
Books/Book Chapters

2022

Early childhood education and care provision through the medium of the Irish language

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Recommended Citation

Mhic Mhathúna, M. and Mac Con Iomaire, M. (2022). Early childhood education and care provision through the medium of the Irish language. In Hayes, N. and Walsh, T. (Eds.) (2022) *Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland: Charting a Century of Developments (1921-2021)*, pp.75-99. Oxford: Peter Lang. DOI: 10.21427/FYD9-A648

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Funder: No funding received

4 Early childhood education and care provision through the medium of the Irish language

Introduction

This chapter will give an overview of the history of naíonraí or Irish-medium preschool settings in Gaeltacht¹ and non-Gaeltacht areas from their beginnings in the 1960s to date. The material for this chapter is based on desk research, interviews with the founding member of the naíonra movement and the personal involvement of the chapter authors. The rationale for establishing naíonraí will be described and the role of the pioneers who led the movement in the 1970s and 1980s will be analysed in light of their principles and philosophy. These principles are visible in the structures they set up to manage and promote naíonraí and in the resources they commissioned. These resources included children's songs and rhymes based on the oral tradition, suitable for the urban environment as well as rural areas, and the provision and mediation of children's books in Irish. A number of support agencies were set up and evolved over time, sometimes willingly, sometimes not. The current roles of support agencies in both the North of Ireland and the Republic will be examined and challenges facing the sector will be identified. Finally, proposals for the future direction of immersion early childhood education and care (ECEC) through the Irish language will be made, including the need for specialized training,

1 Irish-speaking areas mainly on the western seaboard.

Table 1. Naíonra statistics

Details	Gaeltacht Naíonraí registered with Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta	Non-Gaeltacht Naíonraí registered with Gaeloideachas
Number of naíonraí	59	180
Number of sessions	74	283
Number of children	2,000	5,515
Number of staff	189	500
Co-location on primary school site	10	98
Children with languages other than Irish or English	20	129
Children with additional needs	33	163

evaluation of current practice, and cooperation among all participants and stakeholders.

To set the context, the number of preschool services currently working through Irish is 373 (10 per cent of the total) and of these 78 per cent are private and 22 per cent are community based (Pobal 2019). There are more services located in rural areas (67 per cent) than urban (33 per cent), a figure that reflects the rural siting of many Gaeltacht naíonraí. There is an equal amount of community (51 per cent) and private settings (49 per cent) in Gaeltacht areas. Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta is the Gaeltacht naíonraí support agency, while Gaeloideachas is the support agency for naíonraí outside the Gaeltacht. An overview of the key statistics for both organizations is provided in Table 1.

As a number of Irish words are used throughout this chapter, Table 2 provides a translation of these as an easy reference guide.

Table 2. Translations of Irish words used in the chapter

Irish word	English translation
Breac-Ghaeltacht	Partly Irish-speaking area
Comhairleoirí	Practice advisors for practitioners in naíonraí
Dianchúrsa	Week-long intensive course in Irish
Gaeltacht	Irish-speaking areas mainly on the western seaboard
Gaeltacht naíonraí	Naíonraí located in Irish-speaking areas
Naíonáin	Infant children
Naíonra/naíonraí	Group providing early learning experiences to young children through the medium of Irish. Naíonraí is the plural term.
Naíscóil/naíscóileanna	Infant or nursery school through the Irish language. Naíscóileanna is the plural term.
Stiúrthóir	Directress or practitioner in a naíonra setting

Beginnings

The first naíonraí were established in Shannon (Co. Clare), Athlone (Co. Westmeath), Dublin and Cork towards the end of the 1960s. The term ‘naíonra’ was coined to denote a group providing early learning experiences to infants (naíonáin) or children (3–5 years) through the medium of the Irish language (Ó Buachalla 1979) and is now used to describe an Irish language immersion preschool. People in the Irish language community were concerned about the standard of Irish in the education system as the Irish-medium preparatory colleges for primary teaching were closed in 1961 and the number of schools teaching through Irish was reducing (Dunne 2020, Ó hUiginn 1980). Teaching through the medium of Irish in the infant classes of primary schools was also reducing steadily from the 1960s (O’Connor 2010) and Irish language supporters and activists wanted to develop new approaches to promoting Irish within the education system.

