

RESEARCH ON THE OUTCOMES OF PRE-SCHOOL IRISH MEDIUM EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION RESPONSE

1. The Department's 'Learning to Learn – A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning' was published In October 2013. The Framework included an action (1.2(c)) for the Department to commission research on the educational outcomes of pre-school Irish-medium Education as recommended in the DE Review of Irish-medium Education (2008).
2. The aim of the Research was to identify which core components in Irish-medium pre-schools lead to optimum readiness for transition to Foundation Stage in Irish-medium primary schools and the extent to which these components are present in Irish-medium pre-schools in the statutory and voluntary sector here.
3. Following a competitive tendering exercise, RSM McClure Watters (Consulting) were appointed in March 2015 to conduct Research on the Educational Outcomes of Pre-School Irish Medium Education. The Department received the final report in March 2016.
4. For a number of reasons, principally the suspension of the Assembly for 3 years during the intervening period, there has been no policy response to the report up to this point.
5. In accordance with the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018 (section 3), the Department decided that it was in the public interest to publish the research report and not delay its publication in anticipation of an incoming Minister, and the report was published on the Department's website in January 2019.
6. Given the research report was completed more than four years ago, updated context and statistical information for the Irish-medium (IM) pre-school education is set out below. Due to development in the pre-school sector generally, many of the recommendations have progressed. Through the support provided via the IM pre-school support service, the quality of provision has improved; bespoke IM curricular guidance to complement the curricular guidance for pre-school education was produced by Altram in 2018; a transitions form to include Irish language competence has been developed; an early years education cluster has been established specifically for IM pre-school settings to provide opportunities for sharing good practice; an IM Education specialist (ETI or AA), with a high level of proficiency in Irish continues to be deployed on all IM pre-school inspections.

Updated Context 2020

Pre-school education

7. In 2019/20 there were 766 DE funded pre-school education settings and 23,759 funded places, broken down as follows:

TABLE 1: PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION PROVISION 2019/20							
Voluntary / Private		Statutory nursery schools and units		Reception Classes		Total	
Settings	Funded Places	Settings	Funded Places	Settings	Funded Places	Settings	Funded Places
380	8,080	341	15,495	45	184	766	23,759
49.6%	34%	44.5%	65.2%	5.9%	0.8%	100%	100%

8. The five Pre-school Education Advisory Groups (PEAG) in the Education Authority (EA), have been replaced with the establishment of a single Regional Pre-school Education Group in 2017, who has responsibility for ensuring that there is adequate pre-school provision in all areas.
9. The Pre-School Education Programme is delivered in partnership between statutory nursery schools or units, and the non-statutory sector. As a result of the Review of Irish Medium Education, published in 2008, Irish-medium pre-school providers with sufficient children can enter the Pre-School Education Programme even where unfilled English-medium provision is available in the area.

Development of the Irish-medium Pre-School Sector

10. The table below indicates the growth of the Irish-medium pre-school sector since 1999/2000.

TABLE 2: GROWTH OF THE IM PRE-SCHOOL SECTOR 1999 to 2019						
	Voluntary		Statutory		TOTAL	
	Settings	Funded Places	Settings	Funded Places	Settings	Funded Places
1999/2000	17	291	-	-	17	291
2008/09	30	436	4	122	34	558
2014/15*	29	488	14	397	43	885
2019/20	29 (61.7%)	480 (48.8%)	18 (38.3%)	503 (51.2%)	47	983

*as referenced in research report March 2016

11. In 2019/20, 4.14% of DE funded pre-school places were in Irish-medium pre-school settings. There has been a significant increase in statutory Irish-medium pre-school provision, with the percentage of pupils attending statutory settings rising from 22% in 2008/09 to 51% in 2019/20.

