in the ELC workforce has been steadily rising, supported by a range of DCEDIY initiatives. As part of new Regulations in 2016, a minimum qualification was introduced at Level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). DCEDIY funding also supports early years educators to upskill to level 7 and 8 qualifications, with higher capitation payments to ECCE services with lead educators (previously termed 'room leaders') who have relevant level 7/8 qualifications, and a Learner Fund that supports early years educators with the cost of undertaking relevant degrees. Assisted by these measures, the proportion of early years educators with an ELC qualification at level 7 or higher rose from 12% in 2012 to 34% in 2021. In parallel, the Department of Education and QQI have led processes of raising the standards of qualifications at levels 5 to 8.

First 5 commits to furthering the professionalisation of the ELC workforce, including achieving a graduate-led workforce by 2028, and Nurturing Skills (the Workforce Plan for ELC and SAC, 2022-2028) sets out a series of actions to achieve this commitment, as well as to strengthen supports for leadership and for continuing professional development.

DCEDIY, working in collaboration with the Department of Education and a range of agencies including the national Quality Development Service in Better Start and the NCCA, has progressively strengthened supports for continuing professional development. Measures have included the provision of mentoring and training supports for ELC services by Better Start, the national *Síolta Aistear* initiative, child protection training, and a range of training supports within AIM to support inclusive practice.

Commitments in Nurturing Skills include: supporting the development of initial professional education programmes or modules that are conducted through the medium of Irish (at levels

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5-8); and where possible making CPD materials, resources and supports available in both Irish and English.

2. Centrality and engagement of children in their own learning: theories of immersion education

2.1 Introduction

Children are part of a family, families are part of a community, and *naíonraí* and schools are part of the same community. Understanding these links will help provide the means to facilitate the transition between *naíonraí* and primary schools for children.

In this chapter, a number of theories will be explored in order to illustrate the policy context for links between primary schools, *naíonraí* and parents and to understand the links between the various areas. Bronfenbrenner provides a theoretical framework that places the best interests of the child in the context of the people with whom he or she is in contact: his or her family, the *naíonra*, the school, the local community, the education system, society and the values and ideology of that society (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Haugen (1972) and other linguists use the metaphor of ecology to discuss the relationship between language and society. Vygotsky (1978) also emphasises the social life of children and says that children actively learn in relationships with the people around them. Finally, the importance of support in the early learning and care setting and in school will be discussed, to assist children during the transition from the early learning and care setting to the primary school.

2.2 The Theories of Bronfenbrenner, Vygotsky, Lantolf and van Lier

Urie Bronfenbrenner emphasised the importance of the cognitive, social and emotional growth and development of the individual and the impact that different areas of life have on the individual (Hayes *et al.*, 2017). He identified this approach as the ‘bio-ecological model’. In the case of a child, those who are very close to the child have a great influence on his or her growth and development, namely the family, children and adults he or she meets frequently in the *naíonra*, school and neighbourhood, and the services he or she uses (**the microsystem**). People who are further removed from the child – neighbours and family friends – and services such as the media, the education system and the health system (**the exosystem**) – have a weaker influence. All of these are influenced by society and the culture in which the child lives – attitudes and ideologies towards the Irish language, for example (**the macrosystem**). The child’s frequent contact and relationships with people close to him or her, and the relationship between those people and the systems further away (**the mesosystem**), are very important. The systems and their impact on the child change over time, as he or she grows and systems change (**the chronosystem**). Bronfenbrenner

emphasised in particular the impact on the child of those close to him or her and of things that happen often and directly to him or her, of the context in which they occur and of the changes that occur over time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris 2006). He highlighted that these elements are intertwined.

According to this theory, the family is very important – the child himself or herself, the parents, the brothers and sisters, the grandparents and other relatives with whom the child often meets. These people influence the child's attitude towards themselves and towards life.

Outlooks and attitudes are nurtured in the family above all else and this is true in relation to the acquisition of languages - Irish, English and any other home language – and of the early learning and care setting and school system. That is why it is extremely important that a favourable attitude towards the Irish language is fostered in the family and that the family provides opportunities for the child to acquire and enrich their use of the Irish language. This is done through speaking Irish in the home, by providing opportunities to use the language outside the family, by attending a *naíonra* and through the immersion education system, which is an integral part of the school curriculum of a Gaeltacht school operating through Irish. If only one of the parents speaks Irish, it is recommended that this person speak Irish to the child as consistently as possible. This type of approach is called a 'one person - one language' system (Barron-Hauwert 2014) and although it needs to be adapted to the family itself, it has the advantage of regularity and consistency so that the child understands which language the parent prefers. It is important to remember that in the case of one-parent families, this parent may use Irish himself or herself or ask other family members to use the language frequently with the child.

Another suggestion is to speak Irish at certain times of the day (Crisfield 2021), at dinner time for example. The advantage of such an approach is that no one is left out of the conversation and that it is an opportunity for language learning and enrichment for all.

Smidt (2009) supported the importance of collaborating with parents and placing the child in the context of his or her own family. She said that knowledge of the child's experiences, his or her culture and cultural tools (language, for example) and the people who support the child, helps the teacher to create a new school life for him or her. **This information is required to help the child, not to make judgements.**

Haugen (1972) and other linguists, such as van Lier (2010), used the metaphor of ecology to describe the relationship between language and society. According to Haugen, ecology of language meant the study of the relationship between any language and its environment, i.e., the people who speak that language. As in nature, linguistic diversity contributes to the

sophistication of the world, and minority languages help to keep the language ecological system intact.

Van Lier (2010: 600) believed that environmental and cognitive processes influence language acquisition and enrichment, and social relationships with peers and teachers help children carry out more developed reflection. Various elements influence the classroom - such as the family, the school, the community, the education system, and the ideology of the community. As a result, the learning and teaching approaches, as well as the public's attitude towards Irish, are very important.

Vygotsky placed an emphasis on the social life of the child. He argues that learning is a social act because children learn through their relationships and interactions with others. Vygotsky (cited in Gray & MacBlain, 2012) stated that children are active in their learning, and that they have learned through their relationship with the social environment. Children learn rituals and meanings in their own cultures and learn from those around them about what they should say and do in that community.

According to Lantolf (2006), language is a cultural tool used for reflection and learning. Language is an integral part of the cognitive development of the child (Mitchell, Myles and Marsden, 2019: 318). Children make sense of the language they hear and they engage with the community through that language.

Development comes through participation in family life, in relationships with others and in educational institutions, such as schools, that are shaped by culture, language and historical factors (Lantolf, 2006). Children learn about life through participation and imaginative play. They understand how things work, they imitate people's behaviour and they assume roles.

The rhymes, stories and songs in children's culture greatly influence this play. Play begins through relationships with adults but children continue themselves to act independently and creatively. Knowledgeable adults or children can help children learn by providing scaffolding to bridge the gap between what they can do independently and the things with which they need help.

This applies to language as well as other forms of learning (Mitchell *et al.*, 2019: 317). This strengthens the role of the teacher as a facilitator of learning and the importance of learning on a joint basis. Vygotsky's theory of language illustrates the importance of home and school language. **Children acquire language by making sense of life in partnership with others.**

2.3 Links in children's lives

The transition between the home and the *naíonra* relates to the mesosystem and emphasis is placed on the relationship between parents and the *naíonra* to support the children in moving from the home setting to the *naíonra* setting. The greatest supports that children have are the family and the relationship between parents and the *naíonra* early years educators. Another important aspect is the transition from the *naíonra* to the primary school, and the continuity between both settings is very important. The relationship between all adults – parents/guardians, *naíonra* early years educators and primary teachers – is also very important.

Parents have the opportunity to collaborate with the school in promoting the children's learning and development, and the parents' knowledge and insight into their own child is very important. It helps when parents can share this information with the school as it may help the child settle into school more easily. This is particularly the case for children with additional educational needs, where parents and *naíonra* early years educators share information on how to support, encourage and reassure the child in a variety of settings.

Ring *et al.* (2016) noted the importance of the school and community being prepared to support children as they transition into school, which supports the bio-ecological theory. Some early learning and care settings and primary schools had written policies but respondents in this study (Ring *et al.*, 2016) said that most of their contact was informal. The early years educators spoke to the children about starting school and the primary teachers were in contact with the parents and organised open days for the children.

Dockett and Perry from Australia (2012) emphasised the provision of support, both formal and informal, in the early learning and care setting and in school to help children during transition. They recommended

- that the child and family should have contact with the school before the child starts
- having a discussion with the child about starting school
- communication and meetings between the school and parents before school starts
- sharing information on the curriculum and educational approaches with parents
- continuity between approaches in the early learning and care setting and the school, as the approach gradually moves away from an emphasis on play to a more formal approach.

2.4 Summary of key messages from theory and research into early learning and language acquisition

- Contact between the home, the *naíonra* and the school helps children during transitions between settings especially, and ways should be found to share information between them.
- Information from the *naíonra* and the school about the curriculum and the approach used helps parents understand their children's new setting. Information from the parents about their children helps the early years educators in the *naíonraí* and the teachers in the primary schools to provide the appropriate support to the children.
- When the personnel involved in the lives of the children collaborate with each other, the welfare of the children is promoted.

3. Immersion Education: Explanation and Effect

3.1 Introduction

The provision of clear guidance on the scope and nature of immersion education is a positive support for all parents and will encourage those who are non-Irish speaking to continue to engage with their child's education beyond the *naíonra* and into primary school. For parents who are native speakers, their concerns also need to be addressed. If parents/guardians are comfortable with, and confident about, immersion education, they are likely to be comfortable transitioning their children from the *naíonra* to primary school and, if this is the case, the children are likely to be comfortable with the transition also.

This section of the report includes a discussion on the age of second language acquisition, the cognitive benefits of bilingualism and metalinguistic awareness (understanding language as a system in its own right) as well as various aspects of bilingual education.

3.2 Immersion education

There are many types of immersion education, but one type in particular is very popular – the high-quality early bilingual immersion education that began in Montréal, Canada, in 1965. A group of parents set up a French language preschool to provide early bilingual education through English and French (Baker and Wright, 2021). The initiative has been a great success and other forms of immersion education² can now be found in Finland, Spain, the United States and Ireland.

In the case of Canada, Baker highlights that the status of both languages, English and French, has contributed to progress in learning. Immersion education is an option in Canada and in many other countries, and parents can choose to send their children to a school with immersion education or to a school which provides education through the medium of the majority language. “Immersion thrives on conviction, not conformity”, according to Baker & Wright (2021: 246). According to Bialystok (2018):

There is no credible evidence that bilingual education adds or creates a burden for children, yet it is incontrovertible that it provides the advantage of learning another language and possibly the cognitive benefits of bilingualism. (2018: 678)

² The type of immersion education depends on the children's starting age and the amount of time spent on both languages. Most types of immersion education begin with early total immersion for two or three years in the target language and gradually decrease to 50% at the end of primary school.

Bialystok (2018) has carried out an in-depth study on the different types of bilingual education for young children in North America – including the type relevant to the Gaeltacht. Immersion education has been chosen by parents in Canada, Finland, Wales and many other countries due to the commitment of teachers to, and their interest in, the language, culture and the economic benefits. The national curriculum for education is followed (Johnson & Swain 1997) and the academic results achieved are the same or higher than those achieved in schools teaching through the medium of the majority language.

3.3 The benefits of bilingualism

Age of acquisition of the second language: According to a summary of research carried out on this issue by Baker & Wright (2021: 127):

- Children who begin acquiring a second language at an early age often do better than older people, especially in relation to pronunciation.
- The number of years spent on second language acquisition is very important and when children are provided with the opportunity to learn a second language from the early years they often do better.
- Language acquisition is influenced by various factors and the young age is only one factor.
- Older learners can achieve great success if they have the right motivation.

Cognitive benefits: Baker & Wright (2021) described cognitive benefits such as multidirectional and creative thinking. Bilingualism is believed to help people to think more broadly and wider. The level of proficiency in each language is an important factor in achieving the cognitive benefits. People with equal proficiency in both languages gain more benefit and a certain threshold of proficiency in both languages must be met in order for people to gain the advantages (Cummins, in Baker & Wright, 2021). Meisel (2019:230) stated that there are no cognitive disadvantages for bilingual children over monolingual children and that being able to speak two languages fluently is a great advantage.

Metalinguistic awareness: It is believed that bilingual people understand language as a system in its own right and can separate word and meaning from each other (Meisel, 2019: 231). They may have a higher awareness of morphology, grammar and pronunciation in both languages, as they have to pay attention to both the similarities and the differences. Children need to focus on whatever language a person is speaking, on the person in question, and on the context in which the conversation is taking place, and this focus of attention helps them to think more deeply (Baker & Wright, 2021).

This metalinguistic awareness may help them to read at an earlier point than monolinguals if the text and the phonetic system are similar. Despite these positive statements, it should be remembered that language is one aspect of life, and that a myriad of other factors will

influence language acquisition and educational development and achievement in life, including the socio-economic situation of the family and access to support systems and high quality education (Baker & Wright, 2021).

3.4 Immersion education

Immersion education in the Gaeltacht aims to:

- achieve excellence in both Irish and English
- foster a deeper understanding of Irish culture and other cultures
- develop the cognitive benefits of bilingualism
- raise the self-esteem of children and the community by showing respect for the language
- create local employment.

Achieving these benefits requires teachers who are highly proficient in Irish and highly skilled in first and second language education, and who have access to appropriate teaching and learning aids in Irish as well as support from parents, from policy makers in the education and political systems and from the local community (Baker & Wright, 2021: 246).

3.5 The effect of immersion education

According to Baker & Wright (2021), children reach the ability of a native speaker in the receptive language skills (listening and reading) in the second language around the age of eleven in immersion education systems in Europe and America. Not all children attain the same level in speaking and writing. Pupils often do not have contact with the target language outside of school and the opportunities for acquisition and use of the language are narrower as a result. In certain cases, it takes pupils a few years longer to reach the same skill level in the target language as their native speaker peers.

Pupils do not immediately attain the same skill level in reading and spelling in their native language as their peers in non-immersion education due to the fact that the teaching of the language is delayed for a couple of years. However, pupils generally achieve the standard level of competence after about six school years. They manage to achieve the same level or higher in languages and in other subjects by the end of primary school, as can be seen in Wales, for example (Ó Duibhir, 2018: 54).

Johnson & Swain (1994) stated that a second language needs to be sufficiently developed in order to facilitate complex learning in other subjects. On the other hand, full immersion education has better results than partial immersion in terms of achievement in languages and in education in general.

Ó Duibhir (2018: 51) stated that pupils in *Gaelscoileanna* do not have the opportunity to be in contact with native speakers of their own age and that they are not put under social pressure to develop a mastery of the language as a result. Harris & Murtagh (1987) believed that the number of native speakers in Gaeltacht schools helps children to improve their ability in Irish and that the progress of learners in Gaeltacht schools depends to some extent on social pressure to develop accurate language.

Baker and Wright (2021: 286) stated that immersion education is a political and ideological step and needs to be placed in that context. The needs of children, parents, teachers and the community influence each other and are difficult to separate.

3.6 Socialisation

Children learn language and culture simultaneously. Mitchell *et al.* (2019: 337) stated that language socialisation is a process in which a learner seeks to learn the language and develop an ability to participate in the community in which that language is spoken. Through immersion education, the school seeks to create an Irish-speaking community of practice among the pupils so that the children will participate in all school activities through Irish and also speak to each other in Irish outside the school.

The immersion education movement outside the Gaeltacht in Ireland has grown since the 1970s. There was a demand from parents at the time for Irish-medium education to be available for their children, and *naíonraí* and *Gaelscoileanna*/Irish-medium schools outside the Gaeltacht gradually grew and developed.

In the 2020/21 school year there were 149 Irish-medium primary schools operating outside the Gaeltacht, 105 primary schools operating in the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme and a further 27 primary schools located in the Gaeltacht. There are also approximately 35 Irish-medium primary schools in Northern Ireland.

Baker & Wright (2021) and Fortune (2011) recognised the challenges of immersion education in the second language, including the standard achieved by children in the target language and the achievement of children with additional educational needs as well as immigrant children.

3.7 Immersion education in infant classes in schools participating in the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme

As part of the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022*, and in accordance with the Gaeltacht Act 2012, it was decided that a school located in a Gaeltacht area would be eligible to seek recognition as a Gaeltacht School, based on specific language-based criteria

(DES, 2018: 17). The Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme is a new language initiative to support the implementation of the Policy on Gaeltacht Education in schools, and one of the criteria that must be met includes the implementation of a two-year early immersion programme in Irish in infant classes.

It is hoped that early immersion in Irish will help to promote the development of higher levels of competence in Irish among children as English is not taught until first class. Emphasis is placed on the differentiated language needs of native Irish speakers as well as learners of Irish and on the preparation and ongoing monitoring of targets in schools' action plans in order to achieve this.

According to the *Primary Language Curriculum*:

Engaging children in Irish deepens their cultural awareness and broadens their linguistic experience and, for children who are native Irish speakers, their linguistic experience is deepened. This allows them to engage, and deepen their connection, in the case of native Irish speaking children, with a unique and rich strand of the cultural heritage of Irish society.

(DES, 2019: 7)

Ó Duibhir and Ní Thuairisg (2019) supported the postponement of the teaching of English in order to provide native speakers with a better opportunity to develop a more stable basis for the grammatical structures of Irish (Ó Duibhir & Ní Thuairisg, 2019: 239). They stated that the way in which teaching and learning time is spent is of particular importance. Contact with the language is not the same as acquisition (Ó Duibhir & Ní Thuairisg, 2019: 237). However, they contended that there is a clear correlation between the amount of time a child is exposed to the language and the acquisition of certain grammatical aspects of the language. They also recommended differentiated teaching for native speakers and learners of Irish for some part of the day as there may be a tendency towards using English unless there is a critical mass of native speakers in the class.

The above authors appreciated that teachers or parents may be concerned about the children's standard of English. They explained that the *Primary Language Curriculum* is based on an approach of transferring skills from one language to another (Ó Duibhir & Ní Thuairisg, 2019). According to Cummins (1981), there is a common core competency in language learning, i.e., each language has certain features such as pronunciation, syntax and vocabulary and they need to be learned in isolation. However, there are other skills - conceptual knowledge, linguistic aspects and literacy, analytical and evaluative skills, for example - that can be transferred from one language to another. Therefore, the literacy skills

learned through Irish, for example, can be transferred to English when children begin to learn that language.

This will also be true of mathematical concepts. The learning process will be more effective if the teacher explains how to make the transition from Irish to English and if the children are given an opportunity to reflect on the similarities and differences between the languages, i.e., to engage with metalinguistic learning (Ó Duibhir & Ní Thuairisg, 2019).

There will be more opportunities to do this when children are learning to read and write. Community support for the work of the school and contact with Irish outside the school is essential in order for the work to have a meaningful result (ibid).

3.8 Summary and implications

The cognitive and educational benefits of immersion education and bilingualism for the individual and society have been outlined in this chapter. Children may benefit from metalinguistic awareness and greater knowledge and understanding of morphology, grammar and pronunciation in both languages.