The development of Welsh-medium playschools in Wales, *cylchoedd meithrin*, provided an impetus to develop a similar movement in Ireland. The Welsh playgroups were founded in the mid-1960s to provide opportunities for children to learn Welsh in such settings and over sixty groups were in operation by 1970 (Baker and Prys Jones 1998). Leaders in the Irish language organizations Conradh na Gaeilge, Comhdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge and Comhdháil Cheilteach an nÓg invited speakers from Wales to talk about this development. Dr Trefor Morgan, a Welsh businessman and activist, spoke at a meeting in Dublin in 1966 about the potential of the language-focused playgroups to act as a catalyst for wider language development in the community. Many of those present were active members of Conradh na Gaeilge and the organizations tasked their local organizers to establish naíonraí around the country.

Another inspirational lecture was given by Dr Jac L. Williams, Professor of Welsh at the University of Aberystwyth, Wales the following year and published as a pamphlet, *Bilingualism Today* (Williams 1967). The pamphlet explained how young children could begin acquiring Welsh as a second language in Welsh language preschools. The director of Comhdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge, Col. Eoghan Ó Néill, travelled to meetings around the country speaking about this new idea. A new voluntary organization, Na Naíscoilleana Gaelacha, was established in 1974 under the auspices of Conradh na Gaeilge to provide assistance to people setting up or working in naíonraí at that time (Ó Murchú 1979a). Contact with Wales continued and Dan L. James, Lecturer in Education at the University of Aberystwyth, gave a lecture on second language acquisition approaches in minority-language preschools in 1976. The name of Na Naíscoilleana Gaelacha organization was changed to Na Naíonraí Gaelacha in 1979 to better reflect the natural acquisition of Irish rather than formal teaching (Uí Chonghaile 2012). An overview of the many organizations involved in the promotion and support of Irish language preschool education is provided in Table 3.

Table 3. Irish language organizations involved with Naíonraí

Organization	Dates	Activities
Conradh na Gaeilge	1893–present	Maintenance and development of the Irish language through a branch network throughout the country
Comhdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge	1943–2014*	Coordinating umbrella body for voluntary Irish language organizations
Comhdháil Cheilteach na nÓg	1902–present	Youth wing of the Celtic Congress, an inter-Celtic cultural organization
Gaeltarra Éireann, now Údarás na Gaeltachta	1957–present	Gaeltacht industrial agency
Bord na Gaeilge, from 1999 Foras na Gaeilge	1978–present	All-Ireland public body to promote the Irish language and Ulster Scots
Na Náiscoilleana Gaelacha, name amended in 1979 to Na Naíonraí Gaelacha	1974–present	Voluntary advocacy group for naíonraí
An Comhchoiste Réamhscolaíochta, from 2003 Forbairt Naíonraí Teo.	1978–2014*	Agency to promote and manage Irish-medium preschooling
Seirbhísí Naíonraí Teo., from 2004 Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta	1997–present	Gaeltacht naíonraí support agency
Gaelscoilleana, from 2014 Gaeloideachas	1973–present*	National support organization for Irish-medium education at all levels

*Due to a major reorganization of Irish language organizations in 2014 by Foras na Gaeilge, their funding body, many smaller groups closed or were subsumed into larger organizations. Forbairt Naíonraí Teo. (FNT), for example, was subsumed into Gaelscoilleana, which in turn changed its name to Gaeloideachas to reflect its broader remit.

Early developments

As the numbers of naíonraí grew, the committee of Na Naíonraí Gaelacha saw that a more formal, permanent structure was required to manage the development and support for naíonraí, over and above what a voluntary organization could do. The limited funding provided by Conradh na Gaeilge and Gaeltarra Éireann (now Údarás na Gaeltachta, the Gaeltacht development authority) for Gaeltacht naíonraí up to that time was insufficient to manage a national organization. They submitted a business plan to Bord na Gaeilge (now Foras na Gaeilge) which outlined the need for a development officer, a publication plan to provide a handbook and resources, and suggestions for training in immersion pedagogy. A joint committee, An Comhchoiste Réamhscolaíochta, was established between Bord na Gaeilge and Na Naíonraí Gaelacha in 1978 (Uí Chonghaile 2012).