Support Services for Irish-medium Pre-School Education

12. DE through CnaG has invested in a range of support services to the Irish-medium pre-school sector, which are currently provided by Altram. These support services to IM pre-school settings include:
 - Direct Support services, including the provision of Early Years Specialist support to the staff and management committees of IM pre-school settings in the Pre-school Education Programme (PSEP), which includes additional support provided to settings in receipt of an OEC 4 inspection outcome from ETI;
 - Training and support to early years staff and management committees to develop, share and deliver high quality IM preschool education, and enhance good practice in addressing the pedagogical challenges of the IM immersion educational environment;
 - The development of IM resources: IM curriculum enhancing resources; support materials for parents; IM resources to enhance Irish language competency of children, parents and staff; and resources for children with particular issues or challenges; and

- Strategic leadership for the IM pre-school sector, including working in partnership with CnaG to develop the IM early years sector.

Pre-School Curricular Guidance

13. The refreshed [Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education](#) was published by CCEA in June 2018 for the 2018/19 academic year.
14. Altram developed bespoke Support Material for the [CCEA Preschool Curricular Guidance](#) to support Irish-Medium Early Years Immersion Education, which issued to IM pre-school settings in October 2018.

Quality of Irish-medium pre-school provision

15. The last Chief Inspector's report (2016-18) reported improved quality, and that the majority of settings in the IME pre-school sector had the capacity to identify and bring about improvement. In all of the settings inspected it was reported that the children had a good understanding of Irish and the settings had effective links with parents and primary schools to prepare children well for transition.
16. Due to industrial action, the ETI have been unable to complete full inspections in statutory sector settings in recent years (from January 2017) and it is therefore not possible to draw any conclusions on the current quality of the IM pre-school statutory sector. Based on the most recent inspection findings (during the 2016-2018 reporting period), 73% of all IM pre-schools inspected were evaluated as either having capacity or high capacity.

Continued Professional Development (CPD)

17. Teacher Professional Development is provided through the Department's educational partners, the EA and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA).
18. "Learning Leaders", DE's Strategy for Teacher Professional Learning, published in March 2016, aims to empower teachers, including those in Irish-medium nursery settings, to build on their strengths and access support through a combination of learning approaches.
19. It also supports the identification and harnessing of innovative practice and supports closer collaboration between schools and school clusters. This approach to practice-led professional learning will enable teachers to identify their own professional learning needs and seek appropriate support, including from the EA.
20. Learning Leaders is committed to supporting both the development and dissemination of good practice and building professional learning communities to support closer collaboration between teachers, schools and school clusters and professional learning providers, and to support good practice already in the system.
21. The Irish-medium pre-school sector has access to a range of training and development opportunities through the Irish-medium pre-school support service currently provided by Altram.
22. More recently, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic a series of professional development and training opportunities have been made available through the Continuity

of Learning Irish-medium Work Stream to support Irish-medium teachers and school leaders as pupils return to school. These CPD opportunities are available across all phases of Irish-medium education and are intended to support schools and settings in mitigating the impact on learning from the Covid-19 pandemic. These opportunities sit within the Teacher Professional Learning framework.

Sharing of Good Practice

23. The Department is pro-actively supporting the identification and sharing of good practice. A working group of Irish-medium School Leaders was established in June 2015 to develop proposals for sharing best practice in school leadership, and provides earmarked funding to support the continued work of the group in sharing effective practice. Four regional IM Learning Communities based in Belfast, Antrim, Omagh and Newry have been established to support closer collaboration between practitioners, schools and school clusters and professional learning providers. IM pre-school settings have the opportunity to participate in these learning communities.
24. The Continuity of Learning Work Stream set up in response to the Covid-19 pandemic is actively working to support the sharing of good practice, including through the Irish-medium Learning Community. Work is underway to provide a single online location where Irish-medium information and resources can be sited. This will also support the sharing of best practice between practitioners.
25. In implementing the Learning to Learn framework for early years education and learning (2013), the Department created a number of pilot Early Years Education Support Clusters in 2016, which provides an opportunity to test a model for pre-school education settings to share best practice and explore topical issues. An Irish-medium cluster has been established in Belfast which provides an opportunity for sharing of good practice in the IM pre-school sector. 9 Irish-medium pre-school settings, including 4 statutory nursery units and 5 non-statutory pre-school settings participate in the IM cluster group. In addition, Irish-medium pre-schools have and are welcome to participate in the other established early years clusters. Following a positive report by ETI in 2019, the early years cluster programme is being expanded with a target of 24 clusters by the end of 2022.

