



INSPECTORATE

A REPORT ON  
IRISH-MEDIUM EDUCATIONAL PROVISION IN  
GAELTACHT SCHOOLS:  
PRIMARY AND POST-PRIMARY CASE-STUDIES

Department of Education and Skills

A Report on Irish-medium Educational Provision in Gaeltacht Schools: Primary and Post-Primary Case-Studies

The Inspectorate wishes to thank the principals, teachers, support staff, students, boards of management, and members of Gaeltacht communities who participated in the case studies.

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## GLOSSARY

**Aonad lán-Ghaeilge:** Irish-medium Unit attached to a post-primary school

**CCEA:** The Council for Curriculum, Evaluation and Assessment (Northern Ireland)

**CEIST:** Catholic Education An Irish Schools Trust

**CLDN:** Community learning and development networks

**COGG:** An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta

**CPD:** Continuing professional development

**DAHG:** Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht

**DCYA:** Department of Children and Youth Affairs

**DEIS:** Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools

**DES:** Department of Education and Skills

**Droichead:** A 'Bridging Support' bilingual programme

**GLPA:** Gaeltacht language planning area

**ICT:** Information and Communications Technology

**ITE:** Initial teacher education

**Language Assistant Scheme (*Scéim na gCúntóirí Teanga*):** A scheme funded by the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (DAHG) where native Irish-language speakers are employed on a part-time basis to support the Irish language proficiency of students attending Gaeltacht schools.

**Scéim na bhFoghlaimoírí Gaeilge:** A scheme funded by the DAHG to improve students' proficiency in the Irish language in an authentic Gaeltacht setting.

**SEC:** State Examination Commission

**SEN:** Special educational needs

**SIS:** Statement of Individual Support

**SPHE:** Social, Personal and Health Education

**SSE:** School self-evaluation

**Séideán Sí:** An integrated Irish language programme for Irish-medium schools

**STen:** Performance on standardised tests in Irish reading, English reading and Mathematics may be reported in terms of a **STen Score** i.e. standard score on a scale of 1 to 10.

**TEG:** Teastas Eorpach na Gaeilge (European Certificate of Irish).

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings of a number of case studies carried out by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) during the period March to June 2014 on a sample of primary and post-primary schools located in the Gaeltacht. The focus of the case studies was on Irish-medium educational provision. According to DES statistics for 2013/2014, Irish-medium provision in Gaeltacht regions currently accounts for approximately 70% of primary pupils and 60% of post-primary students enrolled in Gaeltacht schools as currently defined, with English-medium education provided to the balance of pupils and students in both school contexts.

These case studies constitute one of a number of strands of the review on educational provision in the Gaeltacht undertaken by the DES. The outcomes of this review is intended to inform DES policy and provide policy options on future educational provision in the Gaeltacht. The review of Gaeltacht education is occurring in a context where each Gaeltacht community is expected to prepare a language plan and clarify its status as a Gaeltacht area, in accordance with the requirements of the Gaeltacht Act, 2012.

The purpose of the case studies on Gaeltacht primary and post-primary schools is to gain a more in-depth insight into the different Irish-medium approaches currently employed in various school settings and across differing sociolinguistic contexts.

This report presents an account and analysis of the instruction approaches and structures of educational provision in Gaeltacht schools as they are currently defined. The report also examines the key drivers underpinning effective Irish-medium education in Gaeltacht schools. Finally, the report outlines key findings and related actions for consideration in conjunction with the findings of the other strands of the Gaeltacht education review.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

A sample of 15 schools (9 primary and 6 post-primary) spread across the main Gaeltacht areas were invited by the Inspectorate to participate in the case studies. The selected schools were located both in the strongest Irish-speaking areas and on the periphery of the Gaeltacht, thus representing a range of sociolinguistic contexts in seven different counties. While almost all the schools in the case studies were exclusively Irish-medium, the sample also included a post-primary Gaeltacht school that is predominantly English-medium and that includes Irish-medium provision to a small number of students.

Each case-study visit was conducted by two inspectors. Sources of evidence included a review of in-school documentation, students' work, assessment data, and observation of teaching and learning across a range of curricular areas and at different class levels and year groups. Relevant school-based background information such as, school context, enrolment, staffing, Irish language classification and instruction was also collected in advance of visits.

In the case of each case-study school, focus groups and semi-structured interviews were used to gather information and gain insights from school-based personnel, students, and representatives from the wider Gaeltacht community. Interviews were conducted with principals, boards of management, members of in-school management teams, representatives of parents' associations and language assistants (*cuntóirí teanga*). Interviews were also conducted with teachers, including teachers in the special educational context and teachers with assigned whole-school responsibilities for Irish. Interviews and focus groups were also carried out with external bodies linked to the individual schools including various youth organisations and local community groups comprising the state-funded and

voluntary sectors such as Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta Teoranta, Oidhreacht Chorca Dhuibhne, Údarás na Gaeltachta and Cumann Lúthchleas Gael.

A summary statement on educational provision was completed on each school that participated in the case studies. The summary statement on each school included an outline of:

- the context of the school
- the Irish-medium education model being delivered in the school in terms of curricular provision, teaching approaches, and students' learning
- the effectiveness of the Irish-medium model employed in terms of promoting the development of learners' competence in Irish and use of the language, their attainment across the curriculum, and enabling the school to support the promotion of Irish as the language of the community
- the extent to which various drivers were supporting the delivery of the Irish-medium education model in the school including leadership and management, planning and school self-evaluation (SSE), parental involvement and support, community links and support, the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), resources and supports, teachers' language proficiency in Irish and their pedagogical knowledge and skills.

The summary statements on individual case-study schools were collated and are presented in this report. Extracts from summary statements on individual primary and post-primary schools are included throughout this report to illustrate the practices observed by inspectors.

The following quantitative terms are used throughout this report:

Quantitative term	Percentage of occurrences
Almost all	More than 90%
Most	75-90%
Majority	50-74%
Fewer than half / a substantial minority	25-49%
A small number	16-24%
A few	Up to 15%

## 2.1 Case-study school profile

Similar to almost all primary schools in Ireland, the nine Gaeltacht primary schools that participated in the case studies are under denominational patronage. At post-primary level, case studies were carried out in three community schools, one voluntary secondary school under the trusteeship of CEIST,<sup>1</sup> and two post-primary schools under the trusteeship of Education and Training Boards. All schools that participated in the case studies are co-educational.

The primary case-study schools range in size from small (with five teachers or less) to medium-sized schools (with 7 to 15 teachers). Four of the nine primary case-study schools have administrative principals. The post-primary case-study schools include small schools (less than 200 students), medium-sized schools (200-400 students) and large Gaeltacht schools (with an enrolment of more than 400 students).

Of the six post-primary schools selected, two schools have designated Irish-medium units or *Aonaid lán-Ghaeilge* to support the provision of Irish-medium education for particular student cohorts, but in very different sociolinguistic contexts. One of the post-primary schools that participated in the case studies has a 'Bridging Support' bilingual programme (*Droichead*) attached.

<sup>1</sup> CEIST = Catholic Education An Irish Schools Trust

Five of the primary and post-primary Gaeltacht schools that participated in the case studies are included in *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools* (DEIS), the DES action plan for educational inclusion. These schools benefit from enhanced financial and staffing measures, and access to a number of initiatives to enhance literacy and numeracy. All of the case-study schools, with the exception of two post-primary schools, access the Language Assistants' Scheme (*Scéim na gCúntóirí Teanga*), funded by the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. Seven case-study schools, mostly post-primary, have a small number of students enrolled from households whose first language is neither English nor Irish.

### 3. INSTRUCTION APPROACHES OBSERVED

The case studies show that a number of approaches to the delivery of Irish-medium education are practised in Gaeltacht schools. While there are some differences between primary and post-primary school contexts, the Irish-medium approaches observed in the case studies are broadly categorised, as follows:

- **Full instruction through Irish**
- **Bilingual approach**
- **Partial instruction through Irish**

It is important to note that the sample of Gaeltacht schools visited is not necessarily indicative of the proportion of schools in the Gaeltacht that conduct their work through the use of full instruction in Irish, through a bilingual approach, or through partial instruction in Irish.

#### 3.1 Full instruction through Irish

Full instruction through Irish is the predominant approach adopted in the majority of case-study primary and post-primary schools, regardless of the language profile of the learners in the school. In such instances, Irish is the language of instruction through which all subjects are taught, with the exception of English in all schools, and additionally, with the exception of modern languages in post-primary schools.

##### *Language maintenance or an immersion approach*

The use of a full instruction through Irish approach in case-study schools where most of the students enrolled are from Irish-speaking homes, is akin to what is described in the language education literature as a language maintenance approach. In such instances, the high concentration of first-language speakers of Irish and the distinctive linguistic identity which results, supports the efforts of the Gaeltacht school in contributing to the maintenance of Irish as the first language of these pupils:

*The position and status of Irish is strong in this school. Most families are native speakers. The school's enrolment policy indicates to all parents that this is a Gaeltacht school, so that the implications pertaining to this are clearly understood. A clear and achievable plan for Irish has been detailed by the school so that each member of staff is in agreement regarding the importance and use of Irish in the school. Irish is the language of communication that is always used at board meetings, parents' association meetings, amongst pupils, in the staff room, and within and outside the classroom. (Primary school: A)*

*The school is situated in a Gaeltacht language planning area (GLPA) where Irish has a strong status. The school community understands the important role it has in supporting the retention of Irish as a community language. In line with the school's policy for Irish, the board and the parents' association conduct their business through Irish and it is in Irish that the school policies are available. The school is effective in implementing an education model in which the main aim is to provide for teaching and learning through the medium of Irish. (Post-primary school: E)*

In case-study schools where native speakers are a minority, the full instruction through Irish approach is similar to an immersion approach i.e., the majority of students are immersed in their second language, Irish. The practice of total immersion is well established in some of these Gaeltacht schools, while in others, total immersion has been introduced in recent years to address the changing language profile of students from Irish-speaking to English-speaking homes and also to strengthen the position of Irish in the work of the Gaeltacht school:

*The use of Irish may have been diminishing in the school, but the school community has reviewed the situation in recent years and the board of management, the principal, the teachers, and the community as a whole are aware of the importance of the Irish language and the school's role in its preservation. It was clearly evident in the school plan and in discussions with the various focus groups that an Irish-medium education model is the aim of the school community as a whole. It was noted that Irish was the medium of instruction in all situations and that it was at all times the language of communication in the staff room and in the classrooms. (Primary school: H)*

*The school is very much supporting the preservation of the language in the locality. All activities are organised through the medium of Irish and Irish is accepted as the school's main language of communication. It is a great support to this post-primary school that the primary schools, from which the children come, are teaching through the medium of Irish and that they place a great emphasis on the spoken word. Most of the teachers on staff are native Irish speakers. They clearly are all very committed to the Irish language and to the school as a Gaeltacht school. (Post-primary school: B)*

### ***Shared understanding and commitment to full instruction through Irish***

A common feature of the case-study schools implementing full instruction through Irish, whether a language maintenance or immersion approach, is a shared understanding about the desirability and benefits of Irish-medium education and a strong commitment to its implementation. Generally, in such Gaeltacht schools, different facets of Irish culture are promoted on a whole-school basis. There is a strong desire to positively influence the behaviour and attitude of all members of the school community towards the Irish language, and to reinforce the Irish-language ethos and linguistic identity of the school.

In Gaeltacht schools implementing full instruction through Irish, all communications are conducted through Irish, and students are encouraged to use the language in their social interactions with adults and peers. Boards of management, and principals and senior management set high expectations regarding the use of Irish as the language of communication and instruction. Conscious efforts are made to encourage and model the use of the Irish language. In instances of best practice, these expectations are made explicit in whole-school planning documentation:

*In support of the consistent implementation of the Irish-medium education model throughout the school, the whole-school language policy indicates that the school's aim is to encourage children to accept that it is a natural practice to speak Irish in the yard and around the school. The school's vision is to provide each pupil with a high quality education through the medium of Irish in a balanced manner, and to foster a stimulating learning environment that promotes respect, intellectual, cultural and linguistic enrichment.....The school community as a whole is in agreement that Irish is the language used for all communication in the school, on the school's website, and in the school's correspondence..... Although the use of English is impacting on the use of Irish in the community over time, it was indicated that parents of all social classes in the community have now more respect for Irish, unlike the situation heretofore..... It was evident during the visit that teachers are vigilant in the playground in ensuring that Irish is the spoken language of the pupils. (Primary school: A)*

*The board of management and the school's senior management are in agreement on their vision for the school as a Gaeltacht school providing education through Irish. The school staff are regularly reminded of the school's Irish policy. The Irish policy also helps to inform the school community of the Irish-medium education model that is being implemented. The board and the parents' association operate through the medium of Irish and all school policies are in Irish. Furthermore, and in support of the provision of a curriculum through the medium of Irish, the school reports on pupil achievement through the medium of Irish. However, parents who do not have Irish are not impeded from asking for information or assistance in English. (Post-primary school: E)*

In many case-study schools implementing full instruction through Irish at primary level, this shared understanding is manifested in the celebration and acknowledgement of pupils' academic efforts and cultural achievements in Irish at whole-school assemblies:

*Prizes are awarded each month at a whole-school assembly to pupils who make a particular effort to speak Irish. (Primary school: A)*

*The weekly assembly and the efforts of the school's music group have a positive impact. They enhance the Irish atmosphere and the promotion of Irish culture in the school. Prizes are awarded to pupils for their efforts to speak Irish. Irish songs are taught and pupils are provided with opportunities to listen to Irish music. (Primary school: D)*

### ***Full instruction through Irish and delayed commencement of instruction in English***

In most of the primary case-study schools implementing a full instruction through Irish approach, the introduction of English is delayed for varying periods in infant classes. Three schools commence the teaching of English from the beginning of the final term of junior infants, three schools introduce English phonics from the beginning of the first term of senior infants, one school introduces English from the second term of senior infants, and one school introduces phonics in English from the beginning of junior infants. In many instances, a strong emphasis is placed on the development of communicative language and phonics skills in Irish during the period before English is introduced:

*A phonological awareness programme, a graded reading scheme as well as many stimulating materials from Northern Ireland are used to implement the Irish curriculum, for example, phonics for Irish; word study; initial sounds, and self-designed auditory materials on flash cards. (Primary school: C)*

Delaying the introduction of English has been a recent development in the majority of the case-study primary schools where such a practice is now in place. The introduction of the practice has been informed by an awareness among principals and teachers of the need to ensure that both first and second-language speakers of Irish have additional exposure to the language, in a context where there is ongoing decline in the numbers of native speakers of Irish, and in the Irish language proficiency of pupils enrolling in the school.