The first Gaeltacht naíonra was established in 1978 in An Cheathrú Rua, Connemara, at the invitation of Gaeltarra Éireann. Many of the management staff coming to work in new factories in the area were not native Irish speakers and it was felt that giving their children a grounding in Irish from the beginning would promote the use of the language in the home and help prepare children for schooling in Irish. A small grant was paid to cover the running costs of this naíonra and the first practitioner/stiúrthóir, Mairéad Mac Con Iomaire, worked in the naíonra on a voluntary basis. Naíonraí soon spread to other Gaeltacht regions and the Gaeltacht naíonraí joined forces with An Comhchoiste Réamhscolaíochta when it was founded in 1978 to support naíonraí across the country. Among those promoting Gaeltacht naíonraí in Gaeltarra Éireann (later Údarás na Gaeltachta) were senior management figures including Seosamh Ó hÓgartaigh, Pádraig Ó hAoláin and Mícheál Ó hÉanaigh. They provided leadership, support and grants to the fledgling naíonra movement in the Gaeltacht. The gender divide, evident in the people involved in the early stages of the *naíonra* movement reflects the social mores of the time, with many women working in the home but contributing to wider society through voluntary work

and the men in this case contributing ideas and advice based on their employment experience.

Údarás na Gaeltachta established Seirbhísí Naíonraí Teo. in 1997 to assist Gaeltacht naíonraí committees manage payroll procedures for the eighteen staff working in naíonraí. Over time, the voluntary committees managing Gaeltacht naíonraí had become increasingly reluctant to oversee employment procedures for staff. This type of business model was probably influenced by the Údarás's experience of supporting other Gaeltacht companies. They provided a grant to assist the administration of the service and employed Mairéad Mac Con Iomaire as manager. It quickly became clear that policies and procedures needed to be developed and that curriculum guidance was needed for the expanding Gaeltacht naíonraí services. A handbook of policies and procedures for the services (Seirbhísí Naíonra Teo. 1997) was published in 1997, followed by the *Loinnir* (Mac Con Iomaire 2006) curriculum guide in 2006. A toy library was set up in each of the main Gaeltacht regions, where staff could borrow toys and equipment for a set period of time. Údarás na Gaeltachta established the company Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta in 2004 to take over and expand the responsibilities of Seirbhísí Naíonraí Teo. Staff were now directly employed by Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta and standardized pay and conditions of employment were developed across the Gaeltacht regions. Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta's remit now covers other kinds of provision such as crèches, afterschool services, parent and toddler groups and breakfast clubs (Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta 2021).

Founding principles

The naíonra movement was founded on strong linguistic principles from the beginning, focusing on early total immersion approaches to second language learning. This grew out of understandings about first language acquisition by young children, the psychology of early language learning and awareness of second language learning theories (Ó Murchú 1980). According to Baker and Wright (2021), immersion education can

succeed very well if delivered effectively in additive language contexts as an optional choice, the children's home language is respected, teachers are competent bilinguals and the focus is on delivering the mainstream curriculum through the second language. Societal and historical factors also play a role with issues of identity, culture and second language proficiency influencing choice.

The principles of ECEC were also important, especially learning through play (Ó Murchú 1979b). Blaise et al. (2016) show how broad the field of play and learning now is and Wood (2014) describes how the ideas behind play and pedagogy have changed over time and how child-initiated play, adult-guided play and a more outcome-focused version of educational play can guide practitioners and researchers. A balanced child-initiated approach with elements of adult-guided language input to play and learning was adopted by the naíonraí as the emphasis was on providing opportunities for learning Irish as a second language in the context of children's overall development.

Pioneers in the naíonra movement

As part of research for a chapter on children's literature in Irish (Mhic Mhathúna and Mac Con Iomaire 2013), a large number of people who had participated in establishing and developing naíonraí were contacted. Written replies to a questionnaire were received from some participants and some of the main players or pioneers attended a focus group held in Dublin in 2012. Those who contributed included, in alphabetical order, Máire Feirtéar, Mairéad Mac Seanlaoich, Máire Mhic Niallais, Treasa Ní Ailpín, Bríd Ní Choincheanainn, Aingéal Ó Buachalla, Helen Ó Cíosáin, Helen Ó Murchú, Peig Uí Chaollaí and Neilí Ó Neachtain. A semi-structured discussion schedule was drawn up and the ensuing discussion included the recollections and reminiscences of the participants, as well as reasons for their participation. The authors of this chapter were also part of the movement from the mid-1970s. Many others were actively involved as practitioners, researchers or supporters. It is noteworthy that

the practical development of *naíonraí*, the on-the-ground work, was led almost entirely by women, which gave the movement a nurturing, child-focused character, fuelled by the women's strong belief in the importance of the Irish language and the value of high-quality ECEC.