Inspection and Self-Evaluation

26. The self-evaluation tool used by most settings is the 'Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework (ISEF)'; this replaced the 'Together Towards Improvement (TTI)' document. The pre-school ISEF document is a generic framework for both Irish-medium and English-medium settings.
27. The ETI has an Irish-medium education core team of inspectors, all of whom have proficiency in the Irish language and an understanding of the principles and practices of pre-school Irish-medium education. All members of the team have attended a range of linguistic courses, and are committed, through continuing professional development, to maintain and continue to develop their linguistic proficiency and understanding of the principles and practices of pre-school Irish-medium education. The ETI has also recruited Irish-medium education Associate Assessors to be deployed in Irish-medium settings. An IME specialist (ETI or AA), with a high level of proficiency in Irish is deployed on all IM pre-school inspections.

Parental engagement

28. In 2016/17, the Department launched the *Getting Ready to Learn programme (GRtL)*, as part of the Early Intervention Transformation Programme (EITP). Whilst EITP funding ended in 2019, the GRtL programme has continued, funded by the Department.
29. GRtL, which is administered by the Education Authority, is focused on improving outcomes for children in pre-school by engaging and empowering parents to help them create and sustain positive home learning environments. Almost 600 pre-school settings delivered GRtL in 2019/20, including 21 Irish-medium settings.

Report Recommendations

30. The Department's consideration of and response to the 9 recommendations is attached at Appendix A.

APPENDIX A
RESEARCH ON THE OUTCOMES OF PRE-SCHOOL IRISH MEDIUM EDUCATION
RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION	DE RESPONSE
<p>Recommendation 1: The perceived variation between statutory and voluntary IM pre-school settings noted by participants should be addressed in order to ensure consistency of experience for all pupils. One way of addressing these differences is to provide the required levels of curriculum and linguistic support and continuing professional development for all settings, both voluntary and statutory. Another way is to consider extending the number of statutory nursery settings.</p>	<p>Accept in principle. This recommendation has been progressed.</p> <p>Based primarily on interviews with 30 teachers / pre-school leaders and 13 strategic stakeholders, the Department notes the finding that there was perceived variation between statutory and non-statutory pre-school settings in relation to the quality of accommodation, qualifications of staff, the linguistic competence of staff, pay and working conditions and professional development opportunities available. The reported benefits for statutory settings associated with staff being able to draw on the ability to draw on the resources, experience and management structures of a primary school are noted.</p> <p>It is noted that the study did not compare pupils' linguistic achievements or language-related outcomes between statutory and voluntary settings.</p> <p>Whilst the recommendation focusses on the perceived variation between statutory and non-statutory settings in favour of statutory, the report refers to general inconsistency across the IM pre-school sector and reports that around ¾ of those interviewed noted that the quality of teaching is likely to vary greatly across the IM pre-school sector, due to the small pool of suitably qualified people, a challenge which applies to both statutory and non-statutory settings. It also notes general inconsistency across the sector in relation to planning and assessment. Challenges for the statutory sector in relation to staff-pupil ratio and curriculum support are also noted.</p> <p>The report comments on good practice relating to Irish language outcomes and links with parents, based on ETI reports, in both statutory and non-statutory pre-school settings. It also refers to similar areas for development for both statutory and non-statutory settings in relation to Irish language outcomes.</p> <p>The Pre-School Education Programme (PSEP) is delivered as a partnership between statutory (nursery schools and nursery units in primary schools) and non-statutory (voluntary, community and private) settings. The Department is committed to ensuring that all children have access to a consistent level of high-quality pre-school education. The voluntary and statutory pre-school education sectors are equally valued by the Department for their contribution to the pre-school</p>