Other reasons for a delay in the teaching of English include a desire among school personnel to establish the Irish language ethos of the school more strongly and to enrich pupils' Irish language skills, so that they can learn more effectively through Irish later on. A number of Gaeltacht schools reported that pupils' understanding of phonological awareness skills in English is expedited when the teaching of English is delayed in infant classes, due to the additional time spent on the teaching of phonics in Irish and the consequent transfer of phonological awareness skills from one language to another:

*This year the school is implementing a phonological scheme in Irish from the Áisaonad. The teachers are happy that it is responding to a gap that was there and that pupils are attaining improved skills to break up words and to use 'word attack' skills in Irish. They feel that the skills learnt in Irish transferred to English and this greatly helped pupils when they started to learn English. (Primary school: D)*

In those case-study primary schools with multi-grade classrooms of up to four class groupings, school personnel reported that the positive impact of delaying the introduction to English may be diluted in instances where pupils in junior infants are present whilst pupils in other class groupings (senior infants, first and second classes) are taught English. However, in some instances, case-study schools have made alternative arrangements to support the implementation of early immersion in Irish, as demonstrated in the following example:

*Although junior and senior infants are in the same room, it is school practice not to teach English to senior infants until after lunch, so that the junior infants are not present in the classroom at this time. (Primary School: C)*

### ***Teaching and learning in the full instruction through Irish model***

Some effective practices relating to teaching and learning were noted in case-study Gaeltacht schools that engage in full instruction through Irish namely, differentiation of students' language learning, use of the Irish language, use of support materials and resources, use of language assistants (Cúntóirí Teanga), and student attainment reporting practices.

#### ***Differentiated learning***

There were some examples in case study schools of effective differentiation of students' language learning in accordance with their needs and language profile:

*Pupils with high levels of ability had the freedom to create more challenging texts, while other pupils were creating sentences with the support of various scaffolds. Pupils are enabled to explore and create their own language using unscripted drama...Pupils' reading experience is enhanced by providing them with opportunities to read original Irish language books from the locality and contemporary books, and by reading collaboratively with parents. (Primary school: C)*

*The school caters for the learning needs of pupils from diverse linguistic backgrounds by the equitable distribution of additional resources across classrooms..... Concrete experiences using communicative contexts and real objects, practical activities, and materials from the locality support the reinforcement of the curriculum. The fact that every class teacher is focusing on improving language development and phonetic and written accuracy in Irish is very positive. In general, a very good emphasis is placed on encouraging higher-order thinking skills based on teachers' skilful questioning and by using a wide range of real books and stories published by local authors. As pupils progress through the school, their standard of writing in the different genres and in different subjects develops very well...Extended oral language opportunities provided for pupils in drama and in extra-curricular activities greatly improve their oral language development and advance their language enrichment. (Primary school: A)*

However, it should be noted that such differentiation practices, as evidenced during case-study visits appears to be rare, particularly at post-primary level:

*There is plenty of scope in the teaching and learning practices to provide more variety in the approaches used, to give students more responsibility, to develop their awareness of themselves as learners, and to ensure sufficient challenges in learning... It is also necessary to focus on systematic planning so as to improve the participation and achievement of students in subjects across the curriculum, and to use the planning for literacy and numeracy to this end. (Post-primary school: E)*

#### ***Use of Irish language support materials and resources***

Many case-study schools that practise full instruction through Irish use Irish language textbooks or teacher-designed materials, including ICT presentations and worksheets, which supplement the use of textbooks or provide an alternative to textbooks:

*An appropriate emphasis is placed on teaching terminology in Irish and on the range of language for the curricular subjects by using interactive whiteboards, children's copybooks, and resources from the locality to enrich pupils' Irish. An emphasis is placed on the provision of language enrichment for pupils through the curriculum as an important step towards success in learning. (Primary school: C)*

Some of the post-primary case-study schools also have arrangements in place to facilitate the explicit teaching of curriculum and subject specific vocabulary and language structures on a systematic school-wide basis or at a subject department level:

*Subject departments have made very good efforts in collaborating to provide the terminology and range of language for Irish to assist students' understanding and learning, with particular attention focused on students from diverse backgrounds. (Post-primary school: F)*

In many case-study schools implementing full instruction through Irish, strong links are fostered between the Irish-language work in classrooms and the language support provided by language assistants (*Cúntóirí Teanga*), who are native speakers of Irish in almost all cases. Support is provided to both first and second-language speakers of Irish using different approaches in different schools:

*Great support is provided to pupils in the classrooms, and the language assistant under the supervision of the teacher also works with small groups for group-reading. Specific vocabulary is taught in a very structured manner and there is ongoing assessment of what pupils have learned. (Primary school: C)*

*The school has a language assistant who works with parents and students. For the most part, the language assistant works with students who are weak in Irish. This additional support is being provided outside the classroom. (Post-primary school: D)*

### **Reporting practices**

Most case-study schools implementing full instruction through Irish issue school reports through the medium of Irish to parents. An English-language glossary is provided in some instances. In other cases, clarifications are provided orally through the medium of English, if necessary.

### **Use of Irish outside the classroom**

The case-study schools at primary and post-primary levels implementing full instruction through Irish often engage in the positive encouragement, reinforcement and monitoring of students' use of Irish outside the classroom, in contexts such as the school yard and during extra-curricular activities. In such instances, particular attention may be given to the discrete teaching of social language with a view to enabling pupils to practise the language in the playground during break times:

*A school improvement plan has been developed and it is the aim of the school to further develop pupils' competency in the language through the implementation of 'Ár dTeanga Dhraíochta'. This is a very useful language booklet containing helpful vocabulary for pupils and parents to support their language learning and language use. Attention is directed towards teaching appropriate language to the pupils, correcting pupils' common errors to improve accuracy, awarding stars and prizes for effort, teaching specific language and games for the playground, playing games in class, and using Séideán Sí systematically. A stimulating print environment in Irish is in evidence throughout the school and there is an emphasis on displays with Irish language terminology. Music, poems, rhymes and songs are used to good effect to teach and to progress the language. Pupils' confidence in using the language has improved greatly and they clearly enjoy the learning activities. (Primary school: G)*

*It was evident during the case-study visit that teachers pay close attention to pupils' use of Irish language in the playground... Prizes in the form of tickets are awarded daily to pupils who make a particular effort to use Irish in the playground. (Primary school: C)*

In other instances, senior primary pupils or post-primary Transition Year students may act as peer mentors who encourage the use of Irish outside the classroom among younger learners either in their own school or in another school:

*The senior pupils monitor the infants in the yard to encourage them to use Irish only in the school. (Primary school: F)*

*Transition Year students have an opportunity to teach playground games in the adjacent primary Gaeltacht school. This project is organised as part of the 'Cluas sa Chlós' scheme. (Post-primary school: B)*

However, as evidenced, particularly in post-primary case-study schools, the potential of empowering the students to take responsibility for promoting the use of the language outside of the classroom is not always realised, and there is need for the Gaeltacht school to be proactive in terms of motivating the students in this regard:

*Students are given no responsibility to provide leadership regarding the issue of the use of Irish in the school. There is no mentoring system in place to assist in promoting the Irish language. Although class leaders are in place in the school, the issue of Irish usage does not arise at all at student level other than they are reminded occasionally to use Irish....Opportunities are being lost here in giving students responsibility to speak and to promote the language. (Post-primary school: B)*

*The students are an excellent resource in the school and they need to be used to a greater extent to fulfil the school's aim in regard to Irish. (Post-primary school: D)*

## 3.2 Bilingual approach

A bilingual approach, where curriculum content is taught using both Irish and English, was not common practice in the schools that participated in the Gaeltacht case studies. A decision was made at whole-school level to implement a bilingual approach in just one primary case-study school in a context where English is the home language of most pupils' households. A bilingual approach was also implemented in an ad-hoc manner with individual students or groups of students during lessons in a number of post-primary case-study schools.

### ***Bilingual approach at primary level***

In the case of the Gaeltacht case-study primary school that implements a bilingual approach, specific reference to the bilingual approach is included in the school's Irish language plan, which is available on the website to the wider school community. The decision, to move to a bilingual approach was taken following a review of pupils' levels of attainment in Irish and much deliberation at whole-school level, both by staff and the board of management.

*The school's fundamental aim is that all pupils be fluent in Irish, but the staff as a whole is also focused on achieving a high standard of education for pupils... The board stated that they were very satisfied that pupils were able to speak Irish and that they were proud of their language. It is desirable that the board and the staff of the school are in agreement regarding the importance of the language and it is clear that the school has made progress in recent years in promoting Irish as a spoken language. (Primary school: I)*

The school's whole-school decision to adopt a bilingual approach was largely influenced by the changing sociolinguistic and socio-economic status of its community. The decision was also informed by the difficulty experienced by some pupils, whose first language is English, in accessing the curriculum through the medium of Irish. Parental and teacher concerns about total instruction through Irish, particularly in light of the constraints in accessing Irish-medium education at post-primary level in the community was also an important factor in choosing a bilingual approach. Another reason cited by teachers relates to the fact that the pupils transferring to post-primary are required to complete an assessment in Mathematics through English and are assessed on their levels of competency in English, and not in Irish.

The primary school serves a small number of households whose first language is Irish, and fewer than half of the households have one parent with competence in Irish. There was a concern among teachers and individual parents that the additional time invested in teaching curriculum terminology through Irish could compromise the students' levels of attainment in certificate examinations at post-primary level in curricular areas, such as Mathematics and Science. The absence of clear guidance and an overarching policy position at national level in relation to immersion education was also a factor resulting in this Gaeltacht school's decision to pursue a bilingual approach.

However, Irish remains the dominant language of communication in the school environs and for all cultural activities. There are also clear expectations that pupils will use Irish in all social interactions both within and outside classrooms. A strong emphasis is placed on Irish language cultural activities to enhance the school's Irish language identity. In recent years, teachers have made heightened efforts to use and encourage the use of the Irish language, develop stronger links with parents, use ICT resources,

and implement *Seideán Sí*, the Irish language programme for Irish-medium schools, in a systematic manner in all classes. Pupils' knowledge of Irish language vocabulary and sentence structure is developed through song and rhyme at the early stages of development. The environments in almost all classrooms include print in both Irish and English. In a few classrooms, the print on display is almost solely in Irish.

However, the same level of priority has not been given to whole-school planning for the systematic teaching of Irish language vocabulary and terminology required to teach curriculum content through Irish in this school:

*Although the aim of the school is to provide a high standard of education for all pupils in this school, it is clear that the school staff do their best to prioritise Irish in their daily communication and as the social language of the school, but it is evident in different classrooms that the academic terminology for various subjects is not being taught through the medium of Irish. (Primary school: 1)*

The implementation of a bilingual approach in this school means that most curricular policies are presented in English apart from the policies' aims which are presented through Irish. A small number of policies are presented either bilingually or in Irish only. Policies for a number of curricular areas, such as Science, Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), and Arts Education, are not always reflective of the emphasis that is placed in some classrooms on teaching curriculum content through Irish.

Although Irish is the language of communication used in all classrooms implementing a bilingual approach in this primary school, the extent to which Irish is the dominant language of instruction across the curriculum varies from class to class and across curricular areas. Where there is a stronger weighting towards instruction through Irish, particular attention is given to the explicit teaching of the Irish language vocabulary of curriculum areas either through the use of drama, and/or to the preparation of supplementary notes on key vocabulary by teachers, which serves as an additional scaffold for pupils. Handouts of Irish language phrases and key vocabulary are also provided for parents:

*During the lesson, the terminology and the new vocabulary were taught very effectively and the pupils were very actively engaged in learning. The teacher felt the language was too difficult in the social, environmental and scientific education textbook used and she prepared her own notes for the lesson. She prepared activity sheets for pupils to practise the new phrases at home as reinforcement. This teacher also believed that drama greatly assisted pupils' confidence and mastery of Irish language words and phrases. (Primary school: 1)*

In this school, formal English and Irish reading is introduced towards the end of junior infants. A range of Irish and English-language programmes, such as those relating to phonological awareness, is used to teach reading.

In general, as children progress through this primary school and are exposed to a wider range of curricular content, the emphasis placed on full instruction through Irish decreases. For example, by the time pupils reach sixth class, the bilingual approach used across most curricular areas places a greater reliance on the use of English-language textbooks and the provision of explanations in English.

Maths terminology is taught through Irish for the most part up to first class, while from second class onwards a bilingual approach is adopted. Tables and computation are generally taught through Irish, and as mathematical concepts become more complex and challenging, the dominant language used to explain concepts is English. This was also reflected in pupils' copy work. A deliberate decision was made by the primary school implementing the bilingual approach to use English textbooks for Mathematics. An English-language version of standardised tests in Mathematics is also used.

Where pupils have additional learning needs in the primary school implementing a bilingual approach, supplementary support is provided in English and Mathematics, and to a lesser extent in Irish. Supplementary support is targeted at pupils' identified needs and is provided through Irish where the child's home language is Irish. In most instances, however, particularly in the case of Mathematics, supplementary support is provided using a bilingual approach and mainly through English, using

resources and diagnostic tests in English. Progress reports are issued to parents either in English or Irish, depending on the language competency of pupils' home language.

### ***Bilingual approach at post-primary level***

At post-primary level, the bilingual approach is implemented in a number of case-study Gaeltacht schools to address the language-comprehension difficulties of a minority of students in different subject areas. Personnel in these schools report that the use of a bilingual approach for such students is largely influenced by the unavailability of suitable textbooks in some subject areas, the complex and inaccessible Irish-language terminology in the textbooks available, and the level of technical difficulty associated with particular subjects:

*Difficulties with terminology and with differing terminology used in textbooks and with examination papers were reported, including materials provided from year to year from the State Examination Commission...The availability to candidates of Irish and English versions of the examination papers were mentioned as a reason for this practice. (Post-primary school: E)*

It should be noted that this commentary reflects the perception of personnel in the case studies and may not take proper account of the positive improvements made in recent years in the provision of a wider range of good-quality Irish-language materials. COGG and the State Examinations Commission (SEC) pays particular attention to the use of the Official Standard (*Caighdeán Oifigiúil*) in its translation and editing work. The State Examinations Commission has also provided schools and students with access to Irish-medium versions of past examination papers on its website [www.examinations.ie](http://www.examinations.ie) to enable students to become familiar with the terminology and vocabulary used in different subject areas.