These beliefs crystalized as an interest in providing early years education through the medium of Irish. Happily, many of them had organizational experience in groups such as *as Na Teaghlaigh Ghaelacha* (an organization for Irish-speaking families) or *Conradh na Gaeilge*, and they were active members of Irish-medium primary school committees as teachers or parents. Their overriding objective was to provide opportunities for young Irish-speaking children to meet outside the home and to facilitate the acquisition of Irish for other children. Several participants had attended the lectures by Jac. L. Williams and Dan L. James on the Welsh-medium preschools and were enthused by the approach adopted in Wales. They were also interested in the Irish Preschool Playgroups Association (IPPA) movement and some had attended training courses provide by the IPPA and St Nicholas Montessori Society. Interestingly, the *naíonraí* adopted the Montessori term for practitioner 'directress' and translated this into Irish as *stiúrthóir* (plural form is *stiúrthóirí*).

Children attending the first *naíonraí* had different language backgrounds. Some of the children in *Gaeltacht* areas were proficient speakers of the language and lived in strong Irish-speaking areas. Other *Gaeltacht* children lived in English-dominant areas and still others in *Breac-Gaeltacht* areas with little or no Irish in the community. The majority of children outside the *Gaeltacht* were English-speaking but their parents were interested in them acquiring Irish at a young age (Hickey 1997). This meant that practitioners in the strong *Gaeltacht* areas could concentrate on language enrichment while those in other areas provided opportunities for second language acquisition.

The role of the pioneers

The pioneers played many roles during the early years of the *naíonraí*. Some were practitioners, some *comhairleoirí* or practice advisors and

others were writers and authors. Some people had multiple roles and also served as committee members of Na Naíonraí Gaelacha and An Comhchoiste Réamhscolaíochta. Both organizations received considerable help and advice from senior figures in Irish language groups including Maolsheachlainn Ó Caollaí, president and Seán Mac Mathúna, general secretary of Conradh na Gaeilge in the 1970s. Liam Ó Dochartaigh, education officer of Bord na Gaeilge also contributed as did Caoimhín Ó Marcaigh, editor-in-chief of An Gúm publishing house.² Many others in the Irish language community also advised informally.

The Comhchoiste Réamhscolaíochta set about organizing the work on a structured basis. It initiated an insurance scheme, provided support and advice to practitioners through the practice advisors and organized short training courses. A week-long intensive course (*An Dianchúrsa*) was organized to show practitioners how language-focused early years education could be provided and a twenty-hour programme was provided for trainee primary school teachers. These programmes provided basic information about the immersion approach in the early years. A handbook for naíonra practitioners *Lámhleabhar do Stiúirthóirí Naíonraí* [Handbook for naíonra practitioners] was published in 1979 (*An Comhchoiste Réamhscolaíochta 1979*) and a second edition followed in 1985. Deirdre Uí Ghrádaigh edited a third edition of the Handbook in 2005 (*Uí Ghrádaigh 2005*), which included additional emphasis on storytelling as a vehicle for language learning. Hickey (1997) had previously noted the challenge of presenting stories to young children in a language they were only beginning to learn and Uí Ghrádaigh (2005: 119–123) offered a clear rationale for presenting stories to children in Irish and procedures for mediating the stories using props and story sacks. She also advised making books highly visible in the setting and ensuring that ethnic and cultural diversity featured in the selection of books.

It is noteworthy that these publications were in Irish, intended to both advance understanding of the content and to normalize the use of relevant terminology and discussion in the Irish language. Training videos

2 Irish-medium publishers under the aegis of the Department of Education from 1926 to 1999 when its functions were transferred to Foras na Gaeilge.

on various aspects of practice were also commissioned, a pioneering practice at the time.

An evaluation of how children were making progress in learning Irish and their overall development was undertaken in 1982 by Síle Ní Aodhagáin, *Staidéar Treorach ar na Naíonraí in Éirinn* [Pilot study on naíonraí in Ireland] (Ní Aodhagáin 1982). This study emphasized the importance of training, as more progress in Irish was made by children in naíonraí with practitioners who had completed the Diachúrsa. Helen Ó Murchú, the first chairperson of An Comhchoiste Réamhscolaíochta concurred with this finding and suggested that a year-long training programme should be initiated as well as shorter in-service programmes (Ó Murchú 1985).