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	<p>education of children, with both following the same curricular guidelines and subject to the same education inspection standards. This applies to both the English and Irish-Medium pre-school sectors.</p> <p>Inspection findings (inspections completed 2014-2019) indicate that 62% of non-statutory IM pre-school settings have a good or better inspection rating (OEC1 or OEC2). Due to industrial action, the ETI have been unable to complete full inspections in statutory sector settings in recent years (there have been no inspection ratings since January 2017), and it is therefore not possible to draw any conclusions on the current quality of the IM pre-school statutory sector.</p> <p>With the aim of improving the quality of Irish-medium pre-school, the IM pre-school support service, currently delivered by Altram, provides curriculum and linguistic support, resources and training to both voluntary and statutory providers and access to Early Years Specialist support for voluntary providers. The Chief Inspector acknowledged the positive impact of the support provided by Altram in her 2016-18 report.</p> <p>In relation to extending the number of statutory nursery settings, proposals for new statutory nursery provision are a matter for the statutory planning authorities (EA and CCMS) working with CnaG and proposers to bring forward robust cases for change. Any proposals will be considered on a case-by-case basis and subject to the statutory development proposal process.</p> <p>Next steps:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DE will continue to engage regularly with ETI to monitor the quality of pre-school provision and address any issues raised. • Delivery of the Irish-medium pre-school support service will continue to support quality improvement. DE officials will continue to engage with CnaG in regard to the delivery and development of this service. • Proposals for new statutory nursery provisions will be subject to the statutory development proposal process.

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<p>Recommendation 2: The identification and sharing of good practice across sectors should be promoted within bespoke programmes of CPD available to all IM Pre-school settings. This should also inform a quality assurance framework for CPD provision.</p>	<p>Accept in Principle.</p> <p>In line with Learning Leaders, the identification and sharing of good practice in the IM pre-school sector is being promoted through the established IM early years cluster group in Belfast, which provides an opportunity for sharing of good practice in the IM pre-school sector. In addition, Irish-medium pre-school settings participate in and are welcome to join the early years clusters established across the region.</p> <p>The four regional IM Learning Communities based in Belfast, Antrim, Omagh and Newry established to support closer collaboration between practitioners, schools and school clusters and professional learning providers also provide opportunities for sharing of good practice.</p> <p>Next steps:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Department will engage with CnaG and the IM pre-school sector to explore the need for and development of bespoke programmes of CPD for all IM pre-school settings and a quality assurance framework for CPD provision. Any proposals may be subject to funding availability.
<p>Recommendation 3: A language competence framework and continuing professional development programme for staff working in Irish-medium pre-school settings should be developed in order to enhance provision and secure the best language-related learning outcomes.</p>	<p>Accept in Principle.</p> <p>The Department's Strategy for Teacher Professional Learning 'Learning Leaders' is committed to supporting both the development and dissemination of good practice and building professional learning communities to support closer collaboration between practitioners, schools and school clusters and professional learning providers.</p> <p>Through their contract with CnaG, Altram provide training and support to early years staff and management committees to develop, share and deliver high quality IM preschool education, and enhance good practice in addressing the pedagogical challenges of the IM immersion educational environment.</p> <p>Next steps:</p>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Department will engage with CnaG and the IM pre-school sector to explore the need for and development of a language competence framework and bespoke programmes of CPD for staff in IM pre-school settings. Any proposals may be subject to funding availability.
<p>Recommendation 4: An agreed fit-for-purpose transition report form which reflects the IM learning experiences and linguistic development of children at the end of their pre-school year should be devised.</p>	<p>Accept. This recommendation has been progressed.</p> <p>This is complete. Altram’s Early Years Specialist team has developed and distributed a transition form to all Irish-medium pre-school settings, which includes a section on Irish language competencies.</p> <p>Next steps:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Department will engage with CnaG and the IM pre-school sector to keep the transition form for IM pre-school settings under review.
<p>Recommendation 5: Given the importance of the key relationship between parents and the pre-school education provision for their children, linguistic resources should be developed to support IM parental partnerships.</p>	<p>Accept. This recommendation has been progressed.</p> <p>Altram has created and distributed language support resources for parents in their role as contracted service provider of the IM pre-school support service. These resources have been enhanced during the period of school closure as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.</p> <p>In addition, 21 IM pre-school settings have participated in the Getting Ready to Learn programme in 2019/20, a programme which aims to improve parental knowledge and engagement in their child’s learning and development and improve home learning environments.</p> <p>Next steps:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Linguistic resources to support IM parental partnerships will continue to be developed as a key part of the IM pre-school support service contract.
<p>Recommendation 6: An exploratory framework of desirable descriptors/indicators of typical IM language development for children in pre-school settings</p>	<p>Accept.</p>