In a few instances and as observed during case study visits, the use of a bilingual approach in providing additional support to students may be due to deficiencies in the Irish-language competency levels of some teachers:

*The competence and ability of some teachers in Irish, and consequently in the teaching of the language, is a matter of significant concern. In a quarter of the classes, it was apparent that the teacher was not comfortable with the language. This is significant and impacts greatly on teaching and learning and on the attitude of students to Irish and to those teachers who do not have much Irish. It is a challenge for the school to manage staff recruitment and to source fully qualified teachers who are fully competent in Irish.... Although Irish was the medium of instruction and communication for the majority of lessons, students noted that the language used during group work depended on the language competency of the teacher and students.... It was acknowledged that an emphasis was placed on the use of a bilingual approach in supporting the development of students' literacy skills. (Post-primary school: D)*

## **3.3 Partial instruction through Irish**

Partial instruction through Irish or a partial immersion approach is implemented when students spend part of the school day learning a number of subjects through the medium of Irish in order to develop proficiency in the language. Therefore, for the remainder of the school day, all other subjects, with the exception of foreign languages, are taught through the medium of English. The implementation of the partial instruction through Irish approach varies in accordance with the number of subjects taught through Irish, and the extent to which Irish is used and Irish culture promoted in the school environs outside of classrooms. Compared to full instruction through Irish, students who experience the partial immersion approach have much less exposure to the Irish language.

The partial instruction through Irish approach was observed in just one post-primary school setting i.e. an Irish-medium unit (*Aonad lán-Ghaeilge*) attached to a large English-medium post-primary school located on the periphery of the Gaeltacht. Students in the unit have access to instruction through Irish for four subjects - Mathematics, Science, History and Geography. Irish-language textbooks are typically used for these subjects and are supplemented, as required, with teacher-designed supports, additional notes for students, the use of ICT, and active-learning methodologies. The students in the

*Aonad* access all other educational provision, including Irish as a subject, in the English-medium host school.

When the Irish-medium unit was established, the intention was that full instruction through Irish would be provided for students up to junior cycle initially. Members of the school community contend that the absence of Irish-medium provision to senior cycle in the unit has had an adverse impact on the demand from students for places in the unit. Although approximately one third of all households with children attending the parent school are Irish-speaking, the number of students enrolled in the unit at the time of the case study was very small. This indicates a lack of confidence in the limited Irish-medium provision of the unit with parental preference for English-medium provision rather than a half-measure Irish-medium provision.

The school community also asserts that the unavailability of a teacher with a co-ordinating role (*múinteoir i bhfeighil*) in recent years to lead the development of the unit, together with low student enrolment and limited subject options through the medium of Irish, have had a negative impact on the confidence of parents and students in the quality of Irish-medium educational provision in the unit. The choice of subjects available through Irish in the unit is also largely dictated by the availability of teachers in the parent Gaeltacht post-primary school who have sufficient competency in the language to teach through Irish:

*It was mentioned at the meeting with the board of management that when a fairly large number of new teachers were being recruited some years ago, an opportunity was lost in not taking the language requirements of the Irish-medium unit into account at that time. (Post-primary school: A)*

In addition, the school plan does not make specific reference to the unit or to the specific needs of first-language speakers of Irish attending the school.

### 3.4 Impact of Irish-medium approaches

This section describes the impact of the different approaches to Irish-medium education adopted by the Gaeltacht primary and post-primary schools that participated in the case studies in terms of meeting the educational and language needs of their students.

#### Impact of full instruction through Irish

The case studies highlight that full instruction through Irish, when implemented effectively, has a positive impact on students' learning and Irish-language development. In such instances, students display a high level of proficiency and positive disposition towards the Irish language and generally display good or very good levels of progress and attainment across the curriculum:

*Pupils in this school have achieved a high standard of fluency in Irish and they display pride in the language and in Irish culture..... An analysis of standardised tests in Irish, English and Mathematics indicates that the school is succeeding in improving pupil achievement in these areas.....Pupils also displayed a very good understanding of the other curricular areas observed during the visit.....This school is evidently supporting the development of Irish as a communicative language and as a community language in this Gaeltacht area. (Primary school: C)*

It would also appear that where full instruction through Irish is practised, the school is an important focal point and support for the promotion of the language in the local community, particularly in contexts where Irish is no longer spoken on a widespread basis.

*This school displays a strong Irish language ethos, even though Irish is not a living language in the local community. No family in the school uses Irish as the spoken language of the home....Despite this, Irish is used as the language of communication throughout the school. The entire curriculum is implemented through Irish and teachers provide pupils with every support to ensure that education through Irish is available to them.... Pupils in the school have a reasonable standard of spoken Irish and the principal and teachers intend to raise the standard significantly through the implementation of the school's improvement plan. Staff members are committed*

*to this plan. ...An analysis of standardised tests in Irish, English and Mathematics indicates that pupils have made significant progress in a short period of time, but significant work remains to be done....It is clear that this school supports the development of Irish and its retention as a living language in this Gaeltacht area, but perhaps too much is dependent on the leadership of the principal. (Primary school: G)*

*The school is greatly supporting the preservation of the language in the community. All activities are organised through Irish and Irish is considered the school's main language of communication. Students who come to this school with little Irish manage to speak the language well. The school is very good at supporting students with little Irish.... All students in the focus group displayed pride and respect for Irish and clearly understood the advantages of having Irish as their first or second language.... Parents referred to the importance of the education system in preserving and maintaining Irish in the Gaeltacht and reference was made to the critical issue of sustainability of Irish as the language of the community and the home. (Post-primary school: B)*

Not surprisingly, the case studies at post-primary level indicate that Irish-medium education, whether partial or full instruction through Irish, is likely to have a positive impact on the performance of students in Irish in certificate examinations. Examination data at post-primary level for the four-year period 2010-2013 indicated that the five case-study post-primary case-study schools implementing full instruction through Irish were conspicuously ahead of the national average, for uptake and attainment in Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate higher level Irish. Due to the very small proportion of students attending the Irish-medium unit attached to the school where almost all students received an English-medium education, this discrete examination data was not extrapolated for analysis.

Nonetheless, there was an awareness in schools that high attainment in certificate examinations may not be a sufficiently high benchmark in terms of the level of Irish-language competence that is desirable for students in Gaeltacht schools, particularly in regard to accuracy in written Irish:

*A challenge that the school recognised was that students were assuming that they would achieve a grade A1 in Irish, but that they are behind regarding written accuracy in Irish and Irish grammar. (Post-primary school: F)*

Despite the potentially positive impact of full instruction through Irish on students' attitude and outcomes in Irish, the case studies indicate that Gaeltacht schools that practise full instruction through Irish have to contend on an ongoing basis with the encroachment of English on the work of the school and on language practices among students:

*The focus group of students that met with the inspectors had a very positive attitude towards Irish. None of them at any time considered post-primary schooling through English. Although Irish was spoken by both teachers and students in those lessons where visits took place, and all students spoke in Irish to the inspectors, English was overheard amongst students as they interacted with each other – even during lessons. There was a gap apparent between the aims in the school's Irish policy and the language the students chose to use amongst themselves. (Post-primary school: F)*

*Although school management and the staff of the school are maintaining a very strong position regarding teaching through Irish, some flexibility applied to the use of English amongst students and to the practice of answering examination papers through English. Although the influence of English is very apparent in the school, the situation is not disimproving, according to the staff. (Post-primary school: B)*

It is also evident that full instruction through Irish may not be enough in itself to ensure that the desirable cross-curricular educational outcomes are achieved.

### ***Attainment at primary level***

A review of the national standardised test returns made by all primary Gaeltacht case-study schools to the Department in 2013-2014 indicates that while the attainment with regard to English reading and Mathematics of many of these schools compares fairly favourably with national attainment in these areas, there is considerable variation in attainment amongst the eight case-study schools that make provision for full instruction through Irish. This variation in attainment is evident particularly in the proportions of higher performing and lower performing pupils in these schools.

- In Mathematics, seven of the eight case-study schools implementing full instruction through Irish had no pupils attaining STen 1<sup>2</sup> in comparison with just under 1% nationally. Six of these eight schools had no pupils attaining in the STen range 1-2 in comparison with just under 3% nationally, and four of the eight schools had no pupils attaining in the STen range 1-3 in comparison with 5% nationally. In contrast, two of the schools had relatively high proportions of pupils attaining STens 1-3 (19.5% and 11.8%) respectively.
- In one case-study school, 50% of pupils attained in the STen range 8-10 in Mathematics. Between 35%-40% of pupils in two other schools attained in the STen range 8-10. However, four schools implementing full instruction through Irish had no pupils that attained STen 10 in Mathematics.
- In English reading, three out of eight case-study schools had no pupils attaining in the lower STen range of 1-3. With the exception of one school that had a relatively high proportion of pupils (11.7%), no case-study school implementing full instruction through Irish had more than 4% of pupils attaining a STen of 1-3 in English reading.
- Between 26% and 38% of pupils in five of the case-study schools implementing full instruction through Irish attained STens in the higher STen range of 8-10 in English reading. This compares favourably with the national average of 26%. However, three schools had considerably fewer pupils in this upper STen range in English reading.
- Similarly, there was significant variation in Irish reading attainment among the case-study schools implementing full instruction through Irish, as evidenced, in particular, in the proportions of higher-performing and lower-performing pupils.
- Seven of the eight case-study schools implementing full instruction through Irish had no pupils performing at STen 1 in Irish reading, and half of these case-study schools had no pupils performing at the STen range 1-2. Of these, three schools implementing full instruction through Irish had no pupils attaining a STen of 3 or less. One of the schools had no pupils performing at the STen range 1-4 in Irish reading in contrast with three other schools that provide instruction through Irish, where between 30-37% of pupils attained in the STen range 1-4.
- Between two fifths and three fifths of pupils in three schools attained in the range of STen 8-10. Approximately a third of pupils in three other schools attained in the STen range 8-10, while 8% and 20% of pupils in the two remaining schools attained STens 8-10. In one of these schools, no pupils attained either STen 9 or STen 10.

### *Attainment at post- primary level*

A review of examination data from five of the six post-primary case-study schools that implement full instruction through Irish relative to the national norms suggests that apart from a few notable exceptions, there is a need for higher expectations in these schools regarding performance of students and uptake of subjects at higher level.

- While uptake in the case-study post-primary schools in higher level English was considerably above the national average, attainment varied between slightly to considerably below the national average.
- In the case of Mathematics at Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate higher level, uptake in the post-primary case-study schools was below the national average, and attainment at higher level Mathematics was notably below national norms, with the exception of two schools, one of which was considerably above national norms.
- Uptake and attainment in French at higher level Junior Certificate in the post-primary case-study schools that offered the subject was considerably above the national average, while uptake and

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<sup>2</sup> Performance on standardised tests may also be reported in terms of a *STen Score* (standard ten score). These scores are on a scale of 1 to 10. They tell us about children's achievement in Irish reading, English reading and Mathematics. For example, a STen score of 5 or 6 indicates that children's performance on standardised tests is 'average' relative to other children at the children's class level nationally. There are also STen scores above and below the average.

attainment in French were mixed at Leaving Certificate high level. Two post-primary case-study schools performed well above the national average in Leaving Certificate Higher Level French.

- Uptake and attainment in Junior Certificate higher level Science were somewhat below the national average. In the Leaving Certificate higher level science subjects examined (Biology and Chemistry), uptake and attainment rates were high in one case-study school compared with the national average. Uptake and attainment in Science in the remaining case-study schools were mixed, either marginally above or below, or notably below the national average in fewer than half of the case-study schools.
- In the humanities subject examined (e.g. , Geography), uptake rates among the majority of case-study post-primary schools were close to the national average, while attainment rates showed an improving trend from Junior Certificate to Leaving Certificate in almost all cases.

The case studies suggest that the necessary leadership structures and planning, teaching and learning processes, as well as other key drivers, need to be in place to support its effective delivery. This is illustrated in the following examples:

*The Irish-medium education model is effective on the whole. Students who come to the school with little Irish manage to speak the language well. The school is very good in supporting students who do not have much Irish. However, the school is not doing much to promote Irish as a communicative language amongst students other than the emphasis placed on drama. An intensive Irish course should be provided for students who come to the school with little or no Irish....*

*School management indicated that students have a very good standard of achievement relative to their abilities in Irish and in other subjects. This is true in regard to Irish with 100% of the students achieving a grade A, B or C in Junior Certificate higher level and 95% in Leaving Certificate higher level. 27% achieved a grade A1 or A2 in the Leaving Certificate higher level in the years from 2010 to 2013. In the same four years, 55% took the higher level English examination and 75% of those students achieved grade A, B or C....*

*During the same period, the school was within the national norms in terms of participation and achievement in higher level Mathematics, based on an analysis of the results in the certificate examinations....The school needs to focus on systematic planning to improve pupil participation and achievement throughout the curriculum and to use the planning for literacy and numeracy to this end. (Post-primary school: B)*

*But it is clear that the school has other leadership challenges. It is reasonable that the school should address the standard of teaching and learning...There is currently no language plan available based on teaching methodologies. The school is depending on its reputation for music and art, as well as the certificate examinations, rather than on teaching standards. The connection between classroom activities and progress in the language itself appears to be unclear for the school staff. It would be well worth implementing the school self-evaluation process to realise the given language aims of the school and of the community. (Post-primary school: D)*

The case studies also suggest that when the correct drivers are in place, full instruction through Irish has a positive impact on learners' attainment, not just in Irish, but across the curriculum. One of the post-primary case-study schools, which implements full instruction through Irish compares favourably with national norms with regard to take up of higher-level subjects and performance across subjects in the certificate examinations, and in many instances is above the national norms. This school is also very successful in winning the support of parents and the local community and in engaging students in sport and other cultural activities.