Arising from the discussion in this chapter, there are strong implications for the promotion of strong links between *naíonraí*, parents and schools. Firstly, it is clear that all groups - parents, *naíonra* staff and school staff - have a key role to play in establishing and building these links. Children are also acknowledged as important influencers in these process and are recognised as unique active individuals with their own personalities, attitudes, skills and life experiences (Christensen and Prout, 2005).

A favourable attitude towards Irish and towards the practice of immersion education in primary schools is very important in providing a positive learning context for children, as well as giving them every opportunity to acquire the language and to enrich their ability in using the language.

4. Methodology and Fieldwork

4.1 Introduction

The following are the various steps that were taken in this research initiative:

Review of the literature: The scope included a review of the theory of relationships between people who have a major impact on children with a particular focus on Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) and Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism theory; immersion education theory, according to Baker & Wright (2021) and Ó Duibhir (2018); relevant research conducted in Ireland and abroad, for example, the research of O'Kane (2016), Smyth (2018), and the NCCA (2018).

Review of relevant government policies: The *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030*, the *5-Year Action Plan for the Irish Language 2018-2022* and the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022*.

Fieldwork and data collection

The following activities were undertaken to collect data:

Meetings with Gaeltacht primary school principals and teachers to facilitate open dialogue and professional conversation

Questionnaire: A questionnaire was prepared for Gaeltacht primary school principals and teachers in order to gather information on the existing best practice in relation to links with *naíonraí* and to obtain the views of principals and teachers on Transition Forms³ used to facilitate the move from the *naíonra* to the Gaeltacht primary school. Information was also sought on the role of school staff, and on how best to support parents and the continuity of children's language learning in the context of immersion education.

Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were held with representatives of Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta and Tuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta in order to obtain their views on the transition forms, on any other information that should be included on those forms regarding the children's ability in Irish, and any recommendations they had about the links between *naíonraí* and Gaeltacht primary schools.

Analysis and synthesis: The data arising from the questionnaires was reviewed and analysed to establish core themes emerging. Arising from the themes identified,

³ Transition forms or templates help to tell the story of the child's learning and development. This information can be shared with parents and, following receipt of parental consent, with the primary school.

recommendations were made on how to strengthen the links between Gaeltacht primary schools and *naíonraí*. Findings from this fieldwork were also cross referenced with findings from the literature review to further inform the recommendations arising from the research.

Further detail on the implementation of these research activities is included in section 4.2.

4.2 Research methods

4.2.1 Ethics

The principles of research ethics have been strictly adhered to in this research initiative (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018; Creswell, 2014). All participants who consented to take part in the research were treated with respect in relation to the principles of confidentiality and anonymity. The aim and rationale of the research were explained to all participants and they were informed that the research would inform the development of guidelines for schools to foster links between *naíonraí* and primary schools by COGG in conjunction with the Department of Education. Informed consent was sought and granted. The permission of participants was sought to collect data and to record discussions. All participants granted permission to carry out the research activities. The interviewees were supplied with a transcript of their discussions and given the opportunity to verify that it was accurate, which they did. Participant data was kept secure on an encrypted computer during the research initiative and was deleted along with the recordings prior to the publication of this report.

4.2.2 Open discussion and questionnaires

A presentation on the research initiative was made to principals and teachers at meetings organised by COGG in nine different venues, as part of a wider schedule of professional supports for schools in the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme. The aim and rationale of the research initiative and the importance of the input of principals and teachers in the research were explained. A questionnaire was designed to ensure that the same issues were discussed in different locations (Cohen *et al.*: 474). These were open-ended questions and covered the following topics:

- The opinions of teachers and principals in relation to the information forms on the transition from the *naíonra* to the primary school (examples were provided)
- The role of staff in *naíonraí* and primary schools
- How to help children improve their language ability in Irish
- How to help parents strengthen their understanding of the importance of Irish
- Examples of links/collaboration between existing *naíonraí* and Gaeltacht primary schools.

During the meetings, the questions were discussed openly in the first instance and then participants were given an opportunity to write individual responses if they wished.

4.2.3 Interviews

The questions were sent to the interviewees in advance, giving them an opportunity to reflect on them. It was possible to clarify any difficulties and answer the questions raised (Cohen, *et al.* 2018). A time and place that suited the interviewees was arranged. The interviews lasted one hour and a half in one case and two hours in the other. The researcher's experience - as a *naíonra* early years educator and as a parent raising a family in Irish - assisted in understanding the interviewees' viewpoints and, at the same time, every effort was made to remain objective.

4.2.4 Transcription and analysis

All recordings and questionnaires were transcribed and the data was organised under the major themes of the questions (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The discussion was much more in-depth than answering questions alone and provided a great deal of other information related to the topics (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The main points of discussion were summarised in each case and it was apparent that there were many common themes.

The common themes are compiled in the final chapter of this report and relevant examples from the literature are referenced. Arising from this discussion, the main features of the research are outlined and recommendations are provided on fostering links between *naíonraí* and Gaeltacht primary schools.

4.3 Involvement of primary school principals and teachers in the fieldwork

4.3.1 Background

COGG organised nine meetings in the different Gaeltacht areas in May 2019 as part of their wider remit to support schools participating in the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme. The researcher was invited to make a presentation on potential linkages between primary schools and *naíonraí* at these meetings. Representatives from 105 primary schools attended one of these meetings. The presentation explained the aim of the research in the context of the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022* (DES, 2016: 42) recommendation that primary schools establish links with the local *naíonraí* as part of the process to gain recognition as a Gaeltacht school.

The Department of Education and COGG sought to ensure that Gaeltacht principals and teachers, as well as other stakeholders including members of the Gaeltacht Education Policy Advisory Committee, would have an input into the research. It was intended that existing best practice would be recognised and discussion on the following themes and questions was encouraged:

- *The transition forms: Nasc leis an mBunscoil* (Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta), *Foirm Aistrithe* (Altram) and *Mo Scéal* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment): What did the principals and teachers think about these transition forms? Would it be necessary to gather more information about the children's level of Irish on these transition forms?
- *School staff*: What role would principals, teachers, support teachers for Irish and language assistants⁴ play in the transition process from the *naíonra* to primary school?
- *The children*: How could the transition process help the children to improve their ability in Irish?
- *The parents/guardians*: How could parents be helped to strengthen their understanding of the importance of Irish as the children transition from the *naíonra* to the primary school?
- *Other examples of collaboration*: What other types of collaboration have been working well?

There was an open discussion and participants were also asked to complete a questionnaire. Permission was granted to record the discussion. The data from the meetings with primary principals and teachers was synthesised under the above themes and the synthesis is summarised in the following sections.

4.3.2 The transition forms: *Nasc leis an mBunscoil*

Respondents thought that the *Nasc leis an mBunscoil* form (Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta) was very clearly laid out and provided infant teachers with a lot of information on the child. Some said that it gave them an opportunity to discuss the information verbally with the *naíonra* early years educators.

Some respondents felt, however, that it was not clear that Irish was the language intended on the form and that this should be clarified on the form and questions should be asked about the children's ability in both languages. Some felt that the ability scale was too narrow and that it was difficult to understand what was meant by the phrase 'still developing'.

4.3.3 The transition forms: *Mo Scéal*

The *Mo Scéal* form is a more recently developed transition form (NCCA 2018). Some respondents were familiar with the form, but only those involved in the NCCA pilot scheme had used it. Some people thought that this form was more helpful than *Nasc leis an mBunscoil* because it contained more information. People felt that "it contained a broader picture of the child's development, but it was not focused on the full range of communication skills in Irish and English". "*The ability scale is wider in this one and gives you a broader*

⁴ The Language Assistant Scheme is funded by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media

picture of the child,” said one principal. It was thought to be a very useful resource for the teaching of Irish.

It was felt that more information was needed on the level of Irish of those children for whom English was the language of the family. The form does not mention anything about the child’s fluency nor their home language. Some respondents felt that this form was looking for too much information and was too complicated. They felt that there was too much work for the early years educators in the *naíonraí* and that the vocabulary was too complicated. It was felt that training would be required for *naíonra* early years educators in order to complete it. Some felt that a combination of both forms would be good. The following list, provided by one respondent, illustrates much of the information identified in the research as useful in the context of the *naíonra*:

1. Irish-language ability and confidence in the language
2. Ability to mix with other children in themselves
3. Relationships with people in general
4. Ability to follow rules and instructions
5. Are they good listeners?
6. Identifying the child’s qualities
7. The children’s strengths and interests
8. Are they good at working in groups and independently?
9. Any needs they may have

One respondent commented that information about the child’s level of vocabulary in Irish should be obtained from the *naíonra*.

Another respondent reported that the following information about the household’s language background was included on the school entry form and it was stated that this was helpful.

Irish	The Child	The Father	The Mother
Cainteoir dúchais/native speaker			
Gaeilge mhaith/Good Irish			
Ar bheagán Gaeilge/ Some Irish			
Tuiscint/Understanding			
Gan Ghaeilge/No Irish			

4.3.4 The role of school staff: the principal, the infant teacher, the Irish language support teacher and the language assistant

Visit to the school: Respondents felt that all parties had a vital role to play – especially the infant teacher. It was recommended that the principal, the infant teacher, the Irish language support teacher and the language assistant introduce themselves to the children when they

visit the school. There were others who felt that the infant teacher and the Irish language support teacher had a very strong role in that context.

Visit to the naíonra: One respondent recommended that the principal visit the *naíonra* regularly. Another felt that the infant teacher could visit the *naíonra* a couple of times and read a story to the children. This would give him/her a chance to get to know the children. Another mentioned that visiting the *naíonra* would require time investment, and the question was posed “Where will staff find the time?”

Schools’ practice of holding *open days* where the children from the *naíonra* and their parents visit the school for the Christmas Play, Sports Day and other events, were commended by the respondents. Some felt that the *naíonra* early years educator should have the opportunity to meet and talk to the children from the *naíonra* following their transition to school on such occasions.

It was felt that the support teacher for Irish could have a stronger role, depending on the needs of the children, and that additional support could be provided for children in small groups a few times a week. It was stated that in some schools the *naíonra* early years educator attends a meeting with the principal and the infant teacher in May/June or at the beginning of the school year.

It was felt that further contact between the *naíonra* and the primary school would help to strengthen the understanding of immersion education and to find out more about the rhymes and poems that had been recited in the *naíonra* to build on them in the primary school.

4.3.5 Supporting continuity of learning for children in the immersion education context

In general, representatives of the schools indicated that further contact between the *naíonra* and the primary school would help the children to understand that Irish is the language of the school. The importance of professional development for early years educators in *naíonraí* and the early years curriculum was highlighted. Emphasis was also placed on the need for teachers to engage with *naíonraí* early years educators to foster continuity in children’s learning, so that they are aware of the rhymes and songs that the children have learnt. One principal commented:

“It would be good if the school were to have a list of the Irish-language exemplars that have been attained by children in the naíonra so that the school can reinforce and build on these. If the naíonra has laid a foundation and the school is aware of this, it allows the school to plan for the child.”

One school sends a questionnaire to the *naíonra* about the rhymes and poems that the children know. This is intended to help ensure continuity in learning.

The importance of gathering information on the children's ability in Irish before attending the *naíonra* was mentioned. Children were coming into the school from Irish-medium *naíonra* and English-medium early learning and care settings and had different experiences of the use of Irish. Some principals felt that the situation was improving in relation to Irish in some English-medium early learning and care settings. It was highlighted that there was a need to develop the child's confidence and understanding that the school is a place where Irish is spoken and used. The children will then see that Irish is spoken in a natural way in the school, even if this is not the case in the community.

Some felt that it would be great if the *naíonra* and the primary school were on the same site as this would foster further contact. Other respondents were of the opinion that there was a need for summer camps in the *naíonraí* for children in order to increase their ability in Irish as they often do not hear Irish in July or August. The transition forms help the primary school to identify these needs.

4.3.6 The parents/guardians: How could parents be helped to strengthen their understanding of the importance of Irish as the children transition from the *naíonra* to school?

It was suggested that the importance of Irish could be explained to parents at a meeting before the children start school, and that the value of Irish could be discussed with them in relation to their children's education, particularly the benefits of immersion education. According to some teachers, it would be worth inviting a language expert to come in and talk to parents about the importance of bilingualism. There was also a suggestion that Irish-language courses could be provided for parents.

To reassure parents at a meeting like this, it was suggested that it would help if money was available to provide tea/coffee in order to make it a social event.

One respondent suggested that the grant for speaking Irish that was provided some time ago be made available again. It was also suggested that regular contact and communication be maintained between the primary school and parents and that newsletters containing basic vocabulary relating to school life be issued to parents.

Others felt that parents could be given a phrase book and a list of the rhymes/poems that the children would be learning. One teacher stated that it would be helpful if an Irish-language pack were issued to parents to explain the importance of Irish and to encourage them to talk to and support their children in using the language. It was suggested that the importance of Irish be explained to parents when the children are very young, before they even start in the *naíonra*, and that parents be encouraged to use more Irish at home for the benefit of their child.

4.3.7 Other collaboration

A combination of formal and informal contact takes place between Gaeltacht primary schools and *naíonraí*. Some Gaeltacht primary schools contact a *naíonra* to discuss the number of pupils for the new school year or to obtain information about children with additional needs. Some *naíonra* early years educators visit the primary school to meet with the principal and the infant teacher. In other cases, the principal or teacher visits the *naíonra* regularly throughout the year to get to know the children. Many schools invite the *naíonraí* to attend a Christmas Play or Sports Day. The children come into the school in June for an open day. Some *naíonraí* are welcome to use the school's facilities, such as the hall.

Informal contact also takes place, such as speaking with the *naíonra* early years educators in the yard or meeting them on different occasions. There is also very useful oral discussion on the children's learning as well as the sharing of information on the transition forms.

Other Gaeltacht schools said that they have little contact with the local *naíonraí*. *Naíonraí* are not located near every primary school in Gaeltacht areas.

4.3.8 Other recommendations

It was recommended by school teachers that Gaeltacht schools and *naíonraí* establish links with the local Gaeltacht area's language-planning committee. One principal felt that the parents should sign a contract with the school, to support their child in promoting the Irish language. Another felt that the role of language assistants should be strengthened and that they should be employed under the remit of the Department of Education.

4.3.9 Summary and implications

This section of the report provides a summary of the recommendations from teachers and principals on relevant themes.

The *Nasc leis an mBunscoil* and *Mo Scéal* transition forms

Respondents in schools felt that both transition forms had various benefits but that it was necessary to gather specific information about the children's ability in Irish.

School staff

Respondents felt that the early years educator in the *naíonra*, the principal, the infant teacher, the language support teacher for Irish and the language assistant all played a very important role in relation to the children starting school. According to primary school respondents:

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- It would be helpful for the children and the *naíonra* staff to visit the school for activities such as listening to stories or playing Irish language games in the hall along with the infant teacher, the language support teacher for Irish and the language assistant.
- It would be helpful for school staff to visit the *naíonra* to meet the children in that setting. Visits should be organised by invitation.
- It would be helpful for the school if the early years educator in the *naíonra* shared with them the rhymes, songs and poems that the children knew so that they could build on this work.

The children

School teachers emphasised the importance of early acquisition and enrichment of Irish for the benefit of the child and recommended that the use of Irish be fostered by households and by all early learning and care settings in Gaeltacht areas. Teachers stated that it would help the children if they were enabled to understand that the school and *naíonra* are educational settings where Irish is spoken and used. It was also highlighted that all efforts made in speaking Irish at whatever level they are at should be commended and children's confidence as young language learners should be fostered.

Parents/guardians

Primary school respondents recommended that:

- The importance of using Irish should be explained to parents at meetings and at other events
- The benefits of acquiring and enriching Irish at a young age should be highlighted and an outline of the positive benefits of immersion education as a medium of learning should be provided.
- The critical importance of parents having a positive attitude and disposition towards Irish and towards immersion education should be emphasised.
- Parents should be enabled to improve their Irish through the establishment of short courses and the provision of an information pack about the school, as well as leaflets/booklets containing words and terminology in Irish related to school life.
- There should be regular communication with parents on social media and by email to keep them informed of school events.

Other examples of collaboration

Primary school respondents recommended that:

- Formal and informal opportunities should be used to foster links between primary schools and *naíonraí*.
- The school should invite the *naíonra* to attend events in the school, such as Christmas plays, concerts and sports days.

4.4 Interviews with Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta and Tuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta

Interviews were carried out with representatives of the two support organisations operating in the Gaeltacht: Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta and Tuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta. These organisations are funded by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and Údarás na Gaeltachta. Interviews with representatives of both groups were arranged at a convenient time and place. Questions were asked in advance and permission was given to record the interviews.

4.4.1 Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta

The researcher met with two representatives from Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta on 5 March 2019 at CNNG headquarters in An Cheathrú Rua. A list of issues for discussion was sent to the representatives in advance of the meeting and the discussion is summarised below:

- *Gaeltacht naíonraí*: the current situation
- *Nasc leis an mBunscoil*: How well is this transition form working?
- *Mo Scéal*: What involvement did CNNG have in the NCCA initiative and what did they think of the transition forms and any recommendations?
- *Information on the children's level of Irish*: What information is being gathered currently and what would be acceptable and useful?
- *Any other relevant information?*

The current situation

There are 118 services under the auspices of CNNG, including early learning and care services and school-age childcare services, among which there are 66 *naíonraí* in the different Gaeltacht areas. CNNG has appointed language-development officers to provide language assistance and support in the services requiring this type of service.

***Nasc leis an mBunscoil* Transition Form**

Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta has been using the transition form *Nasc leis an mBunscoil* (*Link to the Primary School*) since the form was developed in 2013. The early years educators complete an information form on the child, it is shown to the parent and, with parental consent, it is passed on to the primary school. Not all parents give permission to send the transition form to the primary school.

The *naíonra* early years educator discusses the transition form with the junior infant teacher. The children visit the primary school with their parents on the school's open day, on whatever day the different primary schools decide. Children from one *naíonra* would often go to two or three different schools and occasionally to five schools. This means that the

naíonra early years educator needs to attend meetings in the different schools. According to information gathered by Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta:

- 77% of *naíonraí* completed the transition forms in 2013/14
- 75% completed the forms in 2014/15
- 44% completed the forms in 2015/16
- 51% completed the forms in 2016/17.

Early years educators gave different reasons why the transition forms were not always completed. Some said that there was too much work and paperwork involved. It was also stated that some Gaeltacht primary schools did not respond to the contact made and others indicated that the forms were not of interest to them.

In some instances, the *naíonra* early years educator meets with the infant teacher in the primary school and receives feedback on the information provided on the form. Respondents indicated that most early years educators do not receive any formal feedback on how the information helped the infant teacher and the child starting school.

Mo Scéal and Nasc leis an mBunscoil

It was mentioned during the research that CNNG was reviewing the use of *Mo Scéal* transition forms (NCCA) in early learning and care settings. A development officer and two *naíonra* early years educators had a strong involvement in the transition pilot scheme organised by the NCCA and had input into the discussion on the transition forms and other aspects of this pilot. An extensive programme of activities is carried out in the *naíonraí* and although *naíonraí* do not focus on formal preparation for school, the NCCA provide advice on undertaking a lot of informal preparation, in the form of talk and discussion, and telling stories about going to school.