Philosophy and approach

The overarching aim of the naíonraí was to develop children's abilities through the medium of Irish, be they native speakers of Irish or acquiring Irish as a second language (Ó Murchú 1979a). Their educational approach was learning through play, mirroring the natural path of first language acquisition and focusing on children's communicative needs in the context of the naíonra. Siobhán Ní Mhuirthile of Mary Immaculate College Limerick and other members of the Comhchoiste Réamhscolaíochta led the development of play-based approaches to second language learning of Irish. This was an innovative approach and as one of the pioneers said '*Bhíomar ag tionscnamh cur chuige nua i suíomh nua is ag foghlaim de réir mar a bhíomar ag dul ar aghaidh*' [We were introducing a new approach in a new context and learning as we went on]. The practitioners were advised not to think in terms of teaching Irish formally but to focus on communicating with the children and stimulating communication between the children. Communication in the target language was key but this was to be based on selected vocabulary and appropriate interactive strategies (Mhic Mhathúna 1996). One strategy was to link appropriate songs and rhymes to regular activities, thus providing opportunities for repeated vocabulary and use in defined contexts, without the need for translation. Examples of traditional and newly composed rhymes and songs were

provided in the Handbook for sand and water play, routines and fun (An Comhchoiste Réamhscolaíochta 1979: 59–61).

Children's songs and rhymes

There is a wealth of traditional songs and rhymes for children in Irish (see, e.g., *Cniogaide Cnagaide* edited by Williams, 1988) but new rhymes in the Irish tradition/style were needed for the urban context of naíonraí and for children who were beginner learners of the language. As one pioneer said, 'Níl a thuilleadh aistriúcháin ar Humpty Dumpty ag teastáil' [We don't need any more translations of Humpty Dumpty]. Treasa Ní Ailpín, a primary teacher and native Irish speaker, was already composing songs and rhymes in the traditional style for her young family in Dublin. These were published in two collections, *Sonas agus Só* (Ní Ailpín 1977) and *Timpeall an Tí* (Ní Ailpín 1979) and provided exemplars of how traditional forms could be transposed into an urban environment. She then wrote many more rhymes to accompany the naíonra activities and these were published in *Ambráin do Pháistí* (Ní Ailpín, Ó Dubhghaill agus Ó Háinle 1980) and *Maidin sa Naíonra* (Ní Ailpín, Ní Dhorchaí and Mac Con Iomaire 1991) both as booklets and – new for the time – cassette tapes. These were republished as CDs in 2005 (Ní Ailpín and Breathnach 2005). An important aspect of these publications was that they provided examples of Irish rhythm and phonology in a music style appropriate for young children (Mac Liam 1981).

Traditional rhymes were also a great resource for Gaeltacht naíonraí. Mairead Mac Con Iomaire published two collections of children's rhymes that she had collected from her father, *Scéilín, Scéilín* [Story, Story] (Mac Con Iomaire 1978) and *Dreoilín, Dreoilín, Rí na n-Éan* [Wren, wren, king of the birds] (Mac Con Iomaire 1984). The rhymes described nature and the rural environment in rich, idiomatic language suitable for Gaeltacht children. The Comhchoiste Réamhscolaíochta published a booklet and cassette tape of traditional children's songs entitled *Dambsa na gCoiníní* [The rabbits' dance] (An Comhchoiste Réamhscolaíochta 1984). This was republished in 2005 (Forbairt Naíonraí Teo. 2005). Practitioners were

advised to recite the rhymes on a regular basis with the children, though Hickey's research (Hickey 1997, Hickey et al. 1999) in Gaeltacht and non-Gaeltacht settings showed that this did not happen very often.

Drawing on linguistic theory about context-specific language use, Hickey (1997) advised practitioners to assist the children in going beyond the immediate context of the songs and rhymes and to model the use of the vocabulary and phrases in other naíonra activities. The songs and rhymes provided a store of formulaic utterances that could be transferred to other contexts when they had been acquired and reduced the burden of language learning (Ellis 2008, Wray 2004). The Comhchoiste Réamhscolaíochta published a series of wall friezes with the words and illustration of the rhymes (now out of print) to act both as examples of environmental print in Irish and as reminders to practitioners to use them.

Books and stories

A growing number of children's books in Irish were available in the 1970s and 1980, produced mainly by An Gúm/Government Publication. A number of these were original texts commissioned by An Gúm and others were translations from English and other languages (Ní Chuilleanáin 2012). Browne and Nolan publishers also published schoolbooks in Irish, some of which were suitable to read to young children. The pioneers thought that these books were very useful in developing emergent literacy in Irish and listed several books that were particularly suitable. Some of the books, however, contained a mismatch between the context/illustrations and the complexity of the language, especially for young second language learners. The pioneers said that Irish-speaking parents and practitioners were pleased that children's books were available in Irish but that many were not overly critical of the content or language level books beyond that. Nic Congáil (2012) credited the naíonra movement with providing a context and market for the development of wider genres books in Irish for young children, particularly those with simple illustrations and text.