Similarly at primary level, a number of case-study schools that practise full instruction through Irish achieve favourable levels of attainment, across English reading and Mathematics as evidenced in standardised tests, relative to that of other Gaeltacht schools and nationally. These schools also achieve favourable levels of attainment in Irish reading relative to that of other Gaeltacht schools, and Irish-medium schools nationally outside of the Gaeltacht (*scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge*).

## **Impact of bilingual approach**

Notwithstanding the contextual limitations in relation to generalisability within the case-study sample, the case studies reveal that, while a bilingual approach may have some benefits in terms of the communicative and cultural dimension of language acquisition, it also has a number of limitations.

### ***Bilingual approach - primary***

As observed in one Gaeltacht case-study primary school, the bilingual approach has the potential to impact positively on learners' competence and fluency in Irish, where they are exposed to enriched Irish-language input from teachers, and priority is given to the development of pupils' social communication skills and their involvement in cultural activities to promote the use of the Irish language:

*The very high level of Irish language competence and spoken language of all teachers greatly influences practice in the implementation of the bilingual education model in this school. A great emphasis is placed on drama through Irish and on participating in a wide range of cultural and sporting activities, song contests, writing and drama competitions to promote pupils' language enrichment. Pupils have attained a high standard of fluency in Irish and they display pride in the language and in Irish culture. (Primary school: C)*

This school also achieves very good standards of attainment in English reading and Mathematics, as evidenced for example in standardised test results. Nonetheless, it needs to be borne in mind that there are many other factors other than teaching through Irish, such as the school's socio-economic status, and the use of effective teaching pedagogies observed, that may have influenced pupil attainment in this school.

However, the use of the bilingual approach, where adopted as a whole-school policy, as evidenced in this Gaeltacht school, does not appear to support pupils to develop sufficient language proficiency in Irish that is necessary to engage them cognitively with the full curriculum through Irish, particularly in middle and senior classes, where there is a greater breadth and depth of curriculum content to teach and learn.

*According to school management, it is more important for pupils to master a concept rather than struggling with the concepts in Irish. The difficulty for pupils in the class who had specific language needs was also mentioned, as was the importance of explaining concepts through English for the sake of improving pupils' understanding and attainment. (Primary school: C)*

The challenge in using a bilingual approach is somewhat reflected in the lower proportion of pupils attaining higher levels in Irish reading in standardised tests, which compare less favourably with the attainment of pupils in English reading and Mathematics in this school and with the attainment of pupils in Irish reading in almost all case-study schools implementing full instruction through Irish. Such limitations can adversely impact on the motivation of parents and students to access and avail of Irish-medium education at post-primary level.

### ***Bilingual approach - post-primary***

As indicated in some post-primary case-study schools, a bilingual approach, when used judiciously, may benefit students experiencing learning difficulty or those with special educational needs whose second language is Irish, in order to consolidate and reinforce their understanding of complex concepts in the particular curricular area:

*Irish was widely spoken during the lesson, and clarifications were provided in English where necessary. A commendable effort was made to ensure students' understanding of terminology and the practice was particularly successful when students were asked to practise the use of these terms orally.... Individual help was provided to students when necessary. (Post-primary school: C)*

However, as evidenced in a few case-study schools, an over dependency on and overuse of the bilingual approach can lead over time to an erosion of the school's Irish language ethos. In addition, the absence of a clear and agreed school policy on the ethos of the school and the language of instruction, can lead to a lack of certainty among teachers, students, parents, and the local community about the place of the Irish language in the work of the school. Such uncertainty can lead to an over-reliance on the direct translation method and the use of English-language textbooks. It can also lead to inconsistency in the teaching of language and curriculum vocabulary and the terminology necessary to support students' language proficiency within individual schools:

*It was reported that it is possible for students to do house exams and/or certificate exams through English in certain subjects. Difficulties with terminology and with differing terminology used in textbooks and with certificate examination papers were noted...This presents a particular challenge for the implementation of the school's policy to provide education through Irish. (Post-primary school: E)*

### **Impact of partial instruction through Irish**

The case-study school where partial instruction through Irish was implemented indicates that, although there are some gains in terms of students' attainment in Irish, the implementation of a partial instruction through Irish approach has limitations in a Gaeltacht school context, as the students do not receive the same level of exposure to Irish-medium education as in settings where there is full instruction through Irish. The experience of this school indicates that this is potentially exacerbated in instances where partial instruction through Irish is being provided in an Irish-medium unit attached to an English-medium host school, and particularly when the Irish-medium provision is available for the junior cycle only:

*Provision through Irish is currently too restricted. The unit itself has no identity or standing in the school community, thus weakening the interest and commitment of parents, teachers and students.... Parents displayed great empathy for the unit but they were also clearly frustrated regarding the limited provision through Irish that was available to their children... All students were of the opinion that the unit would be more successful if the Irish-medium provision was available as far as the Leaving Certificate. They mentioned other students who were native Irish speakers but did not opt to attend the unit because of the limited Irish-medium provision and the difficulties in reverting to English for the senior cycle. It was stated that there were advantages to being in the unit because it was easier to learn in small classes and through the medium of Irish. (Post-primary school: A)*

## **4. STRUCTURES OF EDUCATIONAL PROVISION**

The case studies show that there are three main structures that support educational provision in the Gaeltacht:

- The stand-alone Gaeltacht school
- The stand-alone Gaeltacht school with a 'Bridging Support' bilingual programme (The *Droichead* Programme)
- Irish-medium unit (*Aonad lán-Ghaeilge*)

### **4.1 The stand-alone Gaeltacht school**

Most of the educational provision in the case-study schools is in 'stand-alone' buildings. At primary level, a high proportion of the 'stand-alone' case-study schools are small schools with multi-grade classrooms and teaching principals. There is greater variation in the size of school at post-primary level, although all have administrative principals. Almost all Gaeltacht 'stand-alone' schools included in the case studies were established between the mid-1930s and mid-1970s. One school at primary level was established early in the twentieth century, while at post-primary level, one school was established in the first decade of the twenty first century. The schools that participated in the Gaeltacht

case studies included small post-primary schools of less than 200 students. Schools of this size are greatly constrained in the level of subject choice that they can offer their students.

For many years, the primary focus of the ‘stand-alone’ Gaeltacht school was the education of children from the local community whose first language was Irish for the most part. This traditional profile has altered significantly, due to the changing sociolinguistic profiles of Gaeltacht communities in which the schools are located. Gaeltacht schools now need to ensure that the needs of both first and second-language speakers of Irish are addressed, as in many instances, English is the first language of the majority of students enrolled.

Full instruction through Irish is a feature of most of the ‘stand-alone’ Gaeltacht primary and post-primary schools that participated in the case studies. As indicated in the case studies, the independent stand-alone school is an important focal point for the Irish language in local communities in the Gaeltacht. In particular, the stand-alone structure supports the Gaeltacht school in establishing a clear language identity, which in turn ensures that the Irish language has a presence in those communities that are mainly English-speaking. As evidenced in many case-study Gaeltacht schools, the strong emphasis in promoting Irish-language cultural activities and linkages with the local community instils a strong sense of pride and loyalty amongst members of the community to the school.

#### 4.2 The stand-alone school with a ‘Bridging Support’ bilingual programme (*Droichead*)

One of the stand-alone post-primary schools that participated in the Gaeltacht case studies has a ‘Bridging Support’ bilingual programme (*Droichead*) in place parallel to the Irish-medium instruction that is provided in the main part of the school. The *Droichead* programme makes provision for particular junior-cycle students, who, due to their low level of competence in Irish, have difficulty in participating in educational provision that involves full instruction through Irish. The *Droichead* programme allows students who experience difficulties with Irish to have a bilingual education on a transitional basis, while receiving supplementary supports to improve their Irish and facilitate their transfer to the Irish-medium provision in the main part of the school. The *Droichead* programme was established in a settlement of a High Court action that centred on whether students were entitled to a choice of education, either through English or through Irish, at a school in a Gaeltacht area with an all-Irish policy.

The *Droichead* programme is currently supported by the provision of substantial additional resources including nine ex-quota teachers funded by the Department of Education and Skills, and a language co-ordinator and two language assistants (*Cúntóirí Teanga*) funded by the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (DAHG). The two language assistants (*Cúntóirí Teanga*) are deployed in the post-primary school to support the additional language needs of both first and second-language speakers of Irish. The additional teachers constitute 18.4% of the teaching staff cohort. A subcommittee of the school’s board of management, which includes parental representation, oversees the management of the *Droichead* programme. There were 23 students, approximately 5% of the total enrolment in the school, enrolled in the *Droichead* programme when the case study was carried out.

The language co-ordinator acts as a point of contact and conduit between the board of management and related subcommittees, senior management, teachers, parents, and the wider school community:

*The duties fulfilled by the co-ordinator are many and varied. She is primarily responsible for the collection, analysis and distribution of information on the various projects and activities. In addition, she also acts as a point of contact for the entire school community if any specific language issue arises. (Post-primary school: C)*

The *Droichead* programme is implemented from the beginning of first-year to the end of junior cycle. Irish is mainly the language of communication and instruction and English is used, as necessary, to support and reinforce students’ learning. The necessity for use of English during instruction declines as students gain in confidence and competence in their ability and use of Irish as they progress through the *Droichead*.

The placement of post-primary students in the *Droichead* programme is determined in accordance with student information from primary schools, the assessment of the language needs of incoming students, and consultation with feeder primary schools, parents or guardians, and students. The post-primary school has also put a number of supports in place to facilitate the transfer of students from primary to post-primary, including the provision of a special Irish-language course and a transition programme for incoming students.

The supports provided in the *Droichead* include:

- timetabling practices that allow students in the *Droichead* access all subjects through Irish
- a bespoke Irish-language programme for first year students
- language assistants (*cuntóirí teanga*) who support both students and teachers
- continuous monitoring of students' progress in Irish-language skills and curriculum content through Irish
- a range of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities which support inclusive learning for students assigned to the *Droichead* programme
- access to an Irish-language homework club
- access to Irish-language courses in the Gaeltacht through the Irish-Language Scholarship Scheme funded by DAHG
- clear communication protocols to facilitate the sharing and transfer of information with parents and relevant teaching staff.

An integrated *Córas Tacaiochta* or 'Supports System' is in place at senior cycle to support students who had progressed from the *Droichead* programme. Such supports include the delivery of customised Transition Year (TY) modules and activities, the implementation of a specific TY language programme for Irish, and study skill workshops for students in fifth and sixth year. Individualised support is also provided to former *Droichead* students, and a detailed Statement of Individual Support (SIS) is developed for each student. The SIS outlines the students' proficiency in the language, their learning needs in relation to subject-specific terminology, the learning objectives set, and the supports provided.

The progress and achievement of former *Droichead* students are monitored on an ongoing basis. Additional supports, such as subject notes, individual assistance during lessons, and extra lessons are provided, as required, in light of the ongoing review of the students' learning needs. Individual students are also assigned a member of staff as a point of contact for discussing their progress.

### 4.3 Impact of *Droichead* programme

It is clear that the *Droichead* programme as delivered in this post-primary case-study school is successful in a number of respects. Overall, the *Droichead* programme safeguards the all-Irish policy of the school, but allows students who have difficulties with Irish to have access to a bilingual education on a transitional basis, while receiving supplementary supports to improve their Irish. It also protects the school's obligation under the Education Act, 1998 to contribute to the maintenance of Irish as the primary community language.

The *Droichead* programme has had a positive impact on students' attitude to the Irish language. It has enabled students with limited capacity in Irish to develop sufficient Irish-language skills and curriculum-based knowledge to access full instruction through Irish and to transfer successfully to the Irish-medium section of the post-primary school. The *Droichead* programme has also enabled students to fully engage in the school's extra- and co-curricular activities through the medium of Irish:

*It has been indicated, and it is clear from the outcomes of certificate examinations that the attainment of students in Irish is above average, including the attainment of students enrolled in the Droichead programme or the attainment of students who previously attended the Droichead. Regarding the attainment of students across the curriculum, clearly the use of Irish as a communicative language does not impact negatively on the attainment*

of students. The *Droichead* programme has enabled students to move ahead and progress with their full education through Irish. (Post-primary school: C)

It is also evident that the *Droichead* programme has facilitated the development of positive relationships and communication between the post-primary school and its feeder primary schools to the benefit of the language and educational needs of students in regard to Irish. It has also played a critical role in the generation of positive attitudes among parents and the local community towards the Irish-language ethos of the school and the Irish-medium education provided. In particular, it appears to have allayed the concerns of parents whose children are not proficient in Irish:

*From the outset, and even in regard to students from the feeder primary schools, the school staff communicates with parents. Decisions regarding assignment to the Droichead is discussed fully with parents and their wishes are considered fully. As an outcome of open communication, and subcommittees with parental representation, the voice of parents is heard. It is clear that the school's Irish plan impacts positively on Irish-language activities in the neighbouring primary schools. (Post-primary school: C)*

The success of the *Droichead* programme warrants consideration of the potential for its extension to other post-primary Gaeltacht schools. Nonetheless, the potential for extending the *Droichead* programme needs to take account of a number of factors, not least the cost associated with the provision of additional teaching and Irish-language resources.

Undoubtedly, the additional teaching and language resources have contributed to the successful delivery of the *Droichead* programme and have enhanced the Irish language and educational provision across the school generally. The additional resources have also helped to secure the support of the local community. Nonetheless, the impact of other factors, such as the quality of management and leadership in the school, the commitment of staff to the Irish language and the educational vision of the school, and the high levels of competence in Irish among staff members in the host school generally cannot be underestimated. The successful implementation of the *Droichead* programme in other school contexts would be contingent on such drivers being in place.

#### 4.4 Irish-medium unit (*Aonad lán-Ghaeilge*)

An Irish-medium language unit or *Aonad lán-Ghaeilge* attached to a mainstream post-primary school either on the same site or remotely is provided by the DES in instances, where it is not feasible, in terms of local demand, to establish a stand-alone Irish-medium post-primary school. Case studies were carried out on two Irish-medium units attached to Gaeltacht post-primary schools that are located in very different sociolinguistic contexts.

##### **Irish-medium Unit 1 (*Aonad 1*)**

Irish-medium Unit 1 or *Aonad 1* is located on the periphery of the Gaeltacht on the same site as its host post-primary school. This large post-primary school operates through the medium of English and serves a wide catchment area, including areas where English is the dominant language of the local community and also where Irish is the dominant language of the community. Irish is the language of the home in approximately one third of students' households. One third of students' households have one parent with a knowledge of Irish. Irish-medium Unit 1 is located less than 20 km from the nearest stand-alone post-primary Gaeltacht school offering Irish-medium education.