Information on the children's level of Irish

There was discussion on the type of information that the *naíonraí* could pass on to primary schools on the children's level of Irish. The CNNG respondents did not consider it appropriate for *naíonraí* early years educators to be asked to provide information to primary schools on the children's home language background as there could be misunderstandings in this regard between parents and *naíonra* early years educators. They felt that it was best to ask this question to parents only. The *Nasc leis an mBunscoil* form requests information on the child's language and communication skills but does not mention any specific language.

Continuity in the relationship between early years educators and junior infant teachers

It was mentioned that the junior infant teacher in primary schools often changes, or that the teacher due to teach the class is not named until the end of the summer. This means that the *naíonra* early years educator often has to get to know the new junior infant teacher and begin to establish a new relationship with him or her. The principal is a more permanent point of contact, but the principal usually does not teach the infant classes. According to CNNG, it is very important that the children meet the new teacher before the summer break.

Summary of the main messages arising from the interview with Comhar Naionraí na Gaeltachta

- CNNG's initiative is acknowledged for developing the transition form *Nasc leis an mBunscoil* and the organisation should continue to be supported in their efforts to strengthen links between *naíonraí* and Gaeltacht primary schools.
- The efforts of Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta aimed at widening the use of Irish in early learning and care settings operating through English should be supported, in order to give the children a foundation in Irish.
- Various transition forms are now available and consideration should be given to requesting/gathering information on the child's ability in Irish. To this end it would be helpful if the transition form could include a section, to be completed by the parent, on the child's ability in Irish.
- The primary teacher and the *naíonra* educator should get to know each other professionally, especially when there is a newcomer to either position.

4.4.2 Interview with Tuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta (TnaG)

The researcher met with the representatives from Tuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta in Galway in mid-June 2019. The following questions were sent to the TnaG representatives in advance of the meeting:

- What type of link between *naíonraí* and primary schools is recommended by Tuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta?
- What type of communication should be fostered between the primary school and the parents?
- What type of support would be recommended for native speaker families, families with different language backgrounds and families of children with additional educational needs?
- What kind of information on the children's ability in Irish should be included on the transition forms? (*Nasc leis an mBunscoil* and *Mo Scéal*)
- Would parents like to receive suggestions in relation to activities that could be carried out at home with their children?
- Any other recommendations from Tuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta?

What kind of link between *naíonraí* and primary schools is recommended by Tuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta?

The areas mentioned by the TnaG representatives interviewed included invitations, visits, and meetings to establish the link between the *naíonra* and the primary school. The view was expressed that the school could invite the *naíonra* to the school Sports' Day or to the Christmas Play, and children from sixth class could visit the *naíonra*. An early years educator in the *naíonra* could bring the children to visit the primary school to foster positive relationships. The pupils enjoyed the visit of the *naíonra* early years educator and the new children to the particular primary school and the pupils in the school really enjoyed seeing the *naíonra* early years educator again.

According to TnaG, parents should be informed that they are very welcome to attend the school on the night of the meeting and at any time thereafter. Some new parents may be unaware that they are welcome to attend certain school events and this needs to be made clear. It is different for families where their first child is starting school and families with other children already in the school. Practical information needs to be provided on basic issues, for example in relation to the timetable, lunch, school uniforms and on the approach to *Aistear*, for example. Immersion education should be presented in a positive context, explaining its benefits and the teaching and learning approaches used. Guidance needs to be sought from the school on the immersion education policy and other relevant practical matters relating to daily school life, such as recycling and environmental awareness.

According to TnaG, where *naíonraí* are located on the same site as the primary school, there are both advantages and disadvantages such as ease of contact, children's experience of and familiarity with the setting, and an easier transition from the *naíonra* to the primary school. Care must be taken, however, not to enforce the school's more formal approach on the *naíonra* and not to turn the *naíonra* into a small school. There is a strong emphasis on the development of socialisation skills in the *naíonra*, in learning how to interact with other children and how to deal with relationships and conflict. The two sectors have different roles and emphases and there is a risk that this would be lost if they were co-located. According to TnaG, the role of the *naíonra* needs to be explained to parents.

What kind of communication would be advisable between the primary school and parents?

The TnaG representatives felt that communication is better when parents have opportunities to speak in person with the teacher or principal. Some principals stand at the school entrance in the morning welcoming and getting to know the pupils. Pupils feel that they are a

central part of the school when they are welcomed by the principal. Some schools have a texting system in place and send a text to parents once a week with reminders about the class or school. Information is shared on this basis and this fosters good relations.

What support would be advisable for native speaker families, families with different language backgrounds, and families with children with additional educational needs?

The *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022* is a great help in supporting families with Irish, and although there is still room for development, the situation is improving. There is now a wider understanding that native speakers need support to develop their Irish. This involves language enrichment for native Irish speakers. Emphasis could be placed on storytelling, language enrichment and metalanguage. The *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022* and the *Primary Language Curriculum* support this.

The language support teacher for Irish and the language assistants are assisting the native speakers and children who are learning the language. The representatives from TnaG mentioned that new people were coming into certain Gaeltacht areas and that people in the community spoke English to them. It has been necessary to develop the understanding among parents that it is worth their while as parents to learn Irish in order to develop their children's language skills. The view of TnaG is that there is a need for people to understand that Irish is the language of the community and that it is used everywhere.

According to TnaG, support has greatly improved in schools as more Irish-language services are now available, especially in relation to speech and language. It was stated that Irish-speaking language therapists are now working in Connemara. It was also stated that special needs assistants with Irish provide additional support for pupils in Gaeltacht schools.

Although efforts are being made by principals in primary schools to communicate with parents regarding the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme, TnaG felt that early immersion education and the benefits of Irish and bilingualism needed to be clearly explained to parents at the parents' meeting. According to TnaG, some parents are concerned about the acquisition of English in the immersion education system in primary school. It needs to be explained to parents that their children are acquiring Irish and that they will be able to transfer this learning to English in the future. According to TnaG, this is very important in schools on the outskirts of the Gaeltacht. It is necessary to show the positive side and to reassure parents that their children will be fluent in English when they transfer the skills they have acquired in Irish to English.

What kind of information on the Irish language would be advisable to collect on the transition forms? (*Nasc leis an mBunscoil* and *Mo Scéal*)

According to TnaG, the *Mo Scéal* transition forms were thought to be very good because they gave a complete picture of the child, but it was not clear that the Irish language was being referred to under the heading 'Communication'. TnaG's view was that there should be clarification about the language in question. The scale of the children's skills (four points) was wider than that of *Nasc leis an mBunscoil* (two points) and this gave a more complete picture of the child's ability. It was shown that the *Nasc leis an mBunscoil* transition form, used by Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta, was helpful, there was a need to ensure that the Irish language was specifically mentioned.

Tuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta felt that it was important for parents to be asked about the ability of children and their parents in Irish. They would prefer this to a question about the children's home language. They felt that parents would be happy to provide information on the child and their interests and strengths on the form.

At the same time, TnaG do not want children to be labelled at a very young age. It was viewed as important that it be made a condition that the forms would not be forwarded to the school without parental consent. Some parents may not wish to share all pieces of information with the school. It was felt that there was too much emphasis on paperwork rather than on fostering relationships with children.

Have the early years educator in the *naíonra*, the class teacher, the language support teacher for Irish and the principal a specific role in the transition process?

According to TnaG, all personnel in the early learning and care setting and in the school have a very important role in the transition process. They also have an important role in the enrichment of Irish among the native speakers, and in the formulation and implementation of the school's language policy. The language support teacher for Irish may from time to time work with specific groups of pupils to provide them with input at the appropriate level: for example, games, rhymes and stories.

The language support teacher for Irish can provide the infant teacher with support in the implementation of *Aistear*. The TnaG representatives felt it was positive that the Policy on Gaeltacht Education stated that *naíonraí* played an important role in supporting children's language development in Irish. It was suggested that language assistants be introduced into *naíonraí* as, according to TnaG, this would be helpful for language acquisition and enrichment.

Small groups of pupils could be organised and provided with focused input, in accordance with their language ability. Specific professional development would be required to properly support this type of language facilitation in the *naíonra* setting.

Would parents like to receive suggestions in relation to activities that can be carried out at home with their children?

It was felt that the recommendations in the Policy regarding reading books to children were good, as were those which place an emphasis on speaking Irish to children in the home. It was suggested that it would be best to provide a small number of recommendations to parents at any given time and to make them as clear as possible as this would be more acceptable. At the time of completing this research, TnaG was preparing a leaflet for parents on how to read books to their child through Irish. It was intended that this leaflet will place an emphasis on fun and comprehension, and will include new words and phrases.

Other recommendations from *Tuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta*

It was recommended that discussions take place with the language-planning officers in the various Gaeltacht areas and also with *Fóram na Gaeltachta*. It was recommended that a further support assistant be provided to the *naíonra* in order to promote the Irish language. The adults in the *naíonra* have great influence on the children's development and on modelling the language they speak. According to TnaG, if there were an additional person as well as the *naíonraí* early years educators, he or she could influence the speaking of Irish among the children in a sensitive and considerate manner.

According to TnaG, the school could invite the *naíonra* to attend Sports Day and the Christmas Play. The *naíonra* early years educator could be invited to visit the school with the children starting school. Sixth class could visit the *naíonra* to play with the children in Irish. The representatives felt that the role and focus of the *naíonraí* needed to be kept strong, while placing emphasis on the children's socialisation and their overall development. A texting system was also highly recommended for regular contact.

Everyone on the school staff was thought to have a very important role to play, especially as the children settled into the junior infant class. They could each promote the acquisition and enrichment of Irish, in small groups, in accordance with the ability of the different children.

It was recommended that emphasis be placed on books and stories as a language support aid and on speaking Irish at home.

4.5 Summary of the main messages arising from interviews

Emphasis was placed on the importance of personal communication, both between the teacher and the parents and between the principal and the children, to foster relationships. Great emphasis was placed on the importance of welcoming new parents to the school and on the need to explain practical things to them in a clear manner.

It was stated that it was very important to provide appropriate support to native speakers of Irish to enable them enrich their Irish and to provide other kinds of support to the children who are learning the language. It was felt that there was a significant improvement in the provision of services for children with additional educational needs, which included supports provided by speech therapists and special needs assistants with Irish.

The implementation of the actions of the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022* is of great assistance in this regard. *Naíonraí* and primary schools have the common goal of enriching and developing the Irish language, and this common goal should be used to strengthen links between them.

Both transition forms - *Nasc leis an mBunscoil* and *Mo Scéal* – were reported to be helpful, although *Mo Scéal* provided a more complete picture of the child. According to TnaG, it was necessary to specify the language being referred to on whichever form was used. Tuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta was happy to ask about the child's ability in Irish, but not to ask about the child's language background at home. In their view, it was very important that parental consent would be obtained in relation to the information on the form in advance of forwarding the forms to the school.

5. The National Context: Links between *Naíonraí* and Primary Schools - Practical Methods and Structures

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will look at the practical methods and structures for facilitating the transition from *naíonraí* to primary schools and takes into account the importance of early learning and care experiences in children's development. It is apparent that there is a strong emphasis on learning through play in all documents. However, from the primary schools' point of view, there is another aspect to be taken into account in the transition, namely the implementation of the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme.

There are many similarities between the methods used in the organisations that support *naíonraí* and primary schools. The structures – in the form of curriculum frameworks, curricula, and other documents, etc. – help parents, *naíonra* early years educators, teachers and children.

5.2 *Aistear* and *Síolta*

5.2.1 Continuity from *naíonraí* to primary schools

The *naíonra* and the school provide experiences for children that develop their ability in language and in communication in various settings - in the *naíonra*, in the school and in the community. Following a period of up to two years in *naíonraí*, children transition to primary school. Experiencing continuity from *naíonraí* to primary schools is a very important support for children's positive transitions and their learning.

Aistear (NCCA 2009) - the early childhood curriculum framework - and *Síolta* - the national quality framework (CECDE, 2006/2017) - provide an opportunity to support continuity and progression in relation to curriculum, learning and skill development, etc., between the *naíonra* and the school.

Guidance on [Aistear](#) and [Síolta](#) is brought together in the *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide, available at www.aistearsiolta.ie, demonstrating their complementarity in supporting high quality practice in early learning and care settings and other settings.

5.2.2 *Aistear*: structure of the curriculum framework

Aistear is described on the NCCA website as follows:

Aistear is the early childhood curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years of age in Ireland. It provides information for adults to help them plan for and

provide enjoyable and challenging experiences so that all children can grow and develop as competent and confident learners within loving relationships with others. *Aistear* describes the types of learning (attitudes, values and attitudes, skills, awareness and understanding) that are important to the child in the early years, and contains ideas and suggestions on how to foster this learning.

The curriculum framework has four themes and O’Kane and Hayes (2013) illustrate their relevance to the transition process and links with the primary school:

- *Wellbeing*: the importance of physical and mental wellbeing for transitioning to primary school
- *Identity and belonging*: the importance of identity and belonging for children transitioning from one learning/practice community (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to a new one.
- *Communicating*: It is very important in terms of language and relationships that there is very good communication between children, teachers, early years educators and parents/guardians.
- *Exploring and thinking*: The children will be transferring their learning from the *naíonra* into the new school setting and learning about their new life in primary school.

5.2.3 *Aistear*: the importance of play as a medium of learning

Aistear advocates that a substantial amount of children’s early learning development takes place through play and hands-on experiences. Children explore the world around them and these experiences help them to manage their feelings, develop as thinkers and language users, and develop socially (*Aistear*: Principles and themes, 2009: 11).

Play is a perfect medium for creating continuity between *naíonraí* and primary schools. Without interfering with the unique experience of *naíonraí*, play-centred activities can be used to prepare children for the transition experience to the primary school.

Play is a process, a way for children to learn by noticing things, by playing with other children and by playing with different materials (Hayes, 2010: 169.) Children do not place much importance on the outcome of their activities, for example the picture or the game or the bricks with which they are playing. According to Vygotsky (1978), children reach a higher level of understanding through physical, cognitive play, and through manipulation of language. They are happy to try new things in play, things they would not have the courage to try in everyday life, and they learn new things as a result. They develop their imagination through imaginative play with people and materials and take great enjoyment from role-play in the home corner (Hayes, 2010: 176). Slightly older children enjoy drama, games with rules and making up complex stories while playing with dolls and other toys.

Other kinds of play involve structured material, such as jigsaw puzzles, matching games and board games. Through free play, the children themselves implement their own versions of life and devise their own procedures and rules and the play is led by the children themselves rather than by the adults (Hayes, 2010: 177). Wood and Attfield (2005: 38) believed that play provided an opportunity for children to express their feelings - for example, anxiety, fear and anger - and felt that children could learn how to deal with them through this expression. They also believed that the children learned skills - for example, the desire to learn, focus on material, social interaction and self-esteem.

Early years educators seek to help children reap the above benefits from their play by providing opportunities for play, by setting aside sufficient time and space in the timetable, and by providing appropriate support. This support is vital if children are to reap the expected benefits from their play. It is recommended that this type of support is provided through talking and conversation, through questions that challenge the children in terms of reflection and by providing additional information that helps them to develop their own ideas (Wood and Attfield, 2005: 46). Fostering this kind of reflection among native speakers is a challenge and a very important question is to what extent can children attain these language benefits through the second language, but the experience can certainly be provided as a cornerstone for reflection and help them articulate some of their ideas.

With the consent and cooperation of parents, children can be brought to visit the primary school and spend time there. While playing in the primary school, the children will get to know the pupils and teachers and gather information in a fun way on the layout and routines of the school.

This period also gives adults – early years educators and teachers – a chance to get to know each other. At one level, with parental consent, early years educators will have a chance to talk about the children, their personalities, their learning needs and to inform the teachers about anything that will help guide the teaching.

At another level, the early years educators will have a chance to inform the teachers about the children's strengths and weaknesses in terms of the language, and the children will have a chance to become accustomed to the use of Irish in the primary school.

5.2.4 *Síolta*: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education

Similarly, it is highlighted in *Síolta* that play is an important medium through which children interact with the world and seek to make sense of it (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, 2006: 9).

Síolta is a national quality framework that supports the achievement of high standards in early learning, care and education. The age range is from birth to six years, which includes children in *naíonra* and primary school.

5.2.5 *Síolta*: Standard 13: Transitions

There are sixteen standards in *Síolta* that apply to *naíonraí* and infant classes in primary school. Standard 13 is of particular importance as it addresses the practice of transitions (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, 2006):

To ensure continuity of experience for all children, there needs to be policies, procedures and practices that aim to handle transition sympathetically. The key relationships should be long-lasting and communication should be within settings and between settings. Relevant information also needs to be recorded and passed on (with parental/guardian consent), and parents/guardians and appropriate professionals must be closely involved. (CECDE, 2006: 93)

Síolta recommends

- Gathering information before the child enters the setting/school
- Sharing information appropriately within the setting/school
- Forging links with other settings/schools/organisations/people to promote a smooth transition
- Providing information and advice to settings/schools/organisations/others when the child is transferring from the setting/school, with the consent of parents/guardians (CECDE, 2006: 95).

It is recommended that parents/guardians, children and relevant professionals are consulted when children transition from one setting to another with the aim of, for example:

- Enabling staff and parents/guardians to meet and discuss issues before the child is enrolled
- Providing opportunities to visit the setting/school before the child is enrolled
- Informing children about school procedures.
- Encouraging parents to spend time in the setting/school with their child after his or her enrollment and enabling them to do so
- Accessing information about the child from parents/from the setting he or she used to attend
- Providing information to another setting/school/class, with parental/guardian permission

- Fostering formal and informal links with other relevant organisations in the community to facilitate the transition (CECDE, 2006: 96)

5.3 First 5 – A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028

Another important document that promotes the importance of establishing links between *naíonraí* and primary schools is *First 5 - A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028*, published by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in 2018.

First 5 places a strong emphasis on transitions, with “supported transitions” one of the strategy’s nine objectives. First 5 identifies a range of transition supports, with a particular focus on transitions from early learning and care settings to primary schools.

This First 5 Strategy (Government of Ireland, 2018: 14) recommends that very good communication needs to be fostered between early learning and care settings, primary schools and parents, especially for children with additional needs. It is recommended that the early childhood system supports child-centred play-based learning in the early years of primary school and “equips primary schools to accommodate young children through smaller class sizes, more time and space to play, and interactive teaching styles” (Government of Ireland, 2018: 14).

Great emphasis is placed on community support and on places where parents and young children will have opportunities to come together for play and learning and where integrated services - health, early learning and care services, primary schools and family support services - are working together (Government of Ireland, 2018: 15).

5.4 *Mo Scéal*

The NCCA developed the *Mo Scéal* initiative in 2017-18 in partnership with early learning and care settings (*naíonraí*) and primary schools in order to support children and their families in the transition. A [transition package](#) is available, which contains:

- Two reporting templates based on *Aistear* themes
- Information on the skills and dispositions that help children with the transition to school
- Transition activities for the respective early learning and care settings and primary schools and joint activities
- Suggestions for working in partnership with parents
- Research summaries.