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<p>should be developed and piloted. These descriptors/indicators should take cognisance of three key sources: bilingual frameworks in international research; the experience of IM pre-school teachers; and empirical evidence of the typical levels of immersion language observed in settings.</p>	<p>The pre-school curricular support material developed and issued by Altram in October 2018 provides a description of the Irish language characteristics and skills that most children who have experienced appropriate pre-school immersion education will typically display.</p> <p>Next steps:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DE and ETI will work with key stakeholders to review the descriptors of Irish language development for pre-school children developed by Altram.
<p>Recommendation 7: Bespoke pre-school curricular guidance which takes cognisance of the IM immersion context should be developed by a collaborative group of stakeholders including practitioners.</p>	<p>Accept. The recommendation has been progressed.</p> <p>This is complete.</p> <p>The refreshed Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education was published by CCEA in June 2018.</p> <p>Altram has developed bespoke Support Material for the CCEA Preschool Curricular Guidance to support Irish-Medium Early Years Immersion Education, which issued to IM pre-school settings in October 2018.</p>
<p>Recommendation 8: Quality indicators in IM pre-school settings should be developed to underpin the Together Towards Improvement self-evaluation process.</p>	<p>Accept.</p> <p>The self-evaluation tool used by most settings now is the 'Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework (ISEF)'; this has replaced the 'Together Towards Improvement (TTI)' document. The pre-school ISEF document is a generic framework for both Irish-medium and English-medium settings. There are also specific references to Irish-medium settings within the refreshed pre-school curricular guidance (CCEA, 2018) which was developed in consultation with ETI, and Altram has produced an Irish-medium specific resource to provide additional support for IM pre-school settings.</p>

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	<p>Next steps:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The review of descriptors of Irish language development for pre-school children developed by Altram (recommendation 6 above refers) will be pivotal in devising IM-specific quality indicators to complement the ISEF.
<p>Recommendation 9: An understanding of the principles and practices of pre-school IM education as well as a reasonable proficiency in the Irish language should be a requirement of all those who evaluate the quality of provision and learning in IM pre-school settings.</p>	<p>Accept. This recommendation has been progressed.</p> <p>The ETI has an Irish-medium education core team of inspectors, all of whom have proficiency in the Irish language and an understanding of the principles and practices of pre-school Irish-medium education. All members of the team have attended a range of linguistic courses, and are committed, through continuing professional development, to maintain and continue to develop their linguistic proficiency and understanding of the principles and practices of pre-school Irish-medium education. The ETI has also recruited Irish-medium education Associate Assessors to be deployed in Irish-medium settings. An IME specialist (ETI or AA), with a high level of proficiency in Irish is deployed on all IM pre-school inspections.</p>