Irish-medium Unit 1 offers partial instruction through Irish in a designated number of subjects to a small cohort of students. It is located within the building of the English-medium school. Enrolments in Irish-medium Unit 1 have reduced by approximately 75% from a high of 60 students since the establishment of the Unit over a decade ago. There were 15 students, which constitutes approximately 0.3% of the total enrolment in the school, enrolled in Irish-medium Unit 1 when the case study was carried out.

According to the school community, the main reason for the decline in enrolment in Irish-medium Unit has been the lack of access to senior-cycle provision through Irish, which has prevented students from completing their post-primary education through the medium of Irish. The lack of continuity in the language of instruction was also viewed as having a disruptive effect on students' education mid-way during the post-primary cycle in advance of the Leaving Certificate:

*It was very difficult for students to have access to education entirely through Irish up to sixteen years of age and then to have to change to English-medium education in Transition Year or in fifth year. (Post-primary school: A)*

Members of the school community also cite the lack of a co-ordinator to oversee the work of Irish-medium Unit 1 as another factor adversely impacting on the growth and development of the unit:

*It was clear that members of the board of management were committed to the development of the unit..... It is necessary, however, to have a specific person in charge of the unit to drive and steer the development and growth of the unit effectively. The absence of having an effective teacher in charge of the unit carries the risk of being like a boat without direction....All students were of the opinion that the unit would be more successful if the Irish-medium provision was available as far as Leaving Certificate. They mentioned other students who were native speakers but did not opt for the unit because of the limited Irish-medium provision and the difficulties in reverting to English for the senior cycle. It was stated that there were advantages to being in the unit because it was easier to learn in small classes and through the medium of Irish. (Post-primary school: A)*

The recent decision by the DES to extend access to Irish-medium provision in the Irish-medium Unit 1 from junior cycle to senior cycle and Leaving Certificate, pending demand, has been widely welcomed by the school community. It is seen to be a significant step in increasing the demand for Irish-medium educational provision in the Gaeltacht school's catchment area, and should impact favourably on student enrolment in the unit. This should support the future viability of Irish-medium Unit 1 attached to the stand-alone post-primary Gaeltacht school provided that a concerted whole-school and community effort is made to promote the benefits of Irish-medium education among its feeder primary schools in order to boost enrolment rates in the unit.

*The greatest hope is that permission has been granted to extend the provision to Leaving Certificate level... Clear lines of communication should be established to liaise with parents, with the feeder primary schools and with the community in general in order to facilitate the sharing of clear, comprehensive information on what is happening in the unit. (Post-primary school: A)*

## **Irish-medium Unit 2 (Aonad 2)**

In contrast with Irish-medium Unit 1, Irish-medium Unit 2 or *Aonad 2* is situated in temporary accommodation on a stand-alone site in a predominantly Irish-speaking community on an island. Its host post-primary school, which is also Irish-medium, is situated on the mainland. Likewise, Irish-medium Unit 2 provides full instruction through Irish, with the exception of English and a modern language, to a small number of students across the full post-primary cycle.

At the time of the case-study visit, Irish-medium Unit 2 had 23 students enrolled, which constitutes approximately 8% of the total enrolment of the school. Over half of the students enrolled in Irish-medium Unit 2 come from other parts of Ireland and are in receipt of Irish-language scholarships through *Scéim na bhFoghlaimoirí Gaeilge*, a scheme funded by the DAHG to improve students' proficiency in the Irish language and broaden access to education in an authentic Gaeltacht setting.

Irish-medium Unit 2 is managed on a day-to-day basis by a teaching member of staff (*múinteoir i bhfeighil*) and has access to its own building, facilities, resources and teachers. The case study shows that there is shared leadership and vision supporting full instruction through Irish between the host school and the co-ordinator of Irish-medium Unit 2:

*The board of management and senior management are in agreement on their vision for the school as a Gaeltacht school providing education through Irish and in responding to the needs of the community and maintaining the tradition and culture of the area. The Irish policy helps to inform the school community of the education model that is being implemented. (Post-primary school: E)*

A small number of teachers (9 in total) provide students with a good range of subject choice through the medium of Irish, some of which are outside of their own subject specialisms. High levels of competence in the Irish language is a key requirement for the recruitment of teachers in Irish-medium Unit 2 and its host post-primary school.

### **Impact of Irish-medium units (*Aonaid lán-Ghaeilge*)**

The experience of Irish-medium Unit 1 indicates that it is very challenging to establish a clear Irish-language ethos and separate identity when an Irish-medium unit is attached to an English-medium school. In particular, it greatly limits the opportunities for students to use Irish with their peers outside the classroom and in the wider school community, particularly if the Irish-medium unit is physically located in the main school building:

*It is important that one section of the post-primary school be set aside for the unit when the numbers increase. Such an arrangement would afford students the opportunity to speak Irish amongst themselves in a section of the school building where such would be acceptable. The same pressure from English or from their fellow students in the main school would not apply. (Post-primary school: E)*

The experience of Irish-medium Unit 2 indicates that the location of an Irish-medium unit in a separate location, in this instance, an island setting, enables it to create a distinct identity, but presents challenges in terms of ensuring that regular communication is facilitated between the host school and the remotely located unit. The use of ICT is one option for addressing communication difficulties between the host stand-alone school and the remote Irish-medium unit:

*Regarding the use of technology, it would be helpful if management reviewed the possibilities pertaining to the use of ICT to facilitate more frequent communication between the school and the unit as a support to the various committees and to the board of management that operate on behalf of both units when fulfilling its obligations. (Post-primary school: E)*

The experience of Irish-medium Unit 1 highlights that lack of access to Irish-medium education up to Leaving Certificate can have an adverse effect on the demand for places in the unit. This in turn limits the capacity of the unit to provide a range of subjects through Irish and further discourages parents from considering such an option.

As seen in Irish-medium Unit 2, the provision of full instruction through Irish contributes greatly to the establishment of a clear language ethos and identity. In contrast, the partial instruction through Irish provided in Irish-medium Unit 1, where students move to the English-medium section of the school to study the subject Irish and a majority of subjects through English greatly weakens the capacity of the unit to establish its own identity, a sense of belonging, or an Irish-language identity among students and staff.

The case studies of the two Irish-medium units, each of which are located in different contexts and have their own strengths and challenges, highlight the importance of strong leadership and commitment from the host school, high levels of Irish language competency among teachers, and appropriate resources and planning supports available from the host school, to support the delivery of the Irish-medium education in the unit. The need for a co-ordinator and a strategic plan to promote and guide the development of the Irish-medium unit is also highlighted.

## 5. KEY DRIVERS/CONDITIONS OF EFFECTIVE IRISH-MEDIUM EDUCATION IN GAELTACHT SCHOOLS

An analysis of the case studies indicates that the following key drivers are essential to support the delivery of high quality Irish-medium education in Gaeltacht schools:

- Leadership and management
- Shared vision
- Whole-school planning and school self-evaluation
- Teachers' language proficiency in Irish and pedagogical knowledge and skill
- Parental involvement and support
- Resources and supports for Gaeltacht schools
- Information and Communications Technology (ICT)
- Community links.

This section provides an overview of the main characteristics and defining features associated with each driver. The section also identifies key actions under each driver that should be considered in support of the provision of Irish-medium education in Gaeltacht schools.

### 5.1 Leadership and management

Many of the Gaeltacht case studies illustrate that the extent to which the Irish language is promoted and Irish-medium education is provided is closely linked to the quality of the leadership and management in schools.

In all case-study schools, principals and senior management have a good appreciation of the unique culture and sociolinguistic context of the Gaeltacht. The majority of principals in case-study schools, regardless of the language profile of the school, display strong vision and commitment to Irish-medium education. In particular, such school leaders seek to promote the use of Irish, enhance the language proficiency of their students, and provide a good-quality education for their students, with the support of staff and local communities. They also set high expectations for students' learning and seek to influence staff and the wider school community in supporting the work of the school:

*The principal aims to promote a positive all-Irish atmosphere in the school. The school community in general cooperates with the implementation of this vision. There is shared leadership and ownership regarding Irish and positive cooperation is in evidence amongst all parties in the school to promote Irish. The principal has confidence in the teachers to implement the Irish-medium education model effectively and to provide a broad education for all pupils. The principal has a very good understanding of the standard of education that all classes achieve throughout the school. (Primary school: E)*

*The principal is highly respected by the staff and by the community in general. It is helpful that the principal is a key figure in the community who regularly participates in local events. There was great respect for the work and the commitment of management and staff. Reference was made to the voluntary work of staff in drama, music, debating and sport ...Clear management, leadership and direction emanates from school management in regard to the use of Irish and in the school and its status as a strong Gaeltacht school. Senior management is very committed to education through the medium of Irish but they also understand the importance of responding to the needs of the entire community. Everything is organised through the medium of Irish and it is accepted that Irish is the main language of communication in the school. (Post-primary school: B)*

In many instances, it is the commitment and drive of the principal teacher that ensures that the Irish language is core to the work of the school. For example, in one case-study school at primary level, where most pupils come from English-speaking homes, the leadership and vision of the principal was the catalyst that led the school to change its instructional practices from mainly bilingual instruction to full instruction through Irish within a relatively short time-frame. Critical to the success of this

change was the ability of the principal to win the support and co-operation of the teaching staff in the first instance, as well as the support of the board of management and parents:

*It was very clear that the development of the language in the school and in the locality is highly dependent on the leadership of this principal. Prior to the appointment of this principal, there was no clear policy in the school and teachers were teaching bilingually or through English..... The principal has a particular vision and she wants to keep Irish and Irish culture alive in the area. She encourages pupils, parents and teachers to use the language as the normal means of communication within and outside the school.... The parents respect the school and they are positively disposed towards the school promoting Irish in the locality. They now understand the importance of the language, something they were not committed to a few years ago.....There is a comprehensive whole-school policy now available to develop the school's work in Irish and pupils are self-confident in and proud of the language..... The staff is committed to this plan..... There is strong support from parents, from the board of management, and from the community for the promotion of Irish within the school... The principal stated that the school had the most important role in the Gaeltacht and that it is important that this role is taken seriously.... (Primary school: G)*

Similarly in other primary schools, the leadership of the principal paved the way for the strengthening of Irish-medium educational provision including the introduction of a policy of total instruction through Irish:

*The principal in this school has a particular interest in the teaching of Irish and in immersion education and has an understanding of the educational standard achieved by pupils in the various classes... The principal felt that a number of pupils were of the opinion that they would not need Irish in the wider world and therefore that it was not worth their while using the language. Because of those challenges, the school decided to organise some excellent activities to strengthen and improve Irish. An 'Irish Campaign' was started in the school. These included: immersing pupils in Irish in the lower classes; the development of a strong whole-school Irish policy; the use of Irish textbooks; having the language assistant work with the junior classes to strengthen Irish; providing praise for regular use of Irish; linking with the youth club; and supporting competitions in Irish. The vision and the school's collaborative action in promoting the language are clearly very important in maintaining the language in this school. (Primary school: C)*

In other instances, the school's senior management team, including the principal, were seen to play a critical role in identifying the school's strengths, challenges and opportunities, and in facilitating a culture of planning, self-review and development in relation to the Irish language:

*Senior management and the language co-ordinator are leaders. They are all committed to the Irish-language campaign underway in the school and understand the key role of the school regarding the Irish language in this Gaeltacht area. Senior management members constantly discuss the Irish language in the school, and encourage and motivate their colleagues in this regard. It is planned to further use the school self-evaluation process to establish strengths as well as areas for improvement. (Post-primary school: C)*

The case-studies indicate that where strong leadership was not evident, there was uncertainty and inconsistency in the school regarding the status of Irish as the language of instruction. In such instances, there was a disconnect between the stated intention to implement a full instruction through Irish approach on a school-wide basis, and the practice observed in individual classrooms:

*It is not evident that management currently has a sufficient understanding of Gaeltacht education or of Irish-medium education. Clear lines of communication need to be established to communicate with parents, with the feeder primary schools and with the community in general in order to provide clear, comprehensive information for parents. It was reported that no information evening, open day, meeting at the beginning of the year or any other form of information of any kind was made available to students or parents to keep them informed. (Post-primary school: A)*

*Some uncertainty was in evidence amongst school management regarding the provision of stronger leadership for the school's Irish-medium education model that has been in place for a long time. Management was restricted because of the necessity of increasing school enrolment and the accessibility of other post-primary schools. It is accepted that parents agree with the school's mission in regard to the provision of all-Irish education but there*

*is no certainty that such is the case. A big challenge for leadership currently is the reluctance amongst an increasing number of students to study subjects through Irish. (Post-primary school: F)*

The case studies indicate a lack of knowledge and understanding among some principals about approaches to Irish-medium education, such as immersion education, which led to an uncertainty about the value of Irish-medium education and its impact on students' learning, and whether the school was correct in advocating the approach:

*Although the principal and deputy principal are committed and diligent, they are not focusing in detail on teaching methodologies or on the close connection between in-class support and the progress of pupils in mastering the language as they progress through the school. School management does not see the close connection between classroom activities and the current status of the Irish language in the school. (Post-primary school: D)*

The case studies also highlight the significance of the role of the board of management in providing the necessary leadership with regard to raising the profile of the school as an Irish-language entity in the local community and in providing the appropriate supports to school principals and the teaching staff. As indicated in a number of case studies, the board of management of a Gaeltacht school can play a key role in the development, approval, implementation, and review of the school's language policy on immersion education. The board also plays an important role in the recruitment of teachers, the promotion of Irish language and traditions, and in communicating with the local school community:

*Fluency in Irish and having a high level of competence in the language are essential for all teachers that are appointed to the school. The board of management supports the professional development of the teachers. Plenty of evidence was provided suggesting that school management gives teachers every support they require to strengthen the educational provision through Irish as an aid to teaching and learning. The board of management has invested significantly in technological equipment for each class, such as interactive white boards, visualisers and laptops to support learning and teaching. (Primary school: A)*

*Irish was very weak in the school but some rethinking has taken place in the last few years and the board of management, the principal, the teachers, and the school community understand the importance of the language and the school's role in preserving and developing the language. A whole-school plan has been developed for Irish and it provides good direction for the school community. The board of management, guided by the principal, has approved a comprehensive policy for Irish.. It was indicated that a high standard of Irish is essential for each teacher that is to be appointed to the school but that achieving this is sometimes difficult. (Primary school: G)*

All of these insights from inspectors' reports point inexorably to the need for the provision of clear guidance to principals and to boards of management on the significance of their management role in a Gaeltacht school context in supporting the provision of Irish-medium education.