***Naíonraí* and primary schools are encouraged to use the *Mo Scéal* templates.** The Department of Education and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration

and Youth intend to develop a guidance and support process to help those who will be using the templates and offer other suggestions.

Two versions of the transition templates are available to support early learning and care settings and primary schools.

Mo Scéal (Reporting Template 1)

[Reporting template 1](#) contains the child's details, a blank space to outline the child's strengths under the four themes of *Aistear*: Wellbeing; Identity and Belonging; Communicating; and Exploring and Thinking. It contains strategies that will help the child settle into school. It also contains ideas on how parents can help the child during the summer break. There is a section for parents to provide information about their child and a section for the child to submit a picture if he/she wishes. There is also a section where the child gives permission to share their activity with the school, as well as a section where the parent gives permission to forward the form to the school.

Mo Scéal (Reporting Template 2)

The details for [reporting template 2](#) are as above, except that the four *Aistear* themes are specified in detail and that there are boxes to tick in relation to the themes and how often (using a scale) the various activities associated with the four themes occur.

5.5 The *Nasc leis an mBunscoil* Transition Form

The *Nasc leis an mBunscoil* transition form is based on the translation of the 'Child Snapshot' form developed in 2011 during an initiative in schools participating in the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) programme (O'Kane & Hayes, 2013). The *Nasc leis an mBunscoil* transition form contains five sections.

- Language and Communication Skills
- Social and Emotional Skills
- Independence and Self-Help Skills
- Thinking Skills
- Fine and Gross Motor Skills

The *naíonra* early years educator has the option of noting whether the child has attained the particular skill or whether the skill is still being developed. In the Language and Communication section, it is accepted that the practice in the Gaeltacht is to refer to Irish as the language.

The form has space to provide the child's details, the name of the primary school he or she will be attending, and a template for writing a letter to parents. There is a section for the early

years educator to provide information on the child and, although there is no section for the parent to complete, parental consent is required in advance of forwarding the form to the primary school. The *naíonra* is required to report to Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta central office on the number of forms submitted to the primary school.

Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta played a key role in the development of the NCCA's *Mo Scéal* transition scheme and the experience of Comhar na Naíonraí Gaeltachta with *Nasc leis an mBunscoil* was a very valuable part of this involvement since many transition activities take place in the *naíonraí*, for example, talking about the primary school, reading books about going to school and visiting the new school with parents.

5.6 Altram: *Tuairisc Aistrithe*

5.6.1 Layout of the transition form

Altram is the agency supporting *naíonraí* in Northern Ireland and the agency has developed a transition form. The sections in the form include:

- The child's details
- Emotional, personal and social development
- Physical development
- Learning Skills
- Communication skills in the first language
- How the child uses the first language, including difficulties
- Ability in Irish
- Pre-reading skills
- Pre-writing skills
- Pre-mathematical skills

Details are given under each heading and a three-point scale needs to be completed under each subsection:

1. This potential has been reached
2. Making progress
3. Beginning to make progress.

The skills relating to ability in Irish (as identified by Altram) include:

- *Comprehends instructional, organisational/social language*
- *Comprehends social language*
- *Comprehends common questions*
- *Comprehends high frequency key words*
- *Participates verbally in songs, stories, rhymes*
- *Uses basic routine social language*
- *Gives single word or single phrase answers*

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- *Inserts single words or phrases in Irish and English communication*

The skills under the use of the first language (as identified by Altram) include:

Social use of 1st language (circle relevant box):

Teacher		Other pupils	
<i>Talks freely</i>	<i>Initiates talk</i>	<i>Talk freely</i>	<i>Participate in group talk</i>
<i>Confident</i>	<i>Reticent</i>	<i>Confident</i>	<i>Timid</i>

Purposes for which pupil uses 1st language (circle relevant points)

<i>Expresses needs/wants</i>	<i>Protects self-interest</i>	<i>Criticises others</i>
<i>Justifies behaviour or claims</i>	<i>Directs actions of others</i>	<i>Asks questions</i>
<i>Collaborates with others</i>	<i>Makes observations</i>	<i>Makes predictions</i>
<i>Recalls events</i>	<i>Describes events</i>	

Problem areas (circle relevant points)

<i>Uses monosyllables</i>	<i>Uses short sentences</i>	<i>Difficulty in expressing thought</i>
<i>Uses infantile words</i>	<i>Confuses tenses</i>	<i>Confused plurals</i>
<i>Limited ability in using negative</i>	<i>Difficulty with question forms</i>	<i>Speaks about self in 3rd person</i>
<i>Uses possessives incorrectly</i>	<i>Uses 'thing' frequently</i>	

The form also provides examples of problems related to specific language difficulties. The form acknowledges that the child's ability in Irish will be at a different level of development, if the information in the completed form relates to the child's second language. The report must be signed by the teacher and principal of the school and space is provided at the end for further comment. It is not stated that the report should be shown to the parent.

Altram's transition form and its use in supporting children's transitions between *naíonraí* and primary schools in Northern Ireland offers useful insights to support the recommendations arising from this report.

There are advantages to providing information on the child's ability in the first language and in the second language, if applicable, as this provides a more complete picture of the child's

language profile. It is helpful that language functions as well as language fluency and social use of the language are mentioned.

5.7 The Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme

The majority of primary schools in the Gaeltacht participate in the [Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme](#) and this will need to be considered when children transition from *naíonraí* to primary schools. Early years educators and parents should be aware of the implications of the Scheme for their children in terms of the language of instruction of the school, particularly in relation to the first two years of early immersion education in Irish in infant classes. All information on the Scheme – guidance for schools, circulars, relevant links, and research, can be found on [gov.ie](#).

As part of the Recognition Scheme, schools will be required to prepare an action plan. This plan will show how the school will meet language criteria for immersion education on a phased basis over the period of time set out for achieving recognition as a Gaeltacht school. It will also show how the school will build links with the local community in order to foster the use of Irish. Circular 0010/2020 - *Primary schools and special schools in Gaeltacht language-planning areas participating in the Gaeltacht school recognition scheme* – states in relation to *naíonraí* that

Useful and mutually beneficial language and cultural links should be established with local Irish-medium early-years settings (*naíonraí*). (Circular 0010/2020, Page 6)

The Scheme recognises that links will benefit both sectors. Therefore, *naíonraí* and primary schools should work together to achieve this by drawing on *Aistear*, *Síolta* and the ten year-strategy *First 5*.

5.8 Early Learning and Care provision and practice

As part of the universal Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme, two years in early learning and care settings are funded for children aged between two years and eight months and five years. This gives Gaeltacht children an opportunity to spend two years learning and developing in an early learning and care setting while also enriching their Irish before they start primary school, with the consent of their parents/guardians.

Early learning and care settings are subject to inspection by two Inspectorates – the Tusla Early Years Inspectorate and the Department of Education Inspectorate. The inspection frameworks for both inspectorates refer to supporting children's transitions.

Inspections carried out by Tusla, the statutory regulator of ELC settings, encompass regulations relating among other things to children's learning, development and welfare. Tusla's Quality and Regulatory Framework refers to the importance of supporting transitions into, within and from the setting, including transitions to primary school, which "should be well planned and organised to make the transition as comfortable and seamless as possible". The Regulations also require all ELC settings to have a "Settling-In Policy", which should show "the procedures in place to facilitate the integration into the service of an early years child when they first attend the service, their progression within the service and their transition to primary school" (Tusla, 2018, p.125).

The Department of Education Inspectorate carries out an annual programme of evaluation on the quality of early education delivered in early learning and care settings delivering the ECCE programme, including Irish-medium settings.

The [*Guide to Early Years Education Inspection*](#) (EYEI) (DES, 2018) describes the inspection framework and how the Department of Education Inspectorate conducts inspections of early learning and care settings, including *naíonraí*. The *Guide to Early Years Education Inspection* describes signposts for practice, which inform the education-focused inspections. It identifies signposts for practice in relation to transitions:

- Information is gathered from parents, families and other settings on children's prior experiences.
- This knowledge is used to ensure continuity of experiences and progression in learning for children.
- Information is shared between the early years setting and the primary school to ensure continuity of experiences and progression in children's learning.
- Policies, procedures and practice have been developed to promote the sensitive management of transitions within and between settings (DES, 2018: 27).

5.9 Whole-School Evaluation

The document entitled *A Guide to Inspection in Primary Schools* refers to the importance of sharing information:

Inspectors will enquire into the structures in place to facilitate sharing of information on pupils with special educational needs with relevant pre-schools and with post-primary schools. (DES, 2016: 22)

In addition, in the document entitled *School Self-Evaluation: Guidelines 2016-2020* (2016), the question posed "*Where are the children at and where are they going in their language learning?*" (DES, 2016: 10) is relevant to children transitioning from *naíonraí* to primary schools, even though there are no references to *naíonraí*, play nor transitioning to settings.

It is an advantage for primary schools to have knowledge of children's psychological and linguistic development so that they can continue their development.

5.10 The Gaeltacht primary school, the Primary School Curriculum and the Primary Language Curriculum

There are 132 primary schools in the Gaeltacht, of which 105 are currently in the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme. The Primary School Curriculum is followed in all schools. This curriculum has been under review for some time now and the draft framework can be viewed on the [NCCA](#) website. The draft framework emphasises continuity in transition:

Children's prior learning, self-worth and identity are built upon as they move from home to preschool and on to junior infants, and as they progress through primary school. This provides important foundations for learning as they move to post-primary school. (NCCA, 2020: 6)

However, it also states:

Primary education brings key transitions for children including, for most, the move from preschool to primary school, and the move from primary to post-primary school. Sharing information about learning and development is especially important at these transition points so that teachers can plan experiences that enable children to continue to make progress in their learning across the curriculum. This transfer of information is supported through *Mo Scéal: Preschool to Primary Reporting Templates* and through the *Education Passport*. The *Mo Scéal* templates help to tell the story of a child's learning and development in preschool and as such, can provide useful information to support teachers in preparing for children's learning in the early days of primary school. (NCCA, 2020: 19)

Information is also available for parents on how they can assist their children after they enter primary school. On the [NCCA](#) website, parents can source information that will help them support their children from infant classes to sixth class, which demonstrates continuity in a practical way.

The new Primary Language Curriculum was introduced in 2015 with a focus on learning outcomes and active learning approaches for infant classes and 1st class. This is a first-language (L1) and second-language (L2) curriculum for Irish and English.⁵

Research has shown that an integrated language curriculum for Irish and English would benefit children in terms of learning and development. The Language Curriculum emphasises the importance of language in the learning process itself and how pupils experience and engage in communicative relationships with others and how they come to

⁵ In accordance with the Primary Language Curriculum, this curriculum review was carried out in response to significant changes in Irish society. There are over 200 languages in use in Ireland, as well as Cantonese and Irish Sign Language.

understand, interpret, construct meaning and critically appreciate the communication of others (DES, 2016: 18).

In addition, language is the main medium of intrapersonal and interpersonal communication and is key to the child's development as a person. These points support the importance of Irish as a medium of instruction and as a medium of communication in the *naíonra* and in the school. An updated version of the *Primary Language Curriculum* was published in 2019.

The *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022* supports the aims of the [Primary Language Curriculum](#), which seeks to ensure that children in Gaeltacht schools are given an opportunity to establish a good foundation in their ability in Irish through early immersion education in Irish in infant classes and by postponing the teaching of English until first class.

The Primary Language Curriculum acknowledges

the learning journey that each child is on. From birth, children learn language through their interactions and experiences at home, in early childhood settings and into primary school. (DES, 2019: 6)

It also mentions the importance of play in a child's life and education and refers to *Aistear*:

Play makes a major contribution to literacy in the opportunities it provides for the development of the children's oral language, which is an important contributor to developing overall literacy. For example, having phones available and accessible prompts make-believe conversations about imaginary situations. This not only promotes oral language development but also abstract thinking, and as we know, for young children, talking and thinking are often the same process. This is consistent with and reflective of the approaches supported by *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. (DES, 2019: 40)

The *Primary Language Curriculum* reflects the need for links between *naíonraí* and primary schools and the contribution of both sectors to the development of the child.

Language is the clearest and most important link between *naíonraí* and Gaeltacht primary schools. Children learn the language at home, in the *naíonra*, at school or in the community and each of these settings help them to broaden their language ability and to deepen their understanding and connection to culture and heritage (DES, 2016: 18).

Of course, there are complexities in the teaching of the language, as not all children that transition from the *naíonra* to primary school are native speakers, and the language ability of speakers for whom Irish is a second-language varies greatly - some with a weak level of ability and others fluent. As stated by Hickey et al. (1999), these variations in ability affect the use of language in *naíonraí*, and often not in a positive way for Irish (Hickey et al., 1999:

139). This needs to be considered when creating links between *naíonraí* and Gaeltacht primary schools (Hickey et al., 1999: 158-9).

5.11 Summary and implications

This chapter provides an outline of the different organisations that support *naíonraí* and schools in their work with children and the practical help that they provide to help children's language and wider development as they continue their educational journey. Reference is also made to the *Aistear*, *Síolta* and *First 5* frameworks, which help foster continuity between *naíonraí* and primary schools and include commitments to strengthen supports for transitions over the coming years. These frameworks highlight also the importance of play in the learning process and in the transition experience from one setting to another.

The importance of the roles of both the Tusla Early Years Inspectorate and the Department of Education Inspectorate in providing feedback and guidance and in promoting good practice in *naíonraí* and primary schools is recognised.

The work of these organisations and the national practice frameworks and resources are operating in the context of the implementation of policies, strategies and action plans by Gaeltacht schools in the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme. Therefore, it is necessary to look at the range of national Government policies relating to the Gaeltacht to see how these impact on the responsibilities placed on COGG and other stakeholders to strengthen the links between *naíonraí* and primary schools. This will be discussed in the next chapter.

6. Government Policies for the Gaeltacht

6.1 Introduction

This chapter will describe the aspects of Government policies that relate specifically to links between *naíonraí*, primary schools and families in the Gaeltacht. It is also necessary to bear in mind that all State policies have an impact on the Gaeltacht community, including education policies, health policies, economic policies, etc. If children hear the language functioning effectively in the community outside of *naíonraí* and primary schools, it will help to create a link between *naíonraí* and primary schools.

The policies covered in this chapter include:

- *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030* published by the Government (2010)
- *Action Plan 2018-2022: 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030* published by the then Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (2018)
- *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022* published by the Department of Education (2016).

6.2 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030

6.2.1 Aims and structure

The *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language (20-Year Strategy)* aims to increase awareness of the Irish language throughout Ireland, create opportunities to use the language and foster positive attitudes towards the Irish language. A phased approach was proposed, with some actions for each phase.

In relation to the role of COGG, the *20-Year Strategy* does not specifically mention fostering links between *naíonraí* and primary schools, but the potential for this is reflected in the following section of the strategy:

With regard to the larger issue of the specific needs of Gaeltacht and *Gaelscoileanna*, a high-level group will review existing policies and explore possible changes, including the development of a new policy for Gaeltacht schools and *Gaelscoileanna*. Other possible functions for COGG will also be considered in the context of these discussions. (Government of Ireland, 2010: 18)

The recommendations in relation to COGG in the *Action Plan* and the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education* emanated from the above paragraph in the *20-Year Strategy*.

Nine actions are laid out in the *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030* (Government of Ireland, 2010: 11), covering all elements relating to the Irish language:

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- Education
- The Gaeltacht
- Family Transmission of the Language – Early Intervention
- Administration, Services and Community
- Media and Technology
- Dictionaries
- Legislation and Status
- Economic Life
- Cross-Cutting Initiatives.

In the case of the Gaeltacht, the 20-Year Strategy aims to:

provide linguistic support for the Gaeltacht as an Irish-speaking community and to recognise the issues which arise in areas where Irish is the household and community language (Government of Ireland, 2010: 3)

The *20-Year Strategy* recognises the importance of links in a community context, particularly in the Gaeltacht:

While strengthening the position of the language within our education system is a key focus of this *20-Year Strategy*, the transmission of Irish as a living language within the family and between the generations is critically important. Our overall approach is to create a supportive framework and the opportunities in which Irish can be passed on in a natural way within households and communities. This is of special importance in the context of the Gaeltacht (Government of Ireland, 2010: 3).

Addressing language planning in the Gaeltacht, it is stated in the *20-Year Strategy that*:

In order to address the threat to the sustainability of the Gaeltacht as a linguistic entity, priority will be given to language planning activities necessary to stabilise the position of Irish as the community language (Government of Ireland, 2010: 20).

In addition, 'Education Planning' and 'pre-school services' are referenced in the plans for Gaeltacht local language plans (Government of Ireland, 2010: 20).

This chapter will focus on links between primary schools, *naíonraí* and families in the Gaeltacht, particularly as they relate to the following areas - Education, the Gaeltacht and the Family. These areas will be discussed in the context of immersion education in Gaeltacht schools. Immersion education is an important element of the *20-Year Strategy*:

It will continue to be national policy to promote immersion education through Irish in all subjects except English in Gaeltacht schools, *Gaelscoileanna* and *naíonraí* (Government of Ireland, 2010: 12).

The Irish-language curriculum has changed radically since the publication of the *20-Year Strategy* in 2010 and the Primary Language Curriculum (DES 2019). The Department of Education Circular 0045/2019 emphasises continuity:

The curriculum reflects the principles and pedagogies of *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) and it supports continuity between children's learning and development in early childhood settings and in infant classes. In its Strands, Elements and Learning Outcomes, the PLC/CTB is aligned with the junior cycle specifications for English, Irish and Modern Foreign Languages. This provides for continuity of experience and progression in language learning as children make the transition from pre-school to primary to post-primary school. The curriculum also provides progression for children with special educational needs. (DES, 2019: 3)

Here we see how the *20-Year Strategy*, *the Primary Language Curriculum*, and *Aistear* are woven together to create the links between the various levels of education.

6.2.2 An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG)

In conjunction with other agencies, COGG has been given responsibility for implementing specific actions in the *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030* relating to education in schools. Resources have been provided to COGG to enable it to develop textbooks and other resources, advise the Minister on policies relating to education through Irish, provide a support service through Irish and support research projects on themes relevant to the *20-Year Strategy*.

6.2.3 The Gaeltacht

The *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030* sets out the strategies for establishing a language-planning process in the Gaeltacht. This provides a means by which links between *naíonraí* and primary schools, and between relevant agencies, can be nurtured and strengthened. The importance of supporting Irish-speaking families in the Gaeltacht and beyond is recognised.

Activities in language planning include activities for educational planning, youth services, care of children with special educational needs, and family services. These will include early learning and care services, language advisory services for families, after-school services, networks for Irish-speaking parents and children, pre-marital and ante-natal advice services, language awareness programmes for families, speech therapy and psychological services, and public health services (Government of Ireland, 2010: 20).