It was also recognized that reading books to young children in their second language in group settings is quite a challenge (Hickey 1997). The benefits are obvious – emergent literacy, oral language development, participation in group activity – but it is difficult to maintain children’s interest in a story through a language they are only beginning to learn. The *Lámhleabhar* [Handbook] (An Comhchoiste Réamhscolaíochta 1979) advised reading the story in a lively fashion and basing the telling on the illustrations. Practitioners should simplify the language and use short sentences when pointing to the relevant part of the illustration. Children did not necessarily have to understand every word but could get the overall gist of the story. Practitioners were advised to use or create repeated phrases in the story, thus providing opportunities for children to join in with these phrases. When children with different levels of Irish were in the same naíonra group as in the Gaeltacht, it was particularly challenging to provide input at multiple levels and to ensure the story sessions were enjoyable and beneficial for all. However, the pioneers thought that children really enjoyed stories told in this manner. One pioneer said, ‘*Ba chuma cén teanga a bhí ag na páistí, d’éist siad i gcónaí le geáitsíocht*’ [It didn’t matter which language the children had, they always listened to an active reading].

Peig Uí Chaollaí, one of the first naíonra practitioners in Dublin in the 1970s, developed an innovative approach to story reading by using large format illustrations from a story (similar to ‘big books’ today) and developing a formulaic but interactive style of telling the story with these illustrations (Mhic Mhathúna 2010). Through repeated telling of the same story over an extended period of time, children understood the storyline and could gradually play a more active part in the telling, eventually being able to make connections between episodes in the story and their own experiences, all through Irish. Other practitioners made use of puppets and drama to present stories to the children using many of the same techniques. These techniques were demonstrated at the Dianchúrsa training sessions and other events and practitioners were encouraged to base the puppet plays on books or stories the children were familiar with.

Gaeltacht children could also benefit from the storytelling tradition in their area and Gaeltacht practitioners were more open to storytelling as well as story-reading. Some practitioner-based stories on the seasons

or local events, others on everyday events in the naíonra, children's pets or outings with the children, for example. They based stories on pictures sourced from local publications or stories in English and told the story to the children in Irish. Finding suitable stories in the local dialect was also an issue, particularly in Donegal as practitioners wanted to present stories and songs to children in the dialect variant they would hear in their local area. This situation has improved in more recent times as CDs and online versions of suitable songs for young children have been issued by Gaeltacht singers and musicians. *Rabhlaí Rabhlaí*, a compendium of traditional rhymes in the Corca Dhuibhne dialect was produced in 1998 (Ó Cathasaigh and Doyle 1998), followed by a second collection *Tidil Eidil Éró* in 2009 (Ó Cathasaigh and Doyle 2009). *Gugalaí Gug*, (Ryan and Mac Dhonnagáin 2005) a modern version of traditional songs and rhymes in the Connacht dialect was published in 2005. Donegal singers and musicians Nellie Nic Giolla Bhríde and Doimínic Mac Giolla Bhríde produced *Ící Pící*, a book and CD of newly composed songs for children in 2010 (Nic Giolla Bhríde and Mac Giolla Bhríde 2010) and Eoghan Mac Giolla Bhríde edited *Báidín Fheidhlimidh*, a compendium of traditional songs for children in the Donegal dialect in 2012 (McGee and Brennan 2012). It is noteworthy that idiomatic nonsense words were often used for titles, giving an immediate flavour of the dialect. Two CDs for very young children, *Sicín Mise go Sona Sásta* [I'm a happy little chicken] (Ní Mhuircheartaigh and Mac Gearailt 2014) and *Ardaigh an Laiste* [Lift up the Latch] (Ní Mhuircheartaigh and Mac Gearailt 2016) were produced in 2016 by Tús Maith, a support agency for speaking Irish in the home in the Kerry Gaeltacht.

It was difficult to find suitable accommodation for Gaeltacht naíonraí in the 1970s and 1980s. Many sessions were held in large community halls which were difficult to heat. For many years practitioners had to set up the naíonra every morning and then clear everything away at the end of the session, a draining use of energy and organization which limited the use of the space for displays of children's work etc. Most Gaeltacht communities now have purpose-built buildings while three new buildings adjacent to primary schools are almost completed (R. Mac Pháidín, personal communication 4th May 2021).