## 5.2 Shared vision

Most Gaeltacht case-study schools at primary level, and the majority of schools at post-primary level, have a shared vision for their school communities on the importance of Irish in the work of the school:

*All parties indicated that the attitude of the staff is very important and that they need to be positively disposed towards Irish....The board of management and the in-school management share a similar vision and they see Irish as the main language of the school.... they do their best to instil amongst the school community a sense of pride in Irish language and culture. (Primary school: G)*

Some schools have written statements that articulate their vision, while others do not. The promotion of the Irish language and the development of cultural awareness underpin the vision statements in many of the case-study schools that had a written vision statement:

*The sub-committee for all-Irish provision is responsible for creating and monitoring the school's Irish plan. In this plan, an agreed vision regarding the promotion of Irish in the life of the school is outlined. (Post-primary school: C)*

However, the written vision statements provided by the case-study schools place less focus on teaching and learning through the medium of Irish. It is nonetheless clear from the experience of some case-study schools that having a clear statement on where Irish is positioned in the work of the school helps to clarify expectations and engender commitment among teachers and students to the implementation of Irish-medium education:

*A very strong vision is outlined in the school plan, with an approach to curriculum planning presented for each class level and the organisational planning outlined in detail also. (Primary school: C)*

As demonstrated in a few schools, the frequent articulation of this vision at forums, such as staff meetings and whole-school assemblies, helps to reinforce the vision and enables it to be manifested in day-to-day school activities. Other examples include the positive reinforcement by teachers of students' use of Irish within and outside the classroom and during transition periods, a shared commitment to delivering all aspects of the curriculum through Irish and to teaching both the social and academic language necessary for students to participate in all aspects of school life through Irish:

*It was indicated that the whole-school weekly assemblies and the formal and informal management meetings organised with the in-school management team assist in the implementation of the all-Irish model of education (Primary school: A)*

*The school is constantly looking at the Irish-language issue in the school and at the implementation of the Irish-medium model throughout the school.... The Language Co-ordinator, supported by the school's senior management, directs all initiatives to promote the use of Irish in every aspect of the school's work....The school recognises that specific teaching and language skills are required to respond to teaching through the medium of Irish. (Post-primary school: C)*

### 5.3 Whole-school planning and school self-evaluation

The Gaeltacht case-studies highlight the importance of whole-school planning and school self-evaluation in supporting the delivery of Irish-medium instruction in Gaeltacht schools. In particular, the Gaeltacht case studies show that there is greater consistency in the delivery of Irish-medium instruction throughout the school, where a well-defined whole-school language policy has been developed collaboratively and has been communicated to staff and the wider school community:

*The school has outlined a clear, achievable plan for Irish so that every member of staff is agreed on the importance and the use of Irish in the school and on the implications that arise for a Gaeltacht school. This plan is being implemented systematically throughout the school. (Primary school: A)*

The availability of such a plan, in tandem with a written vision, helps to create a mutual understanding among teachers and parents of the benefits of Irish-medium education, and facilitates a shared sense of responsibility regarding its delivery. As evidenced in a few case-study schools, the provision of a whole-school plan, in tandem with measures to support its implementation, also helps to avoid the disconnect between the intention to implement full instruction through Irish on a school-wide basis and its actual delivery in classroom practice.

However, the case studies also reveal that in fewer than half of the schools that participated in the case studies, there is a lack of clarity and direction about the language policy of the school. In these instances, the school community is not fully aware of the school's expectations and language teaching approaches, which leads to inconsistency in Irish-medium educational provision generally:

*The board of management has drafted a policy for Irish, but this needs to be further developed... A clear strategic plan needs to be developed to clarify the future of the all-Irish provision in the school by taking into account the language needs of all of its students. Clear lines of communication should be established to communicate with parents, with the feeder primary schools, and with the community in general, in order to have clear, comprehensive information available on what is happening in the school. (Post-primary school: A)*

*The greatest challenge for this school's model of education is the regression amongst an increasing number of students to study subjects through Irish - even among students who are fluent in Irish. This indicates that the school needs an agreed and clear school policy regarding the development of the language of instruction rather than trying to further accommodate both strands. (Post-primary school: F)*

The case studies show that the implementation of an Irish-language policy is most effective when roles and responsibilities are clearly set out, and where a co-ordinator is delegated to lead and review implementation at whole-school level with the support of the principal teacher, staff, parents and board of management. However, fewer than half of the case-study schools, at both primary and post-primary levels, have assigned specific responsibility to oversee the whole-school co-ordination of the Irish-language policy. This is a considerable shortcoming given the importance of Irish to the *raison d'être* of the Gaeltacht school and may be explained, in some instances, by the fact that the in-school management team has been considerably reduced as a result of budgetary cutbacks in recent years.

Where available, school plans are typically drawn up by the principal and school staff in collaboration with the board of management and parents. These whole-school plans provide a *résumé* of the school context and set out the school aims, mission statement, and agreed procedures, approaches and methodologies to guide whole-school practices in relation to matters such as the implementation of the curriculum, the delivery of Irish-medium instruction, assessment, use of resources, community links, homework, and communicating with and reporting to parents:

*The school has developed an Irish plan and this plan describes the school's main aims; how these aims are implemented; the role of parents; infant education; Irish resources; learning-support; and assessment of Irish. In the bullet points outlined in the plan relating to the implementation of the aims, the following are mentioned: developing a favourable environment, encouraging the use of Irish amongst pupils and staff of the school; creating an Irish environment; the language assistant; emphasis on Irish music, poetry and drama; emphasis on pupils' spoken Irish; the development of Irish in every class through oral language, listening, reading and writing; use of Séideán Sí and resources from the Resource Unit (an tÁisaonad) in Belfast and from the website 'an muinteoir.ie'. (Primary school: C)*

*The whole school had a school plan and other policy documents written in Irish only. Reference is made in most of the documents to the school's Gaeltacht status and to the centrality of Irish in the life of the school and in the school's curriculum. (Post-primary school: B)*

A few case-study schools at primary level use elements of the whole-school policy template for Gaeltacht primary schools developed by *Eagraíocht na Scoileanna Gaeltachta*<sup>3</sup> with support from *An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta* (COGG) to guide their planning. This template enables schools to clarify their position in relation to various practices such as:

- implementation of a total immersion approach
- the commencement of reading
- the promotion of Irish as the language of communication
- communication with and reporting to parents
- recruitment of staff members
- expectations relating to the language ethos of the school
- the use of Irish-language resources
- the use of Irish-language assessment
- provision of learning-support
- the delivery of curricular and extra-curricular activities
- community links.

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<sup>3</sup>*Eagraíocht na Scoileanna Gaeltachta* was a national representative organisation which formerly existed for parents and teachers in Gaeltacht areas.

The case studies highlight that one particular practice that requires attention at a whole-school level, even in those schools that have language plans, is the provision of differentiated-teaching and learning in classrooms and other relevant supports for first-language learners of Irish.

In the case of post-primary schools, an issue that merits consideration at a whole-school level is that instruction through Irish and assessment and examination practices are mediated, particularly in light of the fact that an increasing number of students in some case-study schools are opting to sit their examinations through English:

*Although school management and staff are taking a very strong stance regarding the teaching of Irish, some flexibility is being allowed for students speaking to each other in English and for the practice of answering examination papers through English. (Post-primary school: B)*

*There was evidence that the school has been operating primarily in accordance with the all-Irish education model that has been in place since it was established, but that the school now also accommodates a cohort of students who are studying subjects through English and answering certificate examinations through English, in the senior cycle in particular. There was also evidence that the number of students in this cohort has continued to increase in recent years. This is a challenge that impacts on the core ethos of the school as an all-Irish Gaeltacht school, and it is a challenge for the education model being provided. (Post-primary school: F)*

Whole-school policies were available in Irish only in the majority of case-study schools that had whole-school policies in place. Bilingual versions of policies were provided in the remaining schools. Some case-study schools had moved from making policies available in Irish only, to providing bilingual versions of key policy documents in the interest of including all members of the school community, including parents, in the work of the school.

Practice in some case-study schools highlights the potential of school self-evaluation for enhancing students' attainment in Irish and the impact of Irish-medium instruction in Gaeltacht schools. Although at an early stage of development in most Gaeltacht case-study schools, school self-evaluation provides an additional impetus for Gaeltacht schools to examine their *raison d'être* and school ethos collaboratively with relevant parties, including parents and students. School self-evaluation also provides an important opportunity for Gaeltacht schools to reflect on the quality of Irish-language provision, set targets aimed at improving student experiences and attainment in Irish and across the curriculum, and to review the school's teaching and learning processes:

*The effectiveness of the school self-evaluation process was evident in the way in which the approach in junior infants was changed during the past year following a decision to trial the full immersion approach in Irish so as to improve pupils' language structures and enrich their language. Teachers intend to carefully monitor the effects of immersion education on pupil achievement in Irish and in English. (Primary school: A)*

*The school is reviewing Irish as part of the school's self-evaluation process. The staff surveyed parents and pupils and they analysed the outcomes of standardised tests throughout the school. Pupil questionnaires indicate that they are positively disposed towards Irish and that they now speak more Irish in the yard and at home. More than half of the parents indicated that their children do not express themselves with ease in Irish. A school improvement plan has now been devised and the school intends to focus on further development of the language. (Primary school: G)*

*The school self-evaluation process and the language issue are intrinsically linked in this school. Teachers, students and parents are regularly questioned about the school and the language. That said, further use could be made of the feedback gathered from different members of the school community and it is recommended that the use and the impact of all resources available for Irish be reviewed regularly. Similarly, the school self-evaluation process should be used to outline the school's strengths as well as areas for improvement. (Post-primary school: C)*

The case studies highlight the importance of encouraging input from parents during the school self-evaluation process. The constructive feedback from parents during the school self-evaluation process

provided a stimulus for one Gaeltacht case-study primary school to place a stronger emphasis on the development of pupils' oral language proficiency in Irish:

*Feedback from parents, as part of the school self-evaluation process, indicated that the majority of parents would like their children's spoken Irish to be better. (Primary school: G)*

It was noted in the case of some Gaeltacht case-study schools that there is a need for greater involvement from students and parents or guardians in school self-evaluation processes in order to win support for the Irish-language policy and its implementation:

*It would be very worthwhile to use the school self-evaluation process to promote the school's values on a whole-school basis, or at least to begin the campaign with particular year groups in the school so as to strengthen the connection between language activities and the current position. The school should have more contact with the primary schools to discuss teaching methodologies. (Post-primary school: D)*

#### **5.4 Teachers' language proficiency in Irish and pedagogical knowledge and skill**

The case studies highlight the importance of proficiency in Irish and pedagogical knowledge and skills among teachers to the effective delivery of education through Irish:

*The high standard of competence and the spoken language of all teachers greatly support the delivery of the all-Irish model of education in this school. A commendable emphasis is placed on developing pupils' language enrichment within and outside the classroom. A strong emphasis is placed on drama through Irish and on participation in a wide range of cultural and sporting activities, and in singing, writing and drama competitions, to promote pupils' language enrichment. (Primary school: A)*

*Many staff members are native Irish speakers and less than half of them are past pupils from the locality..... The competence of these teachers in Irish and their innate ability to integrate students' language acquisition with learning outcomes in lessons was noted. (Post-primary school: C)*

*The two challenges that present themselves and they are interlinked relate, on the one hand, to those teachers who have little Irish, and on the other hand to teachers who have plenty of Irish but who use a very narrow range of teaching methods. (Post-primary school: D)*

Case-study findings show incidences of effective Irish-medium practice across the curriculum in classrooms, where teachers with high levels of competence in Irish engaged in explicit teaching of language input and enrichment of students' Irish and actively engaged students in their learning through the use of interactive pedagogical methods. Particular attention was given to the systematic teaching of vocabulary and terminology to ensure that students can access curriculum content through the medium of Irish:

*Teachers' quality of language and subject integration in each lesson observed greatly reinforced the model of education through Irish. There was a rich print environment of Irish language materials in every classroom and in school corridors. In various classes, pupils were given good opportunities to engage actively by means of discussion, recitation of poetry, and through practical activities contextualised across the learning areas of the curriculum. There was a specific focus in lessons on Irish-language enrichment, including vocabulary and sentence structure extension..... Interactive whiteboards, items from the locality, and other stimulating resources were effectively used. The notebooks used helped to reinforce and consolidate new vocabulary and pupil knowledge in different curricular areas. (Primary school: A)*

*The Irish-language proficiency and teaching competence evident in lessons was a significant factor in enabling students to acquire the language necessary to access the learning outcomes of lessons.... It was mainly through teacher questioning that students were given opportunities to use the Irish language. In all cases, students displayed a good understanding of the lesson. The approach generally adopted included the teacher providing an explanation of the lesson content and the skills to be learnt followed by students engaging in practical tasks. The students enjoyed this independent work and engaged in the tasks conscientiously and with enthusiasm. A positive feature of lessons was that most students could use the Irish-language terminology, largely as a result of the group work activities provided for students to practise using the language. (Post-primary school: C)*

However, the case studies indicate the need to ensure that such good pedagogical practice is extended to all teachers both within schools and across schools in the Gaeltacht, particularly with a view to ensuring that students are actively engaged in their learning through Irish and get an opportunity to engage with each other during lessons:

*Cooperative group work was used in certain classes but this practice was only regularly used in some classes. Making more use of cooperative learning so that pupils can share and exchange opinions during lessons to reinforce learning would be worthwhile. (Primary school: A)*

*The standard of learning of students in those classes observed was good but it was clear that the objectives were not always sufficiently challenging.... There is plenty of scope in the teaching and learning practices to provide greater variation in approaches so as to place a greater onus on students to develop an awareness of themselves as learners and to ensure that there is sufficient challenge in their learning. (Post-primary school: E)*