As part of the *20-Year Strategy*, communities in the 26 language-planning areas in the Gaeltacht need to set out a language plan on how they will strengthen the Irish language in their area. After the Minister of State has approved the plan, the area needs to appoint a language-planning officer to implement the plan. At community level, among other activities, language-planning officers have a central role to play in strengthening the link between education settings and communities. According to information available on the [Údarás na](#)

[Gaeltachta](#) website, 24 language plans in Language-Planning Areas (LPAs) and two language plans for two Gaeltacht Service Towns (GSTs) in the Gaeltacht have been approved and there are 23 language planning and assistant officers working in 19 LPAs.

6.2.4 Family transmission of the language – Early intervention

The *20-Year Strategy* recognises the importance of the family as a unit of language delivery and undertakes to provide a wide range of services through Irish (Government of Ireland, 2010: 22). The Strategy demonstrates that the close link with language and language activities is fostered through the family, which also helps develop personal, social as well as linguistic and cultural identity.

The strategy highlights that parents will be supported and encouraged to raise their children bilingually (or multilingually, depending on the family) or through Irish. Therefore, advice, guidance, and support will be provided to families who speak Irish in the home and more information about the benefits of bilingualism will be shared with the public. This will require an understanding of the benefits of bilingualism in all services provided in Gaeltacht communities, including medical advisors and therapy services. Reference is made in the *20-Year Strategy* to the activities below to achieve these aims:

- Enhanced support for networks of Irish-speaking families will be provided at a local level;
- Programmes to assist grandparents and other elderly people to pass the language on to the new generation will be supported;
- Targeted language learning opportunities will be put in place to assist families where only one parent speaks Irish;
- Awareness regarding the advantages of bilingualism in the mainstream work of health and social care professionals that work with young families will be fostered (Government of Ireland, 2010: 22).

6.3 Action Plan 2018-2022: *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030* (Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sports and Media)

6.3.1. Background

The *Action Plan 2018-2022: 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010 - 2030* was published in June 2018. It came about following a public consultation process on the *20-Year Strategy* organised by the then Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. It was recognised that there was a need to provide a five-year action plan to provide a more cohesive framework aimed at completing activities within a period of five years and to foster

more effective participation, co-ownership and relationships at Departmental, Non-Government Organisation (NGO) and community levels (DCHG, 2018: 19). The *Plan* specifically states that

- linkages [will be fostered] between schools and *naíonraí* in Gaeltacht areas as part of the Recognition Scheme (DCHG, 2018: 29)

The *Plan* contains suggestions for fostering and strengthening links between *naíonraí*, primary schools, and families in the following areas included in this chapter.

6.3.2 Education

The implementation of the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017 – 2022*, which recognises the role of schools and early learning and care settings in providing quality education through Irish and in encouraging fluency and use of the Irish language in the greater Gaeltacht community, will continue to be implemented (DCHG, 2018: 8).

Actions to achieve this include the following:

- Foster linkages between schools and *naíonraí* in Gaeltacht areas as part of the Recognition Scheme (DCHG, 2018: 29)
- Develop and implement a publicity and communications plan in order to inform school communities of the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022* (DCHG, 2018: 30)
- Develop awareness among parents and communities in Gaeltacht areas in relation to the merit of the language, of Gaelic culture and of high-quality Irish-medium education via information leaflets for parents, seminars and social media
- Irish-language services provided by various Education and Training Boards will be expanded to include support for Gaeltacht parents wishing to raise their children through Irish (DCHG, 2018: 34).

6.3.3 The Plan at Gaeltacht community level

In relation to a community and language support programme at Gaeltacht community level, the *Plan* states that the following action will be taken:

Support will continue for the Gaeltacht's language and community infrastructure through investment in a wide range of schemes, measures and initiatives (both capital and current) currently being administered by DCHG. These schemes include the Community and Language Supports Programme; Irish Learners Scheme; Language Assistants Scheme; and the Summer Camps Scheme (DCHG, 2018: 42).

This support emphasises the importance of community in language learning and development, and is a symbiotic process. The community supports the *naíonraí* and schools, and the *naíonraí* and schools work in partnership with the community to develop and enrich children's language to create a new generation of speakers.

6.3.4 The Family – early intervention

The *Action Plan 2018-2022: 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030* recognises the importance of early support:

Increased supports will be provided in relation to Irish language provision in the early years sector, including the appointment of two specialists within the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (now DCEDIY).

Further investment will be provided in the organisation, Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta, to enable the organisation to better support early years provision in Gaeltacht areas through the medium of Irish.

Further significant resources will be provided to the organisation, Tuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta, that will further support families in Gaeltacht areas who are raising their children through Irish or who wish to do so (DCHG, 2018: 11).

In partnership with the Department of Education and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, DCHG will seek to “build on the existing measures and supports currently being provided in the area of Irish-medium early years” (DCHG, 2018: 47).

The *Action Plan 2018-2022* states that support would be available at preschool and youth levels for families raising their children through Irish in the Gaeltacht and that Tuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta would have funding in place to advance staff and family support policies. This would mean that advice is available to parents on the intergenerational transmission of Irish (DCHG, 2018: 50). Therefore, in these ways, links would be created and strengthened between the different groups.

There is a need to ensure that all *naíonraí* in the country are adequately catered for, as stated in the *Action Plan 2018-2022: 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030*:

A baseline of supports, services and resources will be established to be available to *naíonraí* and to build upon that to develop a strategy to deliver policies, training and related relevant material through the medium of Irish (DCHG, 2018: 51).

Another important point mentioned in the *Action Plan 2018-2022* in relation to the language is that support will continue to be provided for the *naíonraí* services in order to build the capacity of staff and promote their skill development. It is recommended that training modules in language acquisition and enrichment be developed and promoted in early education services (DCHG, 2018: 52). A staff, which is competent, caring and understanding, and fluent in the language, greatly helps in the development of children's positive attitudes and dispositions towards the language.

6.4 Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022

6.4.1 Background

The Department of Education published the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022* in October 2016 following an extensive national consultation process, in order to address the linguistic challenges facing the Gaeltacht. The Policy sets out how the education system will support the strengthening of the use of Irish in Gaeltacht communities, one of the key aims of the *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030* (Government of Ireland, 2010: 4).

The Policy recognises the uniqueness of the Gaeltacht as an area of significant linguistic, cultural and economic importance. The Department of Education's vision for Gaeltacht education is for the provision of high-quality Irish-medium education and for the fostering of Irish-language proficiency and usage in the wider Gaeltacht community (DCHG, 2016: 7).

The Policy recognises the role that schools and early-years' settings play in providing high-quality Irish-medium education and in fostering Irish-language proficiency and usage in the wider Gaeltacht community. The confidence and support of parents and the local community for the work of schools and early-years' settings in Gaeltacht areas are critical. (DCHG, 2016: 7).

It is clear that schools in Gaeltacht areas face significant challenges. Pupils come from families with varying levels of Irish and there has been an increase in the use of English in Gaeltacht communities. Research (Ó Giollagáin *et al.*, 2007) has shown that the sociolinguistic context of Gaeltacht schools is complex and that significant differences exist, depending on the status of the language within the local community. The Department of Education has provided ongoing support since the publication of the Policy to support its implementation.

The *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022* and the measures contained therein are intended to help achieve the goals set out in the *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language* in relation to the use of Irish in the Gaeltacht. The Policy aims to develop the linguistic advantages and strengths of the Gaeltacht in conjunction with local language-planning processes and various groups in Gaeltacht communities.

While the Policy contains seven supporting pillars (Department of Education and Skills, 2016: 9), the following pillars are those that directly relate to the purpose of this report:

- Support pillar 6: Strengthening early-years' educational provision
- Support pillar 7: Building awareness and communicating with and supporting parents

The Policy outlines the tasks and responsibilities associated with establishing links between *naíonraí* and Gaeltacht primary schools, as well as proposals for the strengthening of links between the school and the family.

6.4.2 Support Pillar 6: Goal to strengthen early-years' educational provision

One of the aims of the Government's Policy on Gaeltacht Education is to strengthen the quality of Irish-medium educational provision in early learning and care settings in the Gaeltacht. The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) has lead responsibility for early learning and care policy, and in relation to the Gaeltacht DCEDIY works in collaboration with the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, the Department of Education, and relevant agencies.

The *Policy on Gaeltacht Education* includes the aim to:

Provide guidance for *naíonraí* and primary schools on the development of links between *naíonraí* and primary school to include exemplars of good practice. (DES, 2016: 43)

According to the Policy, positive links between *naíonraí* and primary schools provide additional opportunities to promote Irish inside and outside early learning and care services and schools. The Policy states that links between *naíonraí* and primary schools, between schools and cultural, sporting and language organisations, and between primary and post-primary schools are worthwhile (DES, 2016: 45). Through these links, the various groups will provide support for each other.

The Policy places great emphasis on the continuity of pupil experience in Irish-medium education between *naíonraí*, primary and post-primary schools. The Policy states that "links between educational settings may occur through communication opportunities, sharing of resources, sharing of information on learners as they transfer between settings, and collaboration between settings on joint initiatives and activities" (ibid.).

The Policy indicates that this type of support will help to facilitate the transition of children between settings, including addressing language issues, and recommends the establishment of a transition program for children entering a new setting. Many effective links are already in place between educational settings in the Gaeltacht. It is recommended that this practice be shared through school guidelines and stakeholder discussions (DES, 2016: 45).

The Policy recommends that the organisations responsible for the language-planning process engage with Gaeltacht schools so that both sides understand their roles in this process (DES, 2016: 45).

6.4.3 Support Pillar 7: Goal to build awareness and communicate with and support parents

The involvement of parents in their children's education at all levels from *naíonra* onwards will facilitate the fostering of links between the various groups at all levels of education.

The Policy recognises the importance of partnerships and good relationships between parents, schools and *naíonraí*. The Policy recommends that parents be made aware of the benefits of Irish and Irish-medium education in relation to their children's personal and social development, their education and their capacity to learn languages and in relation to other opportunities open to them in the future. According to the Policy, parents who are raising their children through Irish need to be assured that their efforts to do so are of value to their children and their community. In addition, parents' positive attitudes towards the language policy and the use of Irish as the medium of instruction are critical to fostering a positive co-operative attitude in their own children (DES, 2016: 45-46).

The Policy recommends that good practice in parental involvement be shared among principals, teachers, managers and *naíonra* early years educators. The Policy recommends that opportunities such as professional networks, professional development events and guidelines be provided to Gaeltacht schools in relation to policies and practices (DES, 2016: 46).

The Policy recognises that parents raising their children through Irish in the Gaeltacht require support. Reference is made to the Family Support Centres in this context. Families who are not native speakers also require opportunities to improve their ability in Irish and it is important that they are encouraged to do so (DES, 2016: 46).

The Policy (DES, 2016) recommends:

- providing and disseminating guidance on fostering school-community links and links between educational settings, including exemplars of effective practice (p. 46)
- developing guidelines for Gaeltacht schools on parental engagement and participation (p. 47).

It is thought that these actions will help to develop an understanding among parents and communities in the Gaeltacht of the value of the Irish language, Irish culture and high-quality Irish-medium education. It is recommended that this be done through information booklets for parents, seminars and social media (DES, 2016: 47).

6.4.4 *Guide for Gaeltacht Primary Schools: Immersion Education: Indicators of Good Practice*

A *Draft Guide for Gaeltacht Primary Schools* has been published to provide primary schools with practical support and an insight into indicators of good practice in immersion education (Department of Education, 2018: 5). A revised version of the *Guide for Gaeltacht Primary Schools: Indicators of Good Practice for Immersion Education* was published by the Department in 2020.

The indicators of good practice will help schools to identify specific goals that meet the various language-based criteria to strengthen immersion education. The indicators of good practice are available to aid the process of school self-evaluation and improvement.

This report will focus on the areas relating specifically to links between primary schools and *naíonraí*. For schools, reflecting on how best to build upon and strengthen existing links and establish new links could be undertaken as part of the school self-evaluation process (Department of Education, 2018: 7, 8).

In the language-based criteria necessary to achieve recognition as a Gaeltacht school, the *Guide for Gaeltacht Primary Schools* prioritises the use of Irish in communicating with parents, the local community and other parties. Emphasis is placed on establishing useful and mutually beneficial language and cultural links with local Irish-medium early-years settings (*naíonraí*). The indicators of good practice are aligned with the *Quality Framework for Primary Schools: Looking at Our School* (Department of Education, 2016: 12).

The *Guide for Gaeltacht Primary Schools* on good practice in immersion education recognises that every school is different and that some indicators will be useful for certain contexts and others may not. Principals and teachers will be able to consider their own particular context in terms of each language-based criterion and add to the indicators of good practice as it suits (Department of Education, 2018: 12). In addition, the Guide states that the following improvement continuum regarding each indicator of good practice may be used to guide the next implementation steps:

Improvement Continuum			
1: yet to be implemented	2: progress made	3: being implemented	4: already implemented

If schools use this continuum, they will understand where they stand in relation to the language criteria and what they still need to do. The numbers in the table below relate to this continuum.

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For links between *naíonraí* and primary schools, examples are provided below of indicators of good practice that focus on the links between the *naíonra* and the primary school.

Criterion 11 for primary schools

Criterion:	Establish useful and mutually beneficial language and cultural links with local Irish-medium early-years settings ...				
Dimension:	Leadership and Management, and Teaching and Learning				
Domain:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leading learning and teaching • Leading school development • Learner outcomes and experiences 	1	2	3	4
Samples of Indicators of Good Practice	There is a strong link and communication channel between the local <i>naíonra</i> and the primary school to establish the starting points for children’s language learning and to develop effective transition supports for children.				
Samples of Indicators of Good Practice	There is collaboration between the early years’ setting (the <i>naíonra</i>) and the primary school in communicating with parents regarding Irish-medium education.				

Department of Education, *Guide for Gaeltacht Primary Schools: Indicators of Good Practice for Immersion Education*, 2020: 26

The Guide for Gaeltacht Primary Schools: Indicators of Good Practice for Immersion Education (2020) emphasises the importance of the links between *naíonraí* and primary schools and between parents and the education system.

6.5 Summary and implications

The documents discussed in this chapter contain a consistent reference to recommendations regarding the establishment of links between *naíonraí*, primary schools and families. The *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030* and the *Action Plan for Irish 2018-2022* each recommend an integrated approach between the areas of education, family and Gaeltacht.

The *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022* places a strong emphasis on the continuity of immersion education through Irish in *naíonraí*, primary and post-primary schools. The *Guide for Gaeltacht Primary Schools: Indicators of Good Practice for Immersion Education* (2020) sets out a clear pathway for identifying specific goals and reporting progress.

The various documents mentioned in this chapter recommend the establishment of links between *naíonraí* and primary schools so that they support each other. The benefits of these

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links in terms of continuity of learning and language are highlighted and it is recommended that the good practice already in place be built upon.

It is noted that attention has been given to the need to develop language and cultural links in the *Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme* (discussed in Chapter 4) and in the *Guide for Gaeltacht Primary Schools: Indicators of Good Practice for Immersion Education* (2020).

This provides an opportunity to explore the use of a range of activities to strengthen the links between *naíonraí* and primary schools. It would be beneficial also to consider the social and wellbeing benefits for children.

7. National and International Research on promoting positive transitions between ELC settings and primary school

7.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews national and international research and explores exemplars of transition programmes and the links between primary schools and ELC settings. It includes the following:

- The findings of Growing Up in Ireland, the first longitudinal study of children in Ireland, in relation to school readiness and transition to school
- *Mo Scéal*, a new programme developed by the NCCA in 2018, to support positive transitions to primary school and contains a package of reporting templates, information on children's skills and attitudes, and suggestions for activities between the early learning and care sector and the primary school sector
- *An Traein*, published by Forbairt Naíonraí Teo. and Gaelscoileanna in 2011, a programme describing how to devise a transition programme
- The findings of a research review conducted in New Zealand relating to links and the transition between early learning and care settings and primary schools and learnings from the Australian Gippsland Initiative on fostering links between different early childhood professions
- The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report on transitions from Early Childhood Education and Care to Primary Education.

A positive, successful transition to primary education is of paramount importance for children attending a *naíonra* in the Gaeltacht in order to support their cognitive, social and linguistic development. An understanding of the unique context of *naíonraí* operating in Gaeltacht areas is required and fostering links with Gaeltacht primary schools is of great importance. The implications in relation to the need to strengthen links between *naíonraí* and Gaeltacht primary schools are traced in the sections below.

7.2 Research: Growing Up in Ireland

7.2.1 Background and findings

The longitudinal *study, Growing Up in Ireland*, collected information from over 9,000 five-year old children and their families, primary teachers and principals. This data was filtered in order to support the discussion of issues relating to school entry age, school readiness and stakeholder relations.

Smyth (2018) carried out an analysis of the *Growing up in Ireland* data in the context of the transition to primary school. She noted that the primary school entry age had risen over time, particularly since the introduction of a free year in early learning and care settings in 2010 (Smyth, 2018). Since 2018, two free years in early learning and care settings have been made available. Children from professional/managerial and highly educated families and children with additional needs start school later than other children (ibid.). During the transition from the *naíonra* to primary school, positive relationships between mothers (the vast majority of primary caregivers were mothers) and their children are very helpful, as well as their experiences of stories and creative play at home (ibid.). Mothers were found to help their children in a variety of ways, including talking about school, visiting the school and practicing reading, writing and numeracy with their child (ibid.).

Smyth's research (2018) refers to teachers' views that they were given little information about the skills developed in the early learning and care settings or about the children's strengths and challenges. She noted that "this lack of information is likely to constrain continuity in learning experiences for children" (ibid.) This highlights the importance of this type of information being made available in the forms used as children transition from *naíonraí* to primary schools.

According to GUI data, while most children were successful in transitioning, some boys, children with additional educational needs, children from backgrounds with socio-emotional issues, children with only one parent and children from large families, experienced difficulties (Smyth, 2018). Due to these challenges, it was more difficult for some teachers to establish relationships with boys, children from disadvantaged backgrounds or children with additional educational needs (ibid.).

For some time, research and literature on readiness for school has increasingly focused on the relationship and interaction between family, school and child. According to Smyth (2018), primary teachers place more emphasis on practical skills, that is, self-help skills (children taking care of their own belongings and being able to manage the toilet, for example) and social and emotional skills (children being able to express their needs, take turns and being able to manage their behaviour in class). This finding was echoed by Ring et al. (2016).

7.2.2 Summary and implications

This research places a strong emphasis on the importance of promoting continuity of learning between early learning and care settings (*naíonraí*) and primary schools. The findings from the GUI study highlight a range of activities, as identified earlier in this report, which are central to supporting this continuity. These include:

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- Communication of information about children's skills and dispositions. While information transfer forms would be useful, meetings between *naíonra* early years educators and primary teachers would also help to share information about the children, with parental consent.
- Supporting parents to be proactive - parents play an important role in fostering a positive learning environment at home. Activities identified include the frequent reading and telling of stories, providing creative activities such as playing with water, painting, baking and making things from raw materials around the house.
- Visits to primary school - It would be worthwhile, where possible, to arrange visits to the school so that the children become familiar with the new location. Schools will need to ensure that support is available to establish and maintain meaningful relationships with families who are socioeconomically disadvantaged.