Current roles of support organizations

A number of support agencies provide support and services for naíonraí across the country. Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta is one of the largest organizations in the country providing early years services, be they through English or Irish, on a community basis. The two main aims of the organization are to provide:

- High-quality community-based early years services through the Irish language in the Gaeltacht
- Support services to relevant Gaeltacht committees who have a service-level agreement with Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta.

From the very beginning, Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta recognized the vital importance of working closely with Gaeltacht communities and of providing community-based services rather than private services. Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta has established local offices in each Gaeltacht region, with locally based advisors in each area. Almost 180 staff were working in naíonraí in 2020 and a further ten people in other roles in the organization. A wide range of services is provided, including the development of policies and procedures, in-service training, management services, local practice advisors, publications and participation in research. Recent research projects have included *Borradh: Scéim Pleanála Teanga* [Borradh Language Planning Project] between 2007 and 2013 (Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta 2008, 2009, 2012) and participation in the Preschool to Primary School Transitive Initiative, now published as *Mo Scéal* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA] 2018).

Changes in supports for the naíonra sector outside the Gaeltacht

The ECEC sector, along with many others, suffered cutbacks during the recent economic recession. The cutbacks in relation to naíonraí outside

the Gaeltacht were severe as core Foras na Gaeilge funding for FNT ceased in 2014 following a reorganization of the funded Irish language sector. FNT subsequently closed in 2015 when Pobal, acting on behalf of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), also withdrew its funding of FNT staff and services to support naíonraí. Foras na Gaeilge had discontinued a substantial subsidy scheme for naíonraí during the recession in 2013. This meant that dedicated support for *Aistear* (An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta 2009) and *Siolta* (An Lárionad um Fhorbairt agus Oideachas na Luath-Óige 2006) through Irish was not being made available by any organization.

However, limited funding from Foras na Gaeilge for Irish language support and immersion education in naíonraí continues to the present time. Part of the funding previously provided to FNT by Foras na Gaeilge was reallocated to Gaelscoileanna, a member organization for Irish-medium schools. The organization was renamed Gaeloideachas to reflect its wider role which, as of 2014, includes the provision of support services for naíonraí outside Gaeltacht areas. Gaeloideachas provides a range of advisory and support services for naíonraí, including support for immersion education, online Irish language learning resources for staff as well as limited professional development, grants for setting up new naíonraí and advocacy. Newsletters are produced monthly for each part of the sector including parents and during the Covid-19 pandemic, Gaeloideachas commissioned a series of posters and video animations in Irish regarding social distancing, cough etiquette and handwashing. They provided links to many Irish language resources during this time including storytelling in Irish by well-known Irish writers and authors. Contact details of all naíonraí registered with Gaeloideachas are available on the website <www.gaeloideachas.ie>.

However, Gaeloideachas does not provide on-the-ground support to practitioners or monitor the use of Irish in these services, and neither does any other organization. Limited support through the Irish language is available from Better Start, the national quality development service for ECEC but overall, the provision of Irish-medium support is now much weaker than when the practice advisors from An Comhchoiste Réamhscolaíochta and FNT provided mentoring and advisory services through visiting naíonraí outside the Gaeltacht on a regular basis.

While naíonraí benefit from national supports, it is significant that the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (formerly DCYA) no longer funds any voluntary organizations to provide dedicated support through Irish to naíonraí, nor is any of the funding provided by that department to support the ECEC sector conditional on services and resources also being made accessible to naíonraí in Irish, their working language. The issue of using Irish as a working language in the naíonra sector is significant, both as an ideological principle and as a mediator of experience. On a personal note, much of the preparatory work for this chapter was completed through Irish, with both authors drawing on documentation, knowledge and experience gained in the sector through the Irish language.

Northern Ireland

The first naíscoil (infant or nursery school through the Irish language) was established in Belfast in 1978 and in 2020 there were fifty-six services/naíscoilleana in operation, many with links to local Irish-medium primary schools. Mhic Aoidh (2019) acknowledges that one of the developments flowing from the Good Friday Agreement (1998) was government support for Irish immersion education, which funded the expansion of the naíscoilleana.