*Frequently, the direct method was applied in the classes in so far as the teachers were largely directing the work in the lessons. It was mainly through answering teachers' questions that opportunities were provided for students to speak Irish. (Post-primary school: D)*

The case studies suggest that a key challenge for teachers in Gaeltacht schools is how to differentiate teaching and learning approaches in classrooms in order to cater for the specific needs of first-language speakers of Irish, particularly in the multi-grade or multi-class context. Where observed, differentiated teaching involved providing students of different abilities and language competencies with different paths to learning in terms of curriculum content and skill development, and access to suitable learning enrichment opportunities:

*In this Gaeltacht school, the teaching was reflective and materials and resources were used that were focused on language needs and on fostering language enrichment. A specific language input was organised for each class level and for the differing language abilities. Children's Irish was enriched, particularly regarding vocabulary development and confidence in using language. A lot of unscripted drama was undertaken and pupils were allowed to create small stories themselves, orally at first and afterwards in their copybooks. Every pupil was actively engaged in the learning and they created very good sentences in terms of vocabulary and language structures... Whole-school themes were taught and the work was displayed in the school hall so that parents had an opportunity to discuss the themes at home with their children. (Primary school: C)*

*Because classes are multi-grade and because the number of pupils in the classes is small, the teacher is always differentiating. Cooperative team-teaching is used regularly. The outcome of the teachers' work is in evidence in the learning outcomes of pupils. Pupils have attained a very high standard of Irish and the Irish of many pupils is enriched. (Primary school: B)*

*The best learning was in those lessons where task-based work was well-organised as a focal point of the lessons and where the teacher responded well to the learning needs of the students. (Post-primary school: E)*

However, the review of practice in case-study schools indicates that practice relating to differentiation of language inputs is not common and that in many instances, there is insufficient challenge for first language speakers of Irish in classrooms:

*There was no specific provision for differing levels of spoken Irish in any class and it was not apparent in the lessons observed that particular attention was given to differentiating the language for the pupils who had the best Irish. Particular attention should be paid to differentiating the language, not only for those pupils who are weakest at Irish, but also for those most competent in the language so that they realise their potential as learners. (Primary school: H)*

*Apart from teacher questioning in a small number of instances, there was no evidence available of differentiated teaching based on language competencies or on academic abilities... The work in the classrooms was almost entirely teacher-centred. One example of pair work was in evidence and there were no examples of group work observed.... In line with good practice, attention should be given to differentiation to support the development of students' higher order skills and the language enrichment for students whose first language is Irish. (Post-primary school: E)*

*It was not apparent in the lessons observed that any particular attention was given to differentiating the language for those students who had the highest levels of competency in Irish so that they might fulfil their potential as learners. It was noted that differentiation in one particular lesson was directed at students who were weak in Irish and that sufficient challenge was not provided for those students who were competent in the language – some of whom had excellent Irish. (Post-primary school: F)*

### **Recruitment of teachers**

The case studies indicate that the recruitment of teachers with a high level of proficiency in the language frequently poses a challenge for boards of management in many Gaeltacht schools, and may, in some cases, be outside of the schools' direct control. At primary level, this was reported by schools to be due largely to issues relating to the appointment of teachers from the diocesan redeployment panel or due to local clustering arrangements for the allocation of teaching resources for pupils with special educational needs in small schools:

*The principal indicated that there are ongoing difficulties, when employing teachers, with the panel of teachers for Gaeltacht schools and that Gaeltacht schools are under pressure and compelled sometimes to accept a person with little proficiency in Irish. (Primary school: G)*

*Sometimes a Gaeltacht school is dependent on clustering arrangements already in place that do not take account of the Gaeltacht context. The school then has little option regarding the language competence of teachers providing services for pupils with special educational needs. (Primary school: F)*

Similar issues were reported at post-primary level in relation to the small pool of teachers available with sufficiently high levels of Irish-language competency across different subject specialisms, for example, in Science, Technology, and other practical subjects:

*It was mentioned repeatedly that the supply of teachers, particularly in the practical subjects, who are suitably qualified and with satisfactory competence in Irish, is the greatest challenge for the school in adhering to its vision for the provision of education through the medium of Irish for the local community. (Post-primary school: E)*

Findings from the case-studies indicate that the level of teacher competence in Irish can also affect the subject choice of students at post-primary level. Students in one Gaeltacht post-primary case-study school reported that they determine their choice of subjects from their own assessment of teachers' Irish-language competency as well as their perception of the quality of teaching in the subject:

*The competence and ability of some teachers in regard to Irish and therefore in regard to the teaching of the language is a matter of significant concern. It was evident, in a certain percentage of the classes, that the teacher was not at ease with the language. This is significant and it impacts greatly on the teaching and learning and on the attitude of students to Irish and to those teachers who do not have much Irish. (Post-primary school: D)*

## **5.5 Parental involvement and support**

The case studies highlight the key role that parents can play in supporting the implementation of the Gaeltacht school's Irish-language policy in terms of their attitude to Irish, their own use of Irish, and their support for Irish-medium instruction in the school:

*The school recognises the important role of parents. They understand the influence that their attitude can have on Irish and on its use outside the school. The school is aware that the majority of pupils are coming to the school without Irish at home and this presents an additional challenge for the school. The school has a lively and active parents' association to organise social events through Irish and to encourage parents to participate in courses to improve their Irish. (Primary school: D)*

*It is the parents' wish now that all subjects are taught through Irish. The school has been very well supported by the parents in recent years. The current approach regarding Irish in the school has been made clear to the parents.*

*From the information provided, parents clearly have a positive attitude regarding their commitment to the Irish-medium education model that the school is providing. (Primary school: F)*

*There is a demand from parents in the locality for education through Irish and they displayed a good understanding of the advantages attached to being competent in Irish. (Post-primary school: B)*

However, the case studies indicate that there can often be conflicting views among the parental population in individual schools with regard to the language policy of the school and the Irish-medium educational model employed. This is hardly surprising given the varying sociolinguistic profiles of the parents and their children. It is therefore all the more important that schools actively engage with parents regarding the school's vision, purpose, and approach to Irish-medium education:

*At a meeting with the inspectors, parents indicated that they are more than happy with the educational provision through Irish that teachers in the school are providing. One parent indicated that there was a type of "discriminatory" view in the school regarding those who do not have native-like fluency in Irish. It was clear that there are two views amongst parents in the school with regard to the Irish policy, those of parents who are fluent in Irish, and those of parents who are not fluent in Irish. (Primary school: B)*

*From what was reported, it is clear that there are two views amongst the parents regarding a commitment to the Irish-medium education model that the school is providing. In such instances, the school's vision should be discussed with the parents rather than depending only on the mission statement of the school. This Gaeltacht school should clarify parents' commitment in general to the aims and to the mission statement of the school as a Gaeltacht school that makes curriculum provision available through Irish only, so that there is common ground between the aims of the school and those of the parents. (Post-primary school: F)*

The case studies also highlight the key role that schools can play in harnessing parental support for the language policy of the school through, for example, encouraging parental participation in school committees, in planning and school self-evaluation processes relating to Irish, and in home-school initiatives, such as shared-reading. The role that school management plays in leveraging parental support for and confidence in the language policy and the medium of instruction in the school is particularly highlighted:

*It was indicated that it was mainly the teachers who were involved in whole-school curriculum planning, but that in recent years, parents have a more active role, particularly through the school self-evaluation process. A subcommittee was established to implement the education model through Irish, and in particular to deal with the challenges attached to pupils using English in the school yard. Games to stimulate interest in Irish are being taught to the pupils, and mentors in the upper classes are being assigned to the younger pupils. Teachers and representatives from the parents' association are involved in this subcommittee. (Primary school: A)*

*The role and encouragement of parents offers confidence to the school. The people in the locality greatly respect the leadership in the school and they are loyal to the school. They understand that the use of the Irish language inside and outside the school is a complicated issue. The voice of parents is heard on the board of management and on subcommittees and the school is frequently used as a community facility. (Post-primary school: D)*

The case studies also indicate that opportunities for parents to participate in Irish-language classes run by organisations and bodies, such as Acadamh na hOllscolaíochta, Galway, Comharchumann Forbartha Chorca Dhuibhne, and Muintearas, can enable parents to support the Irish-language ethos and work of the school. In particular, attendance at Irish-language classes can support parents in helping their children with homework and in promoting positive dispositions among their children towards the Irish language:

*There are a small number of pupils attending the school whose families came to the Gaeltacht from America, from England, and from other counties in Ireland. These are pupils whose parents were not previously connected with the Gaeltacht and whose native language is English. It is a positive sign that these children's parents opted to attend Irish classes so that they would be able to speak Irish to support their children. This is an example of the extent to which a favourable attitude and support from parents helps children to acquire the language – a point noted by the school's board of management. (Primary school: E)*

*Regarding the school completion programme, various classes are provided for parents to assist them in developing their Irish and other skills that support them in helping their children. Furthermore, parents have a range of Irish-language classes and other cultural events available to them locally. (Post-primary school: E)*

One case-study primary school referred to the opportunities provided for parents to complete the Irish-language proficiency examination *Teastas Eorpach na Gaeilge* (TEG), the European Certificate of Irish, which is broadly based on the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001).

The case studies show that, while practice varies with regard to communication with parents, Irish is generally the language through which formal and informal communication is conducted with parents and the wider school community, where full instruction through Irish is implemented, particularly in schools in the strongest Irish-speaking Gaeltacht areas. However, the case studies indicate that there is a certain tension for Gaeltacht schools between the provision of communication channels that are exclusively through Irish in line with the school's ethos and its role to promote the language as the language of the community, and the provision of communication channels that are bilingual that facilitate the inclusion of parents who do not have proficiency in Irish.

*The principal and the teachers are aware that most of the pupils are coming to the school without Irish at home and this presents an additional challenge for the school...All communication with the home is bilingual, including newsletters, letters, and school policies. The school reports are also bilingual. (Primary school: H)*

In light of this, it appears that increasingly, schools are providing parents with access to a bilingual version of correspondence, school reports, and whole-school policies, particularly in contexts where the school's catchment areas includes a large proportion of parents whose first language is English and where a bilingual or partial immersion approach is implemented.

The case-studies highlight that the potential for using ICT to communicate with parents is not being realised in many Gaeltacht schools. Almost half of case-study schools, mostly at primary level, have not yet developed a school website to display students' work or provide parents and the wider school community with relevant information about the school. In most of the case-study schools that have a website, the web presence is entirely through the medium of Irish. A small number of primary and post-primary case-study schools have developed a bilingual website.

## 5.6 Resources and supports for Gaeltacht schools

### *Textbooks and teaching resources*

The contribution of *An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta* (COGG) in providing an improved range of Irish-language resources and textbooks to enhance teaching and learning was acknowledged during the case-study visits.

Many instances of effective practice were observed during case-study visits, where primary and post-primary schools made judicious use of the Irish-language textbooks available and either supplemented or replaced them, as appropriate, with teacher-designed resources, notes, commercial schemes, and other Irish language resources sourced from the internet. In order to enrich curriculum implementation, some case-study primary schools access Irish language resources for infant and junior classes from the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and *An tÁisaonad*,<sup>4</sup> in Northern Ireland, for example *Cleite; Cód sa Ghaeilge* and *Féasta Focal*.

However, the unavailability of Irish-language textbooks in some areas of the curriculum or indeed the unsuitability of existing Irish-language textbooks was also identified as a challenge for Gaeltacht schools, particularly at post-primary level. Schools reported how, in comparison with the breadth of

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<sup>4</sup> An tÁisaonad, Coláiste Ollscoile Naomh Muire, Belfast

resources available in English, Irish-language textbooks are not available for the full range of subjects at post-primary level. The Irish language used in many translated textbooks was reported to be overly technical and complex, particularly in the science subjects, History, Geography, Mathematics, Technical Graphics, Enterprise Education, and Technology.

The language and terminology used in Irish-language textbooks at primary level for subjects such as History, Geography, Science and Religion were also reported to be excessively demanding for pupils. It was noted that there is a limited range of Irish-language literature available to support the development of students' vocabulary, language proficiency and language enrichment, particularly from middle standards to the end of post-primary level. Another recurrent comment was that textbooks did not generally reflect the spoken dialect of the different Gaeltacht areas and this sometimes hindered students' comprehension of texts:

*It was also apparent that there were comprehension difficulties with intricate vocabulary in some senior class textbooks, particularly in Mathematics, History, Science and Geography. It was indicated that the vocabulary used was not heard in the Gaeltacht dialect. (Primary school: A)*

*Regarding the supply of textbooks, teachers reported some difficulties, such as not having any textbooks available, for example, for Enterprise Education (LCVP). In other cases, a significant delay in the publication of the Irish version following syllabus changes, was mentioned as in the case of Project Maths. Furthermore, it was mentioned that the language in the textbooks available in Irish was often incomprehensible and that this was the reason the English version was being used. (Post-primary school: E)*

Some case-study schools at primary level highlighted the need to have access to additional graded-reading schemes in Irish, similar to the parallel-reading schemes in English:

*It was stated that a series of more comprehensively graded books was required for Gaeltacht schools, such as PM Readers in English (Primary school: E)*

Many of the case-study primary schools use *Séideán Sí*, the integrated Irish-language programme for Gaeltacht primary schools. Although feedback from primary schools on *Séideán Sí* was generally positive, a number of schools highlighted that the *Séideán Sí* programme was not sufficiently challenging for first-language speakers of Irish, and that it needed to be supplemented with other Irish-language programmes in classrooms:

*The majority of the teachers were positively disposed towards Séideán Sí. We were told that it was excellent as a resource for oral language and for language enrichment in particular. (Primary school: G)*

*It was indicated that Séideán Sí did not include enough pre-reading or phonological awareness activities for infant classes and that some of the Séideán Sí books were deficient in terms of vocabulary enrichment for pupils coming from Irish speaking homes. (Primary school: D)*

*A good level of satisfaction was apparent with the Séideán Sí resource for Gaeltacht schools. It was stated, however, that the workbooks accompanying the reading books for good readers are not sufficiently challenging. (Primary school: A)*

## **Curriculum**

A number of Gaeltacht case-study post-primary schools indicated that the Leaving Certificate syllabus lacked challenge for students who are more proficient in Irish including first-language speakers of Irish:

*According to some students, they were presented with very little challenge regarding the Irish syllabus. They would prefer to be given additional tasks so as to be able to derive greater benefit from learning Irish. It is clear at this point that "the course is too easy" in the senior cycle. (Post-primary school: C)*

### ***Support for first-language Irish speakers***

As highlighted previously, the provision of differentiated-instruction within classes to meet the varying language needs of students in classroom settings, particularly first speakers of Irish, is not widespread practice in Gaeltacht schools, and teachers require support in this regard.