7.3 *Mo Scéal*

7.3.1 Background and materials

The NCCA developed the *Mo Scéal* initiative in 2017-18 in partnership with early learning and care settings including Gaeltacht *naíonraí* and primary schools in order to support children and their families in the transition. Good relationships between early learning and care settings and primary schools help facilitate a positive transition for the children. Such professional relationships enable *naíonra* early years educators and infant teachers to share important information about children's learning and development and gain a better understanding of each other's learning, curricular and pedagogical environment.

The NCCA has a [transition package](#) available on its website. The package contains:

- Two reporting templates based on *Aistear* themes
- Information on the skills and dispositions that help children with the transition to school
- Transition activities for the respective early learning and care settings and primary schools and joint activities
- Suggestions for working in partnership with parents
- Research summaries.

Podcasts and tip sheets are available to discuss suitable stories, many of them in both Irish and English. This package is designed as a tool to facilitate the transition process and, while it is not a requirement to use it, the Department of Education and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth intend to develop a guidance and support process to help those who will be using the templates and offer other suggestions.

7.3.2 The Templates

Two versions of the transition templates are available to support early learning and care settings and primary schools.

Mo Scéal (Reporting Template 1)

[Reporting template 1](#) contains the child's details, a blank space to detail the child's strengths under the four themes of *Aistear*: Wellbeing; Identity and Belonging; Communicating; and Exploring and Thinking. It contains strategies that will help the child settle into school. It also contains ideas on how parents can help the child during the summer break. There is a section for parents to provide information about their child and a section for the child to submit a picture if he/she wishes. There is also a section where the child gives permission to share their activity with the school, as well as a section where the parent gives permission to forward the form to the school.

Mo Scéal (Reporting Template 2)

The details for [reporting template 2](#) are as above, except that the four *Aistear* themes are specified in detail and that there are boxes to tick in relation to the themes and how often (using a scale) the various activities associated with the four themes occur.

7.3.3 Transition: activities for early learning and care settings

When preparing children to transition to primary schools, *Mo Scéal* recommends that early learning and care settings implement a wide range of activities. Emphasis is placed on the importance of social skills, speaking skills and positive learning dispositions such as independence, curiosity and resilience.

There are suggestions for links with the primary school through photographs and by organising visits. For example, *Mo Scéal* recommends photo books and displays of the schools that the children will be attending. A doll from the early learning and care setting could be taken to the school(s) and photographed in various locations.

A visit to the school and the teacher reading a story to the children would be very beneficial. The infant teacher could visit the early learning and care setting to read a story or take part in some activity.

Mo Scéal recommends that it would be worthwhile encouraging parents to talk to their children about going to school in order to help them become self-reliant and to take care of their own things. During the summer, before going to primary school, it would be worthwhile for these children to meet other children who will be attending the same school.

7.3.4 Transition: activities for the primary school

Schools are encouraged to use the reporting forms to learn about the skills, dispositions and experience of new pupils.

As mentioned above in relation to the early learning and care setting, it is recommended that photographs of the school be sent to the early learning and care setting(s) so that the children become accustomed to the school.

For links with parents, it is recommended that they be provided with an information pack containing information on how to help children as they begin school, the curriculum, the importance of play and how it supports children's learning and development, the daily timetable and the programme for the year.

It is also recommended that an information session/open night be organised before the children start school and that the primary teacher and the *naíonra* early years educator discuss the reports about the child with the parent.

It would be worth holding another information session at the end of September to inform parents about the curriculum and how the children are settling into the school.

In addition, children from the early learning and care setting could be invited to attend school events - Sports Day, Christmas Drama or a community venue such as the playground, for example.

7.3.5 Research on the various groups: *Mo Scéal* pilot scheme

What information exists that *Mo Scéal* works? A pilot scheme has already been conducted and the final report on the *Preschool to Primary School Transition Initiative* (NCCA, 2018) is available on the NCCA website. The following took place during the pilot scheme:

- four *Aistear* workshops for primary and early learning and care staff together
- visits to each other's workplaces
- sharing of transition reports between *naíonra* early years educators and primary teachers
- meetings with parents.

The views of the various groups involved in the *Mo Scéal* pilot scheme were gathered and are summarised in the table below.

Summary of views – Mo Scéal pilot scheme

Preschool and primary school staff

Fostering good professional relationships has increased participants' confidence in sharing professional expertise (NCCA, 2018: 31). Other professionals, such as speech and language therapists, also attended meetings with parents to discuss the transition of children with additional needs. Participants felt that personal contact between early years educators and teachers is important and that it takes time to develop a professional relationship. The primary teachers were very pleased with the reports and felt that they had a reasonably good knowledge of the children for whom they received reports. They also appreciated the opportunity to have further conversations about the children.

The teachers used the reports in different ways – to put friends in the same groups or to provide them with toys that they knew the children liked on the first day. Many teachers used the strategies highlighted in the reports to help children with minor difficulties, such as having the child hold something relevant when it was not easy for him or her to sit quietly listening to a story.

The issue of bilingual templates or templates in Irish only was discussed in the case of Gaeltacht schools. The templates were available in English or Irish, with no bilingual version provided. It was reiterated that the reports were just one part of the transition and that the whole initiative was important in building relationships and exchanging information about the children (NCCA, 2018: 40).

Parents' views

The research data showed that parents were very pleased to have the opportunity to attend a meeting with the early learning and care setting and the school to discuss the transition report from the preschool. These meetings were held in the school and were chaired or co-chaired by the principal or primary teacher along with the early years educator.

The parents were happy to meet the new teacher and share information with him/her. They made good use of the practical information provided. They discovered that the primary teachers were emphasising self-help and communication skills – for example, that children take care of their own belongings – over pre-academic skills (ibid.: 22).

They really enjoyed getting the opportunity to hear about what would happen in infant classes and welcomed suggestions for activities over the summer. They said that they often talked to the children about school, that they often read stories to them and that they practised how to open the lunch box and put on coats. They often drove or walked past the school so that the children could get to know the building. They decided that the children would have the opportunity to meet other children during the summer, especially those who would be attending the same school.

Parents were surprised that not many transition events had been organised between preschools and primary schools in the past. They were very pleased with the reports written about their children and that they themselves had the opportunity to share information about the child. In the case of a child with additional needs, his parent was very pleased that the primary teacher was aware of strategies that helped the child in

preschool. Others felt that there was a danger of labelling children with minor behavioral issues and that care needed to be taken to ensure that this did not adversely affect the attitudes of primary teachers towards the children.

Parents felt that participation in the initiative was of great benefit to the children and that the children settled down in school because they were well prepared (ibid.: 23). There were many reasons for this: the processes in the initiative, the co-location of the school and the preschool, and the presence of a brother or sister in the school already. Preschool children at another location also did very well. The children knew about the big school and felt that links had been created between them and the school. The teacher knew of them before they attended the school and they had already visited the school before the first day.

Children's voice

Comments were gathered from the children in a variety of ways, from conversations with parents and teachers, and directly from children talking about their pictures about going to school and in video interviews. These comments were summarised in the final report (ibid.: 28- 30):

Children's feelings about going to school

Many of the children were very happy that they were going to school and looked forward to it. They mentioned learning new things, wearing school uniforms, spending a longer day at school and having fun with new friends. Some were a little worried.

Preschool and school activities

The children enjoyed playing indoors and outdoors in the preschool, painting, drawing, colouring, cutting out and making jigsaws. Other children enjoyed singing, music and dancing and said that they liked books and wanted to learn how to read. They hoped that they could also play when they were in school.

Important adults and children

Most of the children looked forward to meeting the new teacher and their new school friends. They looked forward to being with their siblings in school and almost all children stated that they looked forward to sitting next to friends or playing with them.

Uniform, lunch and homework

Outside appearances were very important to a school child and the school uniform, school bag, school lunch and homework were mentioned positively.

The artwork and video showed that the children thought that the school building was very large, that there were a lot of people, that there were fun opportunities in the school yard and that they would learn new things (ibid.: 30).

7.3.6 *Mo Scéal*: Summary and implications

The suggestions from the *Mo Scéal* initiative would be beneficial in fostering links between *naíonraí* and primary schools in the Gaeltacht. The researcher notes that there may be a

requirement to adapted reporting templates to the particular context of Irish-medium education.

It would be worth looking at the possibility of organising joint continuing professional development between *naíonraí* and primary schools so that they can increase their knowledge of *Aistear* in order to foster continuity between the *naíonra* and the primary school. They could work out a plan among themselves about the use of *Mo Scéal* and other transition/information forms, and could decide what joint events they would like to organise.

7.4 *An Traein: Ag aistriú ón naíonra go dtí an bhunscoil*

7.4.1 Development and Content

Forbairt Naíonraí Teo. and Gaelscoileanna (now Gaeloideachas) published *An Traein*, a background paper and information booklet on the transition from *naíonra* to primary school for *naíonraí* and *Gaelscoileanna* outside the Gaeltacht, in 2011.

The aim of this initiative was to help *naíonra* early years educators, primary teachers, and through them, children and parents to make a smooth, steady and satisfactory transition from *naíonra* to *Gaelscoil* (Mhic Mhathúna, 2011: 11).

The transition process and the main changes in transition for the child were outlined and the basic principles of early immersion education were explained. It was recommended that the language needs of the children, whether beginners in the second language or native speakers, be catered for. It was acknowledged that parents send their children to a *Gaelscoil* by choice, which fosters a favorable attitude towards the language (Mhic Mhathúna, 2011: 20). It was also acknowledged that the early education experience that they had received while attending preschool was very helpful to the children:

Of course, it is very helpful to the children who have attended nursery that they have experience of participating in a group, of taking part in regular directed activities and of doing their own thing during free play time, along with gaining the other cognitive and social benefits of having experienced early childhood education (Mhic Mhathúna, 2011: 21).

The use of the two national frameworks, *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) and *Síolta* (2006), was recommended to foster continuity between the two sectors. It was also recommended that there be an agreed transition programme between *naíonraí* and *Gaelscoileanna*.

7.4.2 International research evidence

The establishment of a transition programme between the early learning and care setting and the primary school, which adapts to the local context in an open and flexible way, is supported by the research of Dunlop and Fabian (2007). They believe that such a programme should begin with the principle that the transition is a joint venture between the children, families, early years educators and teachers in their own community and that the aim of the transition programme is to help and support children to move on to the next stage in their lives as active and talented people.

Fabian (2002) and Dunlop and Fabian (2007) have suggested ways of devising a transition programme for children, early years educators and parents that includes information on the following:

- The school and early years setting's transition policy
- Fostering engagement between early years educators and teachers so that they can understand each other's work
- Providing training and support to the teacher and other staff
- Helping the teacher get to know the children
- Fostering involvement of parents/guardians
- Organising activities to help the children and parents/guardians learn about the location of the school, experience the school day, and meet the teacher
- Liaising with other schools to share information on best practice
- Evaluating the transition programme on a regular basis
- Providing training on the transition process to early years educators and teachers.

Appendix 1 includes some examples of transition activities from the national and international research that could be implemented.

7.4.3 *An Traein* – how to develop a transition programme

Each *naíonra*, each school and the links between *naíonraí* and schools will have particular circumstances. *An Traein* recommends that the following local issues and factors need to be considered when designing a transition programme:

- The location of the school in relation to the *naíonra*: are they based in the same location?
- Which *naíonraí* and *Gaelscoileanna* are based in the same area?
- Should a distinction be made between parents/guardians new to the school and those who already have children in the school?
- How can the school develop the language of the children who attended the *naíonra*?
- Will children with additional needs be transitioning from the *naíonra* to school?
- In what ways do both sectors support, encourage and assist parents/guardians in relation to the Irish language?
- Time issues: how long will the transition programme take? When will the programme begin? How long will it last?

The following is one approach to planning a transition programme:

- Set out the aims of the transition programme on a local basis
- List the actions and features of the transition programme currently underway
- Set out the ideal situation
- Set out the priorities of the transition programme and other relevant details
- Plan how to deliver the priorities of the transition programme:
 1. The time period in which it will take place, from St. Patrick's Day to Halloween, for example
 2. Nominate the people involved in the transition programme: infant teachers, the principal, other members of school staff, *naíonra* managers and early years educators, children, parents/guardians
 3. The time resources and budget required
- Plan for assessment

7.4.4 Summary and implications

Since *An Traein* was published in 2011, Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta and the NCCA have developed other transition forms. In 2020, Gaeloideachas published an updated version of the [An Traein](#) programme on its website. It would be beneficial to consider these developments to support transitions from *naíonraí* to primary schools in the Gaeltacht. Good practice is currently underway on ways to inform the family, provide opportunities for children to experience the primary school, and foster links between primary schools and *naíonraí*.

7.5 New Zealand Project – Research on the Transition from Early Childhood Education to School

7.5.1 Background and approach

Peters (2010) from New Zealand reviewed international research on the transition from the early learning and care setting to primary school and ranked the reported ways of informing children and their families about school, as well as the effectiveness of those pathways.

These include the following:

- visits to the new school
- DVD/video
- a photo book about the new school
- picture books about school
- an exhibition about the school
- transition leaflets
- an open day for the community
- websites
- an exhibition for parents.

Peters (2010) asserts that, while there are many strategies to facilitate the transition, those involved in the process also have responsibilities. Some examples of the strategies and responsibilities identified in Peters' review of the literature are considered below, with suggestions adapted to the Gaeltacht context.

Visits: Visits by children and parents to the school before the children started in the new school. Visits to the school helped the children, and regular visits were better than one. It was necessary to plan the visits and to evaluate them afterwards. Parents thought that it was useful to see the classroom and their school for themselves and to get an idea of the timetable and of what the children would be doing.

DVD: Children in the senior classes made a DVD about the school, the building, rooms and facilities and about the staff of the school. It was necessary to update it subsequently when the staff changed.

Book of photographs about the new school: The teachers and children in the infants' class took photographs of the school and school staff and made a book out of them for the preschools and the parents. There were pictures in it of the classroom, yard, toilets, office, staff room and so on, and they put a few words under each picture with information that would be helpful to new children. The early years educators and parents thought that the book was very useful to get to know the school and as an encouragement for the children to talk about going to school.

Picture books about going to school: There were plenty of picture books available, but some of them were full of stereotypes and challenges of the adults. It was necessary to find suitable ones.

Exhibition about the new school, photographs of the relevant schools were put up in the preschool: The buildings, the school staff and the school uniform and a photograph was included of the children for the relevant school. This helped them to identify the teacher and which children would be in the class with them.

Transfer pamphlets: In one example cited, targeted information was provided to parents in two pamphlets - one relating to the end of preschool and registering in the school, and the other relating to the first days at school. Pamphlets were used rather than issuing separate pages.

Open day for the community: Parents were invited to visit the school and a basket of learning resources to help children as they start school was given to them: books, leaflets, scissors, crayons, glue, eraser, ruler, adhesives and paper.

7.5.2 Supporting schools to get to know the children and families

Portfolios/folders made by the children in the early learning and care setting: Peters (2010) highlighted that portfolios/folders helped pupils who did not speak the language of the school, or were shy, as they were able to present their work to the teacher and other pupils. This meant that the teacher was able to gain an understanding of the pupil's knowledge, skills and learning experience. *Síolta* (CECDE, 2006) and *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) contain references to the importance of portfolios (or work folders, as referred to in *Aistear*). In the

case of children in Gaeltacht settings, it would be very helpful to have a portfolio or work folder available on the children's different language skills.

Working in partnership with families: In Peters' review of the research, there was a strong emphasis on establishing a partnership between schools and parents. Parents sometimes feel, however, that the school does not welcome them. While teachers felt that parents understood that they would be welcome at any time, parents did not feel the same in some cases. It was suggested that there be an 'official' time and place in the school where parents could speak to the teacher. Reports from the school helped to provide information about how the pupil was settling into the school (Peters, 2010). In the case of Ireland, *Síolta* places a strong emphasis on partnership with parents (CECDE, 2006) and *Aistear* illustrates the many different ways in which parents and schools can work together for the benefit of pupils (NCCA, 2009).

Barriers may exist for parents when they do not speak the language of the school. This is a very sensitive issue for Gaeltacht schools when parents who speak English or other languages visit the school. Peters recommends that a Home/School Liaison Officer who speaks the language of the parents be used to share information.

Teacher qualities: Peters affirms the importance of the teacher's personal qualities in supporting children as they transition from the early learning and care setting to primary school. She recommends that teachers reflect on learning difficulties where issues exist and that they make use of other educational strategies. Parental involvement in school is often thought to be linked to teachers having a positive attitude towards such involvement (Peters, 2010). This is particularly true of families who have children with additional needs, with parents feeling that the teacher's attitude is closely linked to a satisfactory transition process for the child. In the case of Ireland, *Síolta* provides many opportunities for early years educators to reflect on their working practice in relation to parents and children (CECDE, 2006). In the case of *Aistear*, the situation is the same (NCCA, 2009).

7.5.3 How teachers can be supported to help pupils in transition

Peters found various ways in which infant teachers can be supported to help pupils.

Small class size: Small classes help pupils settle into school and begin learning when the teacher uses appropriate pedagogy and when the opportunity is taken to get to know the pupils personally.

Additional supports have been provided for schools participating in the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme – for example, additional support hours for Irish and language

assistants. This provides opportunities for schools to provide better personal care for pupils and provide them with more differentiated teaching.

Flexible curriculum: Where the teacher is aware of pupils' learning experiences from home and in the *naíonra*, he/she can make connections with them. The *Primary Language Curriculum* and *Aistear* both provide opportunities to build on pupils' learning.

Professional training and development: Training and continuing professional development for teachers is very important, as they play such a central role in the process (Ó Ceallaigh, Hourigan & Leavy, 2018). Of particular importance are the modules on immersion education in the Initial Teacher Training programmes and the new programme for student teachers (primary), the Bachelor of Education through the medium of Irish in Marino Institute of Education, and the Masters in Irish-medium and Gaeltacht Education for teachers and principals in Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, and other teacher education programmes with an immersion education focus.

Further training for teachers on working in partnership with parents and families would be helpful, particularly in relation to parents of children with additional educational needs and parents of highly gifted children. Such training would help support the enrichment of Irish as a first language and the development of Irish as a second language, as well as the transition process. As part of this professional development, information could be provided about early learning and care settings and about how *Aistear* can be implemented in *naíonraí* and in infant classes.

Recognition of the unique role of the infant teacher: The infant teacher has a key role when pupils are starting school. It helps when the teacher warmly welcomes pupils and parents in the morning and when she/he takes good care of the pupils at lunchtime and at play time in the yard.

While there are different practices in relation to playground play, some pupils find it difficult to cope with this less structured situation. Peters recommends that infant teachers be exempt from other school duties so that they are available to their own class at these times and are also available to talk to parents at home time (Peters, 2010). If the same face is visible, children and parents will have a sense of certainty and they will feel more at ease.

Resources for transition activities: Peters (2010) recommends that funding be available for the purchase of transition resources and for the planning and implementation of a transition programme. She recommends that the transition programme be run by a designated person, and that teachers have free time to carry out various activities: visiting early learning and care settings; organising school activities for children in early learning

settings; organising social evenings for new parents; making a video about the school; providing books and leaflets; and purchasing early learning resources for the classroom.