Altram is a community-based organization, founded in Belfast in 1990, to promote high-quality early years education through Irish to children and their families. It offers support and in-service training to the *naíscoilleana* through its core team of three early years specialists and other support workers (Altram 2020). It also provides advice and guidance to management committees. The organization is funded by the Department of Education (Northern Ireland), through Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta and by the Health and Social Care Board. Similarly, to naíonraí in other parts of Ireland, the need for specific training in immersion pedagogy was recognized in evaluations of the Irish-medium sector in Northern Ireland (Conway 2017, RSM McClure Watters et al. 2016). The Council for the

Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) published a guide to ECEC which includes a short section on Irish-medium nursery education (CCEA 2018: 15–16).

Challenges and future directions in Irish-medium early years education

Many issues in regard to ECEC apply equally well to Irish-medium and English-medium settings (Mhic Aoidh 2019). However, based on research, readings and experience, the authors of this chapter consider that a number of specific issues apply to Irish-medium immersion education on a whole-island basis and indeed to immersion early years education further afield.

Specialized training: Particular high-level skills are required of practitioners, in both ECEC and immersion pedagogy in the early years. They need to understand how second languages are acquired incrementally, how language learning can be facilitated through supportive interactions in a play-based approach and how the language of children with Irish as their first language can be enriched and extended. Practitioners need to have a repertoire of skills that allows them to see the language learning opportunities in all aspects of ECEC work, both planned and incidental. To do this well, practitioners should be highly competent speakers of the target language, Irish in this case, and be able to relate to children in the appropriate register through supportive relationships. This means that children will be offered a rich educational experience as well as opportunities for language learning. The relationship between the child and the adult is key to making this happen as combining early years expertise with language skills is a complex task (Mhic Aoidh 2019).

Many researchers, including Hickey and de Mejía (2016), have recognized the need for specialized training at pre-service and in-service levels to develop these competencies in practitioners but few degree level programmes in Ireland offer input on understanding second language learning

and developing strategies to promote this type of learning (Qualifax 2021). Currently, the number of immersion practitioners is relatively small, which makes it economically and socially difficult to provide specialist training programmes, however much needed they are. ECEC training at all levels from certificate to degree and postgraduate study should be made available online through Irish to serve dispersed Irish language communities in the Gaeltacht and other areas. This in turn would ensure a pool of graduates eligible to provide professional support in areas such as leadership, mentoring, advocacy and inspection services. Continuous Professional Development (CPD) training should be provided on current topics and new developments and accredited in line with other CPD training for the ECEC sector.

National policies: It is a feature of minority-language education at all levels that the immersion curriculum follows the majority language curriculum and that all national policies apply to minority-language settings (Baker and Wright 2021, Tedick et al. 2011). *Aistear* (An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta 2009), *Siolta* (An Lárionad um Fhorbairt agus Oideachas na Luath-Óige 2006) and *An Chéad 5* [*First 5*] (Rialtas na hÉireann 2018) policy documents are all available in both Irish and English and support materials are available in both languages. The Irish language is the working language of naíonraí and national ECEC services should be made available through Irish at the same time as English-medium policies, procedures and supports. This may mean that a dedicated officer in the relevant government departments is tasked to oversee these developments.

Inspection: ECEC services are subject to four different inspection regimes in the Republic, but only the Department of Education inspections are carried out through Irish in Gaeltacht regions. Inspections by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, Environmental Health and Pobal should be carried out in Irish in services working through Irish. The reports from these inspections in Irish-medium settings should also be made available in Irish as happens with the Department of Education reports. The Department of Education (Northern Ireland) states that there is a team of education inspectors in Northern Ireland who have proficiency in Irish and who understand the principles and practices of early years immersion education

(Department of Education 2020). There should be an Irish language condition applied to government grants for ECEC services in the Gaeltacht to encourage the use of Irish in all settings.

Evaluations: A planned series of self and external evaluations should be carried out in naíonraí on a systemic basis to map children's language learning in these contexts and ascertain which factors and strategies are most conducive to language learning.

Cooperation: Services provided by naíonraí support organizations are shaped to suit the educational, regulatory and social environments in which they operate. However, greater cooperation and collaboration between the organizations across the country would be beneficial in identifying good practice, sharing of common experiences and pooling of resources in programme planning and research. This could include outreach to parents, acknowledging their role in choosing immersion early education and identifying ways they can both offer and receive support from naíonraí.

Finally, as noted by other authors in this book, a national agency is required to oversee all aspects of ECEC in Ireland. This should serve practitioners who wish to work through Irish as well as English and other languages. This would raise the status of ECEC, facilitate coordination across the myriad of government departments and agencies and provide coordinated services to young children, their families and those who work with them in the ECEC sector.

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