7.5.4 How can early learning and care settings and primary schools collaborate with each other?

While collaboration between early learning and care settings and primary schools is very important, Peters' (2010) research has shown that this was difficult to achieve. Collaboration worked best when both the early learning and care settings and schools were interested and had good intentions. Joint initiatives on topics of interest to all groups fostered a good relationship between the parties, with unsuccessful initiatives evaluated to discover why they did not succeed.

Peters (ibid) recognised that professional relationships and mutual respect existed in the joint initiatives between primary teachers and early years educators in early learning and care settings. They understood that this was ongoing work, that there was potential for misunderstandings between the parties, that someone needed to be willing to take the lead and that the various groups required opportunities to participate in the discussion, to make suggestions and to implement arrangements.

There was always a risk that the primary teachers would prevail over the early years educators in early learning and care settings and that the early learning community would not have the opportunity to raise their own questions and views (ibid). To support collaboration, all teachers needed to have a knowledge and understanding of the curriculum and pedagogy in both sectors.

Discussion of different practices and common issues would help to develop a mutual understanding. Visits to each other's sites would be helpful in observing the children's abilities during the sessions and lessons. However, differences in the expectations of the parties in the two sectors may persist where there are concerns about different issues.

Peters suggested that it is best to focus on continuity between learning in the early learning and care setting and in the primary school in order to give the appropriate recognition to each of the two sectors. It takes time and energy to build relationships and connections between groups, and people need to maintain the effort when staff members change. The efforts made would yield positive outcomes for the benefit of children, families, early years educators and teachers in both sectors.

In *Síolta*, the following question is asked as a signpost for reflection: 'How do you support the child's transition into/within/from your setting?' The responses include: 'Making connections with other settings/schools/organisations/individuals to promote smooth

transitions' and 'providing information and advice to other settings/schools/organisations/individuals when the child is transferring from your setting'. (CECDE, 2006: 93). This shows that the importance of communication between settings is recognised in *Síolta*.

Aistear could also be used to foster this continuity. *Aistear* highlights various cases in which this continuity is in progress (NCCA, 2009: 18, 26, 44-45). All cases illustrate the need for communication and engagement between the various settings.

7.5.5 Peters' Research: Summary and implications

Sally Peters' research provides an insight into a range of suggestions on how best to foster links between nurseries and primary schools and it would be useful to consider how to make the best use of the various activities. Her reference to the importance of a positive teacher's attitude to parental involvement and the type of support that would be useful to teachers to help students transitioning is noteworthy. These suggestions include the ratio of adults to pupils, a flexible curriculum, professional training and development in working with parents, recognition of the important role of the infant teacher, and the provision of resources to support transition.

Other aspects of Peters' research relate to the relationship between preschool staff and school staff. While accepting that this professional relationship may involve challenges, she recommends that the focus be on joint initiatives that benefit all and on fostering continuity between children's learning in the preschool and in school.

This research review indicates the emphasis that is placed on engagement and communication. In Ireland, *Síolta* and *Aistear* emphasise these two aspects between the different groups (children, parents, early years educators, teachers and therapists) and between the different settings (*naíonraí* and primary schools).

7.6 Gippsland Initiative: networks of schools and early learning and care settings

7.6.1 Description of the initiative

Arnup (2014) describes a network of stakeholders established in rural Gippsland, Victoria, Australia, to facilitate transition between different settings in a child's life. The initiative was funded by the Gippsland Department of Education and Early Childhood (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development), with a development officer appointed to run the initiative.

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The initiative involved early childhood and primary school communities and health services and related to the inclusion of children with additional needs. The participants hoped that the various groups could establish relationships with each other and share knowledge and information about existing services and jointly plan other developments. There were various types of networks, some to help with the transition to school, others focusing on a wider range of transitions.

The groups were led by the appropriate lead organisations and brought people together to develop an agreed vision, to provide better opportunities and outcomes for children, parents and professionals and to foster relationships and professional development (Arnup, 2014: 263). A working group came together to discuss ideas and they understood the need to discuss the meaning of different terms, discuss their priorities and identify barriers. Issues for discussion included the following:

- the need to differentiate between being introduced to the school and the process of transition to the school
- gaps in the knowledge and resources of parents, early years educators and primary teachers to support children with additional needs
- not utilising the expertise or involvement of therapists or health professionals often enough in transitions
- the need to find creative ways to engage with families not attending early childhood services, especially children with previously unidentified needs
- the lack of an agreed concept of school readiness between families and early years educators
- the limited knowledge of early years educators and primary teachers on each other's work and curriculum
- the lack of time that early years educators had to support transition.

According to Arnup (2014), the participants in the networks had successfully implemented many policies:

- **Forums:** successfully developing understandings of school readiness among parents, early years educators, primary teachers and other professionals and providing parents with information about transition to school, including parents of children with additional needs
- **Resources:** compiling leaflets for parents on transition to school, early literacy and numeracy, and organising information sessions for parents
- A **directory** for professionals about children's services, with contact details for the various services
- A **transition directory** for parents, with information about the early learning and care settings and schools in the area and information about enrolling in these centres, etc.

- **Community collaboration:** co-ordination between stakeholders on transition to school, particularly for children with additional needs; a transition template for early learning and care settings and primary schools in which parents were also involved
- **Professional development opportunities:** agreed understandings of oral language development and early literacy; early identification of children with language difficulties; the existence of agreed understandings of early years and primary school curricula among those working with children from birth to eight years of age.

It was very helpful to have a formal structure with the networks and to have someone in charge of the work, including organizing meetings.

According to Arnup (2014: 266-7), it was helpful that resources were available to get things implemented. Participants were willing to collaborate with each other, everyone respected each other's work; they had agreed aims and an agreed work plan; leadership and administrative support was available; personal contact was also made with people through emails and letters; notes from the meetings were provided; meetings were held outside contact time with the children; tea and coffee were provided during meetings; and a special group was set up to support children with additional needs.

7.6.2 Summary and implications

The Australian Department of Education and Early Childhood set up networks of pre-schools, primary schools and therapy staff in a rural area in Victoria, Australia to facilitate transition between different settings in a child's life. They focused on catering to children with additional educational needs as well as other children. They identified the key issues to be addressed in the various networks and devised a range of initiatives to fill the gaps.

These initiatives involved organising various meetings for parents (information on transition) and staff in primary schools and early learning and care settings (information on each other's curriculum and practices) and the work of therapists. They compiled a directory for parents, designed transition templates in partnership with parents and organised training sessions on language development and speech difficulties and other issues related to these areas.

It was very helpful to have a formal structure with the networks and to have someone in charge of the work and of organising meetings. Leadership and administrative support was available and tea and coffee were provided during the meetings, which made the work a social event. Funding was available to get things done and, through collaboration and liaison, professional respect grew between the participants.

Arnup (2014: 275) identified a number of recommendations in her research. Based on those recommendations, and given the context of Irish-medium education, it might be useful to

establish networks between primary teachers, early years educators in *naíonraí* and parents with a view to arriving at a mutual understanding of each other's point of view and to provide opportunities to co-ordinate planning and the implementation of policies. The recommendation that one person be appointed to lead the initiative for a reasonable period of time might be considered, as such an approach would take some time to develop. To be successful, it would be necessary for the various agencies, COGG, CNNG, TnG and Government Departments to be fully committed to supporting the development of these networks, and to have the support of all participants.

7.7 The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Report on transitions from Early Childhood Education and Care to Primary Education

7.7.1 Description of the report

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) published the report *Starting Strong V* on transitions from early childhood education and care to primary education in 2017. A questionnaire was sent to 30 different countries, including Ireland, and international research was also reviewed.

The topics discussed in the report included professional and pedagogical continuity in the transition between the two sectors. It is recommended that early years educators and primary teachers receive specific training in the transition process during their basic training or as part of continuing professional development. A wider range of skills would be developed in early years to prepare children for transition and teachers would have more developed skills in helping children settle into primary school (OECD, 2017: 91).

Such training is deemed to be most effective when joint training for both sets of staff takes place together (OECD, 2017: 86). Through joint training, everyone gains a better understanding of best transition practice and a deeper knowledge of the practice and views of both early learning and care and primary school staff. Such programmes have already had good outcomes in the United States and Australia (OECD, 2017: 93).

The report recognises the challenges relating to professional continuity - differences in the status and attitudes of early years educators and primary teachers, shortcomings in basic transition training and opportunities to spend time collaborating with each other. Practical support, school and preschool leadership and joint training between the two sectors would help to provide a more satisfying transition for children.

Another challenge relates to staff changes, with professional continuity said to better succeed when there are permanent staff in both areas (OECD, 2017: 93). This, of course,

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applies to employment conditions in the early learning and care sector, and to language assistants in particular, as noted by the Joint Oireachtas Committee (Joint Committee on the Irish Language, the Gaeltacht and the Islands, 2019).

Other practical guidelines and supports help to alleviate challenges (OECD, 2017: 94), especially when the guidelines are compiled in partnership with early years educators and teachers, parents and the local education system. While a range of transition forms and schemes are currently available in Ireland, they need to be adapted to the Gaeltacht context.

Another strategy that the report says has been very helpful is the employment of teaching assistants to help with reading and to support children's wellbeing (OECD, 2017: 94). In the case of the Gaeltacht, every primary school operating the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme has a support teacher for Irish, a language assistant and an infant class teacher, each having a key role in transition and in the promotion of Irish. Special needs assistants are there to help pupils with additional educational needs and play an important role in facilitating transition for such pupils (OECD, 2017: 106). In Finland, assistants help pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The OECD report research (2017: 95, 110) shows that there is a need for leadership and support from primary principals and managers in early learning and care settings in relation to the provision of advice and training. These are the people who usually establish collaborative links with schools/nurseries and parents.

As in other countries, there are significant differences in pedagogy and curriculum between early learning and care settings and primary schools in Ireland (OECD, 2017: 148).

However, *Aistear*, the early childhood curriculum framework, applies to all settings where children aged from birth to six years old are present and that includes *naíonraí* and junior classes in primary school.

While limited systematic training has been provided on *Aistear* for primary teachers and through the National *Síolta Aistear* Initiative in the early learning and care sector, it would be beneficial to expand such training on *Aistear* for both sectors. Efforts to increase the availability of materials and resources to support the implementation of *Aistear* through the National [Síolta Aistear Initiative](#) are very welcome. It is hoped that these supports will continue to grow in reach and capacity to engage all early years educators of children in this age range. Mutual understanding would help everyone to understand each other's work and provide continuity of experience to the children. This would mean that both sets of staff understand the structure of the day, the layout of the room and the learning activities that children undertake when in the *naíonra* and what changes they face in school.

Another challenge is how to take the children's voice into account when transitioning. Attention is now being paid to the rights of children to have a voice in areas concerning them. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1992) requires that the views of the child be considered and taken into account in all matters concerning him or her. It is clear from the account of children's views in the NCCA's Report (2018) and in other research that children felt that a new experience was in store for them, that they thought the school setting to be very large in comparison to the early learning and care setting and that they needed their friends to sit next to them in primary school. The children's visit to the school to meet the teacher helped children understand that they would be learning new things like reading and writing.

In some cases, parents do not understand the importance of transitions for their children and the role that they themselves play during the process (OECD, 2017). This applies, in particular, to parents from disadvantaged backgrounds or those who are immigrants. It is recommended that they be provided with support material such as leaflets in their own language containing suggestions for activities at home, and that they be invited to participate in activities with their children.

The important role parents play as partners with early years educators and primary teachers is reaffirmed (OECD, 2017: 210). If a positive relationship is established during transition, there is a greater chance that the child will have a successful transition. A positive professional relationship between the early learning and care setting and the school will also help to ensure a joint understanding between the two sets of staff of each other's aims, roles and specialist skills.

Professional communication and information exchange between both of these sectors and other professionals in the community are important. These include psychologists, speech therapists, occupational therapists and others who support children with special educational needs.

In summary, the OECD report states that collaboration between primary schools and early learning and care settings contributes significantly to fostering a satisfactory transition for children (OECD, 2017: 241). It is widely felt that there should be even greater collaboration and that the differences between the two sectors need to be recognised and their respective strengths built upon.

Collaboration, in relation to curriculum development and the sharing of information on the children, has helped facilitate learning progression in transitions in Finland. Transition-based

staff networks has also helped the preschool and primary school community to understand each other's area and to work together in accordance with their strengths (OECD, 2017).

7.7.2 Summary and implications

This report highlights the importance of forging positive professional relationships across staff in *naíonraí* and primary schools. It is recommended that there be joint training between *naíonra* early years educators and primary teachers in relation to transitions and other links between primary schools and *naíonraí*.

All staff in the *naíonra* have a key role to play in preparing children for transition and all school staff - principal, infant teacher, language support teacher for Irish, language assistant - play a role in facilitating transition in the school.

Primary principals and *naíonra* managers have a leadership role to play in establishing links.

At a basic level, early years educators, teachers, parents, children and other experts should meet, talk and listen to each other.

7.8 Additional sources on links between primary schools and naíonraí

[Gaeloideachas](#) has published marketing material on immersion education, which explains the immersion system to parents and provides information on various [grants](#) available to support communication and cooperation between groups involved in Irish-medium education. Similar schemes would be helpful in Gaeltacht communities to help set up linkages between primary schools and *naíonraí*. Early Childhood Ireland translated a booklet [Aq Tosú sa Scoil Mhór](#) (*Starting in Big School*) in cooperation with Gaelscoileanna and the National Parents Council.

8. Conclusions and Recommendations⁶

In this concluding section of the report, the implications of the findings of the various elements of the research are incorporated into a discussion of the recommended actions that need to be undertaken to strengthen links between *naíonraí* and primary schools in the Gaeltacht. The services of a range of organisations are identified as being important to support the realisation of these ambitions. Where possible, web links to these organisations and their resources are provided.

8.1 Introduction

The *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022* recognises ‘the role that schools and early learning and care settings (*naíonraí*) play in providing high-quality Irish-medium education and in fostering language proficiency and use of Irish in the wider Gaeltacht community’ (pg. 7). In the case of early learning and care settings in the Gaeltacht, the development of fundamental language, literacy and numeracy skills is of particular importance when children are being socialised in the Irish language.

One of the aims of the Policy is to develop a guide that will help early learning and care settings and primary schools create collaborative links that support the promotion of Irish. The [Guide for Gaeltacht Primary School: Strengthening Links between Primary Schools and Early Learning and Care Settings](#) (2021) is informed by the research findings in this report, which was commissioned by An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta on behalf of the Department of Education⁷. This guide contains the perspectives of principals, teachers, early years educators, parents/guardians and other Gaeltacht support services. The Guide is also underpinned by the findings of the literature review of relevant national and international literature. This research and literature review shows that an integrated approach is required in order to support the speaking, enrichment and acquisition of Irish at home, in the *naíonra*, at school, and in the community.

There is an understanding of the need to develop the Irish language from early learning and care settings to primary schools and on to post-primary school. The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme offers children two full years of preschool education. Children aged from two years and eight months can be enrolled at the beginning of the Programme year.

⁶ This chapter provides an insight into the research findings, which informed the *Guide for Gaeltacht Primary Schools: Strengthening links between Primary Schools and Early Learning and Care settings*, published by the Department of Education in June 2021.

⁷ An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta, Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta and Tuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta.

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It is vitally important to cultivate links between *naíonraí* and primary schools in order to facilitate the children's continuity of learning and assist in the transition between the *naíonra* and the primary school for children and parents. Continuity in the development of the child's Irish-language skills is of particular importance in this transition.

The Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme, an integral part of the Policy on Gaeltacht Education, was introduced in order to support schools in achieving language-based criteria for immersion education. One of these criteria is to:

- Establish useful and mutually beneficial language and cultural links with local Irish-medium early learning and care settings (*naíonraí*)

The success of these links depends on maintaining ongoing collaboration and a positive relationship between Gaeltacht *naíonraí* and Gaeltacht primary schools. The main aim of the link is to facilitate the positive transition of children from *naíonra* to primary school.

[First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028](#), published in 2018, reinforces the importance of fostering links between *naíonraí* (early learning and care settings) and primary schools. The main purpose of *First 5* is 'to support children as they transition to and through early learning and care settings and onto primary school'. To this end, a new model of transition supports will be developed.

8.2 Creating links between Gaeltacht primary schools and *naíonraí*

A broader model of transition supports will be developed under *First 5*. The guidance based on this report will be kept under review and will be updated as soon as the broader model of transition supports is in place under *First 5*.

Primary schools and *naíonraí* should follow the steps below in order to establish links between themselves and initiate professional conversations between teachers and early years educators:

- Identify a person in the primary school to initiate the process and liaise with the relevant *naíonraí*
- Build on the links already in place, such as those provided through the *Aistear* framework, in order to establish collaboration on a sustainable basis
- Outline a plan for building upon these links on a phased basis, and subsequently, share the plan with the school and *naíonra* communities
- Create a partnership between the staff of the primary school and the *naíonra* in order to implement the plan effectively
- Monitor the operation of the plan, evaluate the effectiveness of its implementation, and make amendments, if necessary

Primary schools and *naíonraí* should then be able to move forward, plan for the following year and build on the work already achieved.

Professional conversations and discussions between the school and the *naíonra* will support the positive transition of children from the early learning and care setting to the primary school. It is necessary also to ensure that the following aspects are addressed as part of the process:

- Select and amend, as appropriate to the setting's context, a suitable template or devise an alternative information-sharing system to support the positive transition of the child from the *naíonra* to the primary school. Schools are encouraged to use the national *Mo Scéal* template, developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2018) (see Section 4 of this chapter).
- Organise activities that will support children's transition from the *naíonra* to the primary school (Appendix 3).
- Collaborate with parents/guardians in order to support continuity of learning for their children and to inform them about the transition process (Appendix 4).
- Establish partnerships with other groups, for example the language-planning committee and the manager in the *naíonra*.
- The school and the early learning and care setting will also need to identify their particular continuing professional development needs and liaise with the relevant agencies, as appropriate (see Section 6 of this chapter).

8.3 Supporting the transition from the *naíonra* to the primary school

To support progression in learning and development and to ensure that the transition from the *naíonra* to the primary school is a positive experience for the child, there is a need for schools and early learning and care settings to work together, to establish a clear understanding of one another's aims, purpose and philosophy and to facilitate the sharing of relevant information, routines and processes. In the case of a child with additional learning needs, extra visits to his/her new school, involving the support of other professionals, may be required to ensure a smooth transition.

8.3.1 Transition forms

Various transition forms are available to ensure that the needs of individual children and their families are met. Schools and *naíonraí* will have the option to choose whichever transition form is most suitable for them and to amend the form in order to cater for their own specific contexts, the learning from home, and the child's language, culture and learning needs. Schools are encouraged to use the national *Mo Scéal* template, developed by the NCCA, to support a consistency of approach.

To ensure that a smooth transition is achieved, the following information should be included on the transition form, as appropriate, for each child:

- relevant information regarding the child's development including their social, emotional, cognitive and affective skills

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- information on the child's communication skills and on their attainment in Irish, English, in any other home language, and in other areas of learning
- information on the child's specific language needs and on their possible implications for the child's ability to communicate
- additional relevant information on the child that would help teachers build on the child's own personal context when starting school. This would include the child's strengths, likes and dislikes, and the child's interests and pastimes that are a central part of his/her life.

The information collected on the transition form will support appropriate planning in relation to the best approach to be adopted to ensure that the child derives the best possible benefit from the transition.

8.3.2 *Mo Scéal*

The transition template *Mo Scéal*, developed by the NCCA, facilitates the sharing of information about a child's strengths, interests and challenges as he/she makes the transition from the early learning and care setting to the primary school. The early years educator, parent/guardian and individual child are all involved in the process. Subject to the receipt of parental permission, the early learning and care setting can choose how to share information about a child's learning and development. The *Mo Scéal* reporting template and support materials are available on the [NCCA](#) website.

As children make the move to school for the first time, there are a number of actions parents may take at home, to support this important transition, as outlined in the resource *Let's Get Ready*. The new resources, developed as part of the NCCA's *Let's Get Ready 2021* Campaign, are available on the [gov.ie](#) website. These resources provide helpful ideas and play-based activities to support children.

Appendix 4 of the NCCA report on the [Preschool to Primary School Transition Initiative](#) (2018) provides teachers with views on how to use the information contained in transition reports. Appendix 5 provides examples of approved forms.

Compliance with the appropriate data protection guidelines is necessary in order to manage and share information appropriately, especially in relation to personal data. Further information is available from the [Data Protection Commission](#).

8.3.3 Transition programme

Depending on their own specific contexts and arising from the professional conversations and the information collected on the transition forms, *naíonraí* and primary schools in the Gaeltacht can plan and develop their own transition programmes. Existing best practice should be identified and built upon, a transition form selected, and transition activities planned. Examples of [transition activities](#) are available on the NCCA website.

8.3.4 Guidance to Support the Effective Management of Transitions from Early Learning and Care Settings to Primary Schools

One of the aims of the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022* is to support the development of positive links between *naíonraí* and primary schools. This aim has already been met through the development of a [Guide for Gaeltacht Primary School: Strengthening Links between Primary Schools and Early Learning and Care Settings](#) (DE, 2021), which was informed by the content of this research report. It is built upon the perspectives of principals, teachers, early years educators, parents/guardians and other Gaeltacht support services. It is also underpinned by the findings of the review carried out on relevant national and international literature. This research and literature review shows that an integrated approach is required to support the speaking, enrichment and acquisition of Irish at home, in the *naíonra*, at school, and in the community.

The [Guidance to Support the Effective Management of Transitions from Early Learning and Care Settings to Primary Education](#) (DE, 2021) provides practical advice for primary teachers to promote continuity in children's learning and to ensure coherence and consistency between each learning environment across the educational continuum.

8.3.5 Other sources of information to support transitions

Another helpful source of relevant information for schools is the inspection reports on the quality of educational provision in early learning and care settings that are registered with the Child and Family Agency, Tusla. These settings are funded to deliver a free two-year early learning and care service. The [Department of Education inspection reports](#) are available on gov.ie. The [Tusla](#) Early Years Inspectorate is the regulatory authority for all early learning and care services and for the statutory registration of services. The Tusla inspection reports can be accessed through the Tusla website.

The DE Inspectorate has created a series of webinars [Insights: Quality in Early Years Education](#) to share the findings from the programme of education inspections in ELC settings and schools on a variety of topics including transitions. The webinar series also shares research findings, ideas and examples of effective practice in diverse early learning and care settings and is also a rich source of information.

8.4 Collaboration with parents/guardians

The Irish Constitution states that parents have primary responsibility for educating their children. It guarantees the parents' right and duty to provide for their children's education.

The role of parents as primary educators is paramount in promoting the wellbeing, learning and holistic development of the child. The positive attitudes of parents greatly influence their

children's dispositions and use of language. The *Aistear* and *Síolta* Frameworks acknowledge the importance of this role and the value of involving parents in their children's learning through the cultivation of meaningful partnerships. Relevant information regarding partnerships with parents is available in *Aistear* on the [Aistear/Síolta](#) website. Chapter 3 in [Síolta](#) also provides an insight into how to strengthen collaboration with parents/guardians.

8.5 Leadership, administration and supports

8.5.1 Children with additional educational needs

Better Start provides a range of national state-funded supports to support children with disabilities, as part of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM). These include the Access and Inclusion Plan, which includes a transition section. Further information on [Better Start](#) is available on their website, and further information on AIM is available at aim.gov.ie.

Support for schools and parents is available from the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). One aspect of the support provided by these services is the sharing of expertise, online resources and videos on best practice in relation to catering for the additional educational needs of pupils, which are relevant to the Gaeltacht school context.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has published transitional guidelines for parents of children with special educational needs to assist parents to support their children in making successful transitions, including the significant milestone of starting school. The NCSE has also published [guidance](#) for schools on supporting children with special educational needs to make successful transitions.

NEPS has produced helpful [guidelines and tips](#) for parents of children transitioning during the COVID-19 pandemic from early learning and care settings to primary school.

Schools may consult with [Gaeleideachas](#) also in order to draw on relevant supports provided by the organisation.

8.5.2 Children at risk of educational disadvantage

Supporting effective transitions from early learning and care settings to the *naíonra* is of particular importance for parents and their children where there are risks involved in school attendance and in the educational experience of pupils from socially disadvantaged areas participating in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) School Support Programme (SSP). [The Home School Community Liaison](#) (HSCL) Scheme supports families as their children transition from early learning and care settings to primary school.

8.5.3 Continuing professional development

The Better Start Quality Development Service provides a range of national state-funded supports to develop quality in Early Learning and Care (ELC) settings for children from birth to six years. Further information may be accessed through the Better Start website.

Information on the [First 5](#) continuing professional development (CPD) supports is available on the website.

The Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) provides continuing professional development support for schools. The PDST provides professional development support on the *Primary Language Curriculum* and on early-years learning for infant classes with a particular focus on play-based and differentiated pedagogy. As resources permit, and with the approval of the board of management of the school, schools may access relevant courses provided by the Professional Development Service for Teachers, An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG) and other relevant agencies.

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth supports the provision of a range of continuing professional development support services for early learning and care staff. Early learning and care settings may also access professional development support through the [Access and Inclusion Model](#) (AIM), which supports children with disabilities to access and meaningfully participate in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme.

8.5.4 Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta (CNNG)

Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta is the nationally recognised service that provides early learning and care services throughout the Gaeltacht. The organisation employs almost 200 early years educators to serve up to 2,000 children in the Gaeltacht. CNNG is funded by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (RTCEGSM) and Údarás na Gaeltachta.

Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta has the infrastructure in place to provide early learning and care services in Irish in the Gaeltacht, and provides administrative support and training for those services.

The “Borradh” language-planning scheme, developed by CNNG, is used to ensure the full development of the Irish language of children who are attending CNNG early learning and care services in the Gaeltacht.

8.6 Supporting the acquisition, use and enrichment of Irish

8.6.1 Promoting the use of Irish in the local community

The school's participation in the language-planning process is particularly important to promote the increased use of the Irish language in the local community, as set out in the Gaeltacht Act, 2012. The Gaeltacht school and *naíonra*, therefore, have a key role in fostering links with the language-planning officer who is employed to support the implementation of the language plan in the local Gaeltacht area.

This means that both the *naíonra* and school play a central role in promoting and fostering the use of Irish in the local Gaeltacht community. The [Guide for Gaeltacht Primary Schools: Partnership with the Community in Promoting the Use of Irish](#) (2021) provides practical advice for school leaders⁸ in Gaeltacht schools as they devise plans to strengthen the partnership between the school and its community in order to promote the use of Irish.

Upon starting primary school, it may be very useful to consider the child's strengths and any aspects of learning, where the child might need some additional support, from the perspective of the parents/guardians and the child himself/herself. This can be facilitated by organising face-to-face or online discussions between the infant class teacher and the relevant early years educator in the *naíonra*.

This would complement the information that has already been collected from the early years educators and the transition forms and would help to foster a positive relationship between the teacher and the child and his/her family. As well as those outlined below, suggestions from the [NCCA](#) tip sheet on settling into school may also be selected.

8.6.2 Supporting the use of the Irish language among families

TnaG and the [Tús Maith](#)⁹ scheme, funded by DTCAGSM, have a particular role to play in supporting families who are raising their children with Irish in the Gaeltacht or who wish to do so. A range of supports for schools is available from [Tuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta](#) in order to strengthen and enrich Irish as a language of communication.

⁸ The term 'school leaders' typically refers to those who have formal school leadership roles (board of management, principal, etc.) and also to those teachers who have undertaken specific leadership roles in the implementation of the whole-school action plan.

8.7 Strengthening links between the primary school and the *naíonra*

It is the responsibility of teachers and early years educators to identify and agree on actions to facilitate the smooth transition of children from the early learning and care setting to the primary school. These actions should take into consideration the individual contexts of the setting and the school and be implemented in accordance with best practice.

In Appendix 3 of this report, sample activities and approaches are provided that may be useful to the school and to the *naíonra* in supporting children during the transition from the early learning and care setting to the primary school. Appendix 4 provides examples as to how parents/guardians could be supported during this transition. Schools may amend, adapt or develop their own checklists to support the effective transition process.

When using the tables outlined in Appendix 3 and Appendix 4, teachers and early years educators could draw on the following scale to assess progress and the extent of implementation:

Improvement continuum			
1	2	3	4
No progress	Partial progress	Good progress	Very good progress

This continuum of improvement can be used to support the school in reviewing the success of its improvement plan and in monitoring, on an ongoing basis, the implementation of the particular language-based criteria under review.

8.8 Concluding statements

This report provides ideas and practical suggestions for schools and early learning and care settings (*naíonraí*) to strengthen the links between the setting and the school. The suggestions provided are based on national and international literature and the current best practice in Gaeltacht *naíonraí* and primary schools. This interdependence will ensure that *naíonraí* and primary schools share the same objective that the child and his/her parents/guardians enjoy a positive and successful transition experience.

The research which underpins this report highlights the need for such an integrated and collaborative approach. Professional collaboration and dialogue are central to the success of these joint endeavours. The availability of relevant professional development in each sector or joint training, where this is possible, would greatly help in achieving the optimum outcome.

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Appendix 1: Samples of potential transition programme events gathered from national and international research

Sample events for a transition programme

- **Informing the family:** There are many ways to inform parents/guardians about the school, for example:
 - ✓ Organise a meeting at the school with parents/guardians before the start of the school year
 - ✓ The school sends a booklet and letters to the family. A decision has to be made regarding the language of communication, Irish/English or any other language spoken by families of different nationalities.
 - ✓ The school sends a booklet and letters to the child.
 - ✓ Set up a website or homepage to inform parents and children about the school. This can be provided in Irish and English.
- **Leaflet for parents:** The *naíonra* could prepare a leaflet for parents, encouraging them to speak some Irish to the children during the summer and to recite rhymes and sing songs in Irish from time to time. Sample phrases and rhymes from the *naíonra* could be included on the leaflet.
- **Experience of the school:** Some schools run events that give children a taste of school life:
 - ✓ The school invites the child and family to visit the school before the start of the school year. Fabian (2002: 63) suggests there should be more than one visit before the start of the school year and that a school event should take place during the visit, for example, a lesson, lunchtime, stories, songs, as well as free play.
 - ✓ The school invites the *naíonra* director and children to visit the school before the beginning of the school year.
 - ✓ A primary lesson or custom, such as a story, or lunch time taking place during the visit.
 - ✓ The *naíonra* invites some children and their parents/guardians to visit the *naíonra* to talk about the school.
 - ✓ Fabian and Dunlop (2006) recommend that nursery children have “friends” in the school who will look after them when starting school. These would be children from senior classes, and may include children who attended the *naíonra* when they were young.
- **Links between the *naíonra* and the school:** There are many ways to promote links between the *naíonra* and the school:
 - ✓ The *naíonra* and the school design an agreed transition policy and programme

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- ✓ A meeting between early years educators and teachers is arranged to discuss the children's interests and abilities, with the consent of parents/guardians.
- ✓ The *naíonra* invites the teacher to visit the setting during a session and the school invites the early years educator to visit the infant class during a lesson.
- ✓ The *naíonra* and the school inform each other about their aims, curriculum and working methods and the approach taken to promote the use of Irish.
- ✓ The *naíonra* provides the school with a sheet containing the words, phrases, rhymes and songs used in the *naíonra*.
- ✓ The early years educator discusses issues about going to school with the children in the *naíonra*.
- ✓ School uniforms are provided for dressing up in the *naíonra*.
- ✓ Children in the school make a booklet about the infant class for the children in the *naíonra*.
- ✓ The director of the *naíonra* read books about the school to the children.
(See Appendix 3)
- ✓ The *naíonra* and school have a photo wall containing photos related to the following themes - my home, myself and my family, my friends, at play, the *naíonra* and school, the early years educator and the teacher.
- ✓ The school and the *naíonra* invite the children to each other's plays and events, Seachtain na Gaeilge events, Christmas events, for example. Some assistance is available from Gaelscoileanna to cover the costs of such a visit.
- ✓ The school makes a video of school activities (lessons, hanging coats, the school environment, pupils' advice for new children, for example), to inform the children from the *naíonra* about these areas.
- ✓ Organise social events for *naíonra* and school staff, such as Christmas Dinner.
- ✓ Hold a Welcome Ceremony in the school in the first term, inviting parents and directors.
- ✓ The early years educators and teachers compile a transition form or transition profile
- ✓ A "Child's Booklet" may be created.

Appendix 2: Child Protection Procedures for Schools (Department of Education)

Reminder for principals and school management authorities

The *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* (2017) require a board of management to prepare a Child Safeguarding Statement based on a risk assessment.

The board of management must make a copy of the statement available to all school personnel, the patron and the Parents' Association and also publish the statement on the school website. Parents must be provided with a copy of the statement if they requested.

In Section 8.9 of the *Child Protection Procedures*, further information is provided on the requirements regarding the preparation and content of the Child Safeguarding Statement.

The [Irish-language](#) and [English-language](#) versions of the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* (2017) and related documents are available on the gov.ie website.

Appendix 3: Activities to support the transition of children from the *naíonra* to the primary school

(This template may be adapted to take account of the school and/or setting context or an alternative checklist may be developed.)

Criterion:	Activities to strengthen the linguistic and cultural links between the primary school and the early learning and care settings (<i>naíonraí</i>)				
Dimension:	Teaching and learning				
Domain:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learner experiences Teacher individual practice 	1	2	3	4
Examples:	Gather contact details of the local <i>naíonraí</i>				
	Organise visits between the primary school and the local <i>naíonraí</i>				
	Organise an opportunity for the infant class teacher or the principal to attend the <i>naíonra</i> during playtime, to read an Irish story, for example				
	Issue an official invitation to the <i>naíonra</i> to attend the Christmas Play, Sports Day, concert or other celebratory event				
	Issue an invitation to the infant teacher, the special needs teacher and to the principal to meet with the manager in the early learning and care setting, if provided in the <i>naíonra</i> , to discuss the specific language needs of the child				
	Organise joint information and professional dialogue sessions for teachers and directors of <i>naíonraí</i> to foster collaboration and strengthen links				
	Facilitate professional conversations between the teachers and early years educators regarding the learning needs of children. This might include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discussion of children's contexts to build upon their specific interests, strengths and experiences to progress their learning journey and communication skills in Irish Informing the school of cases in which the child has complex additional needs and in which further targeted supports are required Sharing of information with the school regarding transition supports provided through AIM (Access and Inclusion Model) and Better Start, for example, the Access and Inclusion Plan template, which includes guidance and relevant information on transitions. 				
	Invite the early years educator in the <i>naíonra</i> to visit the pupils in infant class and speak to the teacher about the information to be collected on the transition form				
	Organise visits to the <i>naíonra</i> , where suitable and appropriate, from primary school pupils to read an Irish story, play music, perform a dance or sing Irish songs for the children				

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Inform the pupils of other school activities that are inclusive, for example, a football/hurling/basketball team that caters for both boys and girls or paired reading initiatives or co-operative project work with pupils from other classes				
Help the pupils become accustomed to the school environment				
Display photographs in places easily visible in the school of the <i>naíonraí</i> attended by pupils				
Have photographs of the families on display, if appropriate				
Display a photograph of the teacher, clearly labelled in Irish, on the classroom door				
Use pictures and photographs in order to illustrate the timetable				
Read and discuss stories about going to school				
Have pupils from the same <i>naíonra</i> , or who are acquainted with each other, sit together				
Group pupils with high proficiency in Irish together from time to time				
Revisit the Irish-language rhymes, songs and books that the pupils were familiar with in the <i>naíonra</i> and introduce the pupils to a new repertoire				
Undertake a wide range of Irish-language activities in pairs so that the pupils can help each other and learn from one another				
Promote the use of Irish during playtime in the classroom/ <i>naíonra</i> and in the playground in order to develop pupils' social and communication skills and their competency in Irish.				

Appendix 4: Collaboration with parents/guardians to support them in the transition: checklist for primary schools

(This template may be adapted to take account of the school and/or setting context or an alternative checklist may be developed.)

Criterion:	Activities in conjunction with parents/guardians in the <i>naíonra</i> and the school				
Dimension:	Leadership and management; Teaching and learning				
Domain:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership of school development • Teacher individual practice • Learner experiences 	1	2	3	4
Examples:	Arrange a meeting with parents/guardians in conjunction with the <i>naíonra</i> in order to discuss the transition form				
	Organise a meeting for new parents/guardians before the summer holidays in order to discuss their children's first steps in the Gaeltacht primary school				
	Organise a meeting for parents/guardians in early Autumn in order to outline the school's procedures, to explain the curriculum, the timetable and the approach to communication, and discuss the proposed type of participation expected by the school				
	Communicate with parents/guardians via text messages, emails, phone calls or newsletters through the medium of Irish as frequently as possible				
	Organise short Irish-language courses for <i>naíonra</i> and primary school parents/guardians				
	Prepare bilingual leaflets for parents/guardians, some in conjunction with the <i>naíonra</i> , for example, on starting school, immersion education and bilingualism for Gaeltacht children, or other topics suggested by parents/guardians				
	Organise a pupil visit to facilities in the community, for example, a fire station, a senior citizens' home, a historic site in the area, and promote the use of Irish during the visit				
	Organise an Irish-language course focusing on the language register of the home and of the school in order to help the pupils become accustomed to the Irish spoken in the school and the specific terminology of the curriculum				
	Host a session on the importance of the Irish language for the pupils, the advantages of immersion education and on the benefits that can be derived from the language culture and heritage, for example, <i>sean-nós</i> singing, traditional music, wildlife in the area and local storytelling				

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	Organise a session on how to select and read Irish-language books when introducing reading to pupils with different language abilities				
	Invite various members of the public with particular skills, including competency in Irish, to visit the school, for example, storytellers, singers, actors and craftspeople. The appropriate child protection regulations must be complied with in these cases (Appendix 1).				