The Language Assistants' Scheme (*Scéim na gCúntóirí Teanga*) is a particular support available to Gaeltacht schools, where native Irish-language speakers are employed on a part-time basis to support the development of students' proficiency in Irish. The scheme is funded by the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and co-ordinated by Muintearas and Comharchumann Forbartha Chorca Dhuibhne. The scheme does not specify whether Gaeltacht primary or post-primary schools should use the language assistant to target first-language speakers of Irish, learners of Irish or to provide support for parents, but requires that schools participating in the scheme are teaching through Irish.

All Gaeltacht primary case-study schools, and the majority of post-primary case-study schools, avail of the Language Assistants' Scheme (*Scéim na gCúntóirí Teanga*) to support the learning needs of pupils and students only. Practice regarding the use of this additional support varies across schools, with schools using the service to either support the development of Irish among first-language speakers or learners of the language, or both. The plan of work is largely dependent on the advice of individual class teachers or principals in individual case-study schools.

The quality of support provided is largely determined by the quality of planning at whole-school and classroom levels. In some schools, the Language Assistants' Scheme is used to encourage and monitor students' use of Irish in the school yard, and in other cases, to facilitate students' involvement in cultural activities, for example, poetry competitions, Irish-language debates, drama etc. The case studies reveal that in a few case-study schools, the language assistant is deployed for activities other than language support. For example, instances were observed where the language assistant was employed to provide additional support to students with learning difficulties or special educational needs. Such variation in the deployment of the language assistant points to the need to clarify the role of this additional resource:

*The scheme for language assistants should be strengthened in Gaeltacht schools and guidelines should be provided as to how they are utilised, and the effectiveness of the service should be monitored. It would also be beneficial to use the scheme as a facility for parents and for the entire community. (Primary school: G)*

*The view is that it would be important that the language assistant have a specific programme to implement so as maximum benefit might be derived from this support for learners rather than having the provision available on an ad hoc basis. (Post-primary school: B)*

The allocation of the language assistant varies greatly across case-study schools, and ranges from five to six hours per week in some schools, to an allocation of 20 hours per week in a few case study schools. Although the service is not available for the entire school year, it is valued highly by principals and teachers in Gaeltacht schools.

The case studies indicate that the Language Assistants' Scheme works best when there is strong collaboration between individual class teachers and the language assistant, and when support for students is provided in classrooms:

*The service for language assistance is very effective indeed in the school and very specific vocabulary is taught in a very structured manner and there is ongoing assessment of what pupils have learned. It is apparent that pupils are given experience of using Irish in various contexts throughout the school to ensure that their Irish is not confined to the classroom context only. (Primary school: C)*

The withdrawal model of support, whereby language support is provided outside classrooms, is adopted in most case-study schools, with a few instances of in-class support provided in a small

number of schools. In instances where support is provided outside of classrooms, and where ongoing records of student attainment are not maintained, there are greater challenges for teachers in monitoring and evaluating accurately the impact of the additional support on students' learning.

## 5.7 Information and Communications Technology (ICT)

Overall, the case studies reveal that, while ICT is used to some extent in almost all Gaeltacht case-study schools, its potential is largely underutilised in supporting the language learning of students. The findings indicate that there was insufficient use of ICT in the provision of supplementary support for students experiencing comprehension difficulties in the Irish language or for students with a particular aptitude towards languages.

The majority of Gaeltacht case-study primary schools reported that the use of interactive whiteboards enhanced lessons and enabled teachers access a range of Irish-language resources to support students' language learning:

*During the visit the teachers indicated that the interactive whiteboards facilitate learning through Irish across the curriculum. (Primary school: G)*

*The pupils stated during the discussion with them that the interactive programmes facilitate their learning through Irish in various subjects. (Primary school: C)*

A number of Gaeltacht case-study primary schools access online resources regularly from the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), Northern Ireland to support teaching and learning through the medium of Irish in infant and junior classes. In almost all Gaeltacht case-study schools, it was observed that where ICT presentations, social learning websites, visualisers or tablets were used to mediate the teaching and learning process, the level of engagement of students was enhanced. The structured and planned use of ICT provided a valuable support to teaching and learning in two case-study schools. One of the case studies highlighted the importance of whole-school planning in order to extend the potential of integrating ICT to enhance Irish-medium educational provision:

*Regarding the use of technology in the teaching and learning process, and taking into account that iPads are used, management should outline a strategic plan for the integration of ICT with different subjects to ensure that their use will support the implementation of the school's Irish policy and the development of learning. (Post-primary school E)*

Limited 'hands-on' opportunities were provided in most case-study schools at both primary and post-primary level for individual or small groups of students to engage actively with ICT to enhance language learning:

*Sixth class have been using iPads for the past three years and it has been shown that they can be very useful for work on editing of Irish writing, in particular, using packages such as 'Evernote'. (Primary school: D)*

*It was the teachers only who availed of ICT in the observed lessons. There are missed opportunities here in placing a greater onus on students in regard to speaking and promoting the language. (Post-primary school D)*

It was articulated frequently during the case study visits that there was a limited supply of software, in addition to apps available through the medium of Irish, to support Gaeltacht schools:

*It was stated that more extensive and more appealing computer software was available in English than that available in Irish. It was also stated that teachers have to do a lot of preparation with regard to translating materials to Irish. (Primary school: G)*

*Pupils felt that they would like more information to be available through Irish on the internet and that they would like to have more computer games available through Irish. (Primary school: C)*

*Teachers and parents stated that there was a shortage in the availability of high quality materials in Irish on the internet. (Primary school: B)*

Given the vast range of emerging digital and multi-media technologies, and students' increasing familiarity with technology and social media in the modern digital age, the effective deployment of ICT has a key role in increasing students' motivation in Irish-medium education.

## 5.8 Community links

The fostering of positive school-community links to promote the use of the Irish language is an effective feature of practice in almost all case-study schools. The case studies indicated that such school-community links can support the school in a number of ways, including the extension of opportunities for students to use Irish, the enrichment of students' Irish, and enhancement of their ability to learn through Irish.

Almost all Gaeltacht schools are well supported by agencies and local bodies that promote the use of Irish through extra-curricular and co-curricular activities, both within and outside of the Gaeltacht school. This includes inputs from various organisations that provide drama, sport, music, literary and cultural activities through the medium of Irish:

*Particular strengths pertained to the school's diligence regarding the steps taken by management to create links with external services and various community organisations in support of the Irish-medium model of education. ...The school policy indicates that a significant effort is made on an ongoing basis to ensure that invited guests coming to the school to speak to any members of the school community are fluent in Irish. (Primary school: A)*

*A strong emphasis is placed on drama through Irish and on participating in a wide range of cultural and sporting activities, song contests, and in writing and drama competitions to develop pupils' language enrichment. (Primary school: C)*

*The area is traditionally renowned for drama. Some local groups produce dramas and that tradition supports the promotion of drama in the school. The school has strong links with the Comharchumann, the Acadamh, the Gaelic Athletic Association, and with the primary school next door....Drama is very strong in the school. Drama practice take place entirely through Irish after school. It was stated that many students who were not native speakers acquired the language as a result of the drama. Sport practices and matches also take place through Irish and once again, students are more inclined to use the language on the playing field. (Post-primary school: B)*

*The school and the unit have established and developed good links with various community groups, organisations and businesses that support them in the provision of education through Irish and that affirm their place in the heart of the community. There is a strong emphasis on culture and sport and consequently links have been established with local drama and sports clubs. (Post-primary school: E)*

In many case-study schools, visitors and experts from the locality provide language and cultural inputs to students relating to place names, local history and folklore, Irish music, poetry, literature and Science. Irish-language summer camps are organised by cooperative societies, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), and other organisations. Access to such supports is usually co-ordinated in case-study schools by school principals and senior management teams, and in fewer than half of the schools, by the DEIS co-ordinator:

*The school management and staff are very effective in creating links with community groups to strengthen and consolidate their experience of local culture.... It was clear that a strong link had been established with Muintearas and with the Education Officer of the Education and Training Board to provide support for the implementation of the curriculum by means, for example, of the Language Assistants' Scheme, and to organise events and facilitate the participation of students in local and national events. (Post-primary school: E)*

*All interviews indicated that the members of the school sports teams always speak to each other in Irish, and that Irish is their chosen language, particularly when competing with schools that are operating through the medium of English. (Post-primary school: F)*

Many Gaeltacht case-study primary and post-primary schools participate in competitions and exhibition activities including:

- BT Young Scientist and Technology Competition (*Comórtas BT na nEolaithe Óga agus na Teicneolaíochta*)
- Best Irish-language entry sponsored by Foras na Gaeilge
- *Scríobh Leabhar* organised by the Education Centre Network
- National talent competitions, such as *Scléip* organised by Gael Linn
- Drama competitions and events organised by *An Cumann Scoldrámaíochta* and *Baboró*
- Cultural activities provided by *Áislann Rann na Feiriste*
- Irish literature celebrations e.g. Erris Festival of Words (*An Béal Binn*)
- Cultural competitions, such as *Oireachtas na Gaeilge*.

Many case-study schools at primary level have fostered strong linkages and communication channels with local Irish-medium playgroups or *naíonraí*. Personnel in the case-study schools report that the *naíonraí* have had a positive impact on children's development of Irish:

*It is a particular advantage to the school that the infants attend the 'naíonra' before they begin in the school. Although all those coming to the school do not have Irish at home, they have a good understanding of the language when they start in junior infants. (Primary school: F)*

*The board of management and the principal stated that the school is very well supported by local organisations. There is a strong link with the local 'naíonra'. This connection supports pupils' learning of Irish. The teachers commended the amount of Irish that the pupils learn in the naíonra and the extent to which this is beneficial to the school. (Primary school: G)*

In a few cases, positive links are cultivated between Gaeltacht post-primary case-study schools and neighbouring feeder primary schools. In one post-primary case-study school, for example, a Transition Year mentoring programme, *Cluas sa Chlós*, is implemented with its neighbouring primary school to promote the use of Irish. In another instance, mutually beneficial links are nurtured that facilitate the transition of students from primary to post-primary and promote students' competence in the language:

*The school appreciates the interaction with the local primary schools and this is a reciprocal arrangement that supports the implementation of the Irish-medium model of education... It is good that there are primary principals on the board of management. It is understood that the school and the local community operate as a unit.... The Irish plan in the school is now clearly having a positive influence on language activities in the primary schools. (Post-primary school: C)*

The case studies suggest that a full instruction through Irish approach in post-primary Gaeltacht schools is dependent on the commitment of feeder primary schools in implementing full instruction through Irish. Likewise, where there is a strong Irish-medium ethos fostered in the post-primary Gaeltacht school, this provides an impetus for its feeder primary schools to set higher expectations in terms of Irish-language proficiency targets for students.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

The case studies carried out by the Inspectorate have provided useful insights into current policy and practice with regard to education through Irish in Gaeltacht schools and on the key drivers that support the effective provision of education through Irish in these schools. This section provides a summary of these insights, draws conclusions, and identifies actions for consideration to support educational provision in Gaeltacht schools.

### ***Defining a Gaeltacht school based on effective practice***

There is need for the Department of Education and Skills to define a Gaeltacht school in light of effective practice observed in the case-study schools, the reality of English-medium education in a substantial minority of Gaeltacht schools, and the findings of national and international research. Such a definition should be considered in the context of the Department's policy on Gaeltacht education.

The case studies have captured many elements of effective practice relating to Irish-medium education. Such practice includes communication through Irish in all aspects of school life, full teaching instruction through Irish, including a delay in the teaching of English for a period in infant classes and potentially for the entire period of infant classes, extension of the learners' experience of the language beyond the classroom, use of Irish-medium resources, and differentiation of learning to accommodate the needs of all learners, including the needs of first-language speakers of Irish.

### ***Approach to Irish-medium education***

The case-study Gaeltacht schools show that full instruction through Irish, whether in the language maintenance context or a language-immersion context, is the desirable model of education in Gaeltacht schools in terms of developing learners' competence in Irish, extending their experience of the Irish language and enabling them to access the curriculum through Irish. The case studies indicate that bilingual instruction and partial instruction through Irish have limitations, but could be considered as part of a phased approach in the case of English-medium schools in the Gaeltacht that may wish to move to full instruction through Irish.

### ***Structure for educational provision***

The case studies indicate that the desirable structure for educational provision through Irish in Gaeltacht areas is a stand-alone school. This allows the school to establish a clearly-defined language ethos and identity and facilitates the establishment of policies and practices that support the socialisation of learners through Irish and enable learners to use and develop proficiency and enrichment in the language in all aspects of their school life.

In contexts where it is not feasible to establish a stand-alone school, which can be the case at post-primary level, due to insufficient demand, consideration should be given to the establishment of an Irish-medium unit. It was noted, however, during the case studies that the attachment of such a unit to an English-medium host school can constrain the capacity of the unit to establish its own identity and extend the opportunities for students to be immersed in the language outside of lessons, especially if the Irish-medium unit is accommodated within the building of the English-medium host school.

The case studies show that the remote attachment of an Irish-medium unit to an Irish-medium host school is an option worthy of consideration in terms of allowing a school to establish a clearly-defined language identity. However, there is need to ensure that clear communication channels and planning supports between the host school and the remotely located Irish-medium unit are put in place in order to leverage the administrative and teaching and learning resources from the host school. In light of this, the potential of ICT to accommodate such communication between a host school and an Irish-medium unit should be explored. The potential of ICT to extend subject provision in Irish-medium units and in smaller Gaeltacht post-primary schools should also be considered.

In the case of primary schools which have very small numbers of pupils and where access to administrative and other resources can be limited, consideration might also be given to the inclusion of such schools within a federated structure where all the included schools are Irish-medium. Such a federated structure would function under one board of management and not be dissimilar to the alternative provision at post-primary level, where an all-Irish unit is attached remotely to an all-Irish post-primary school.

The ‘Bridging Support’ bilingual programme, *Droichead*, that is attached to one post-primary Irish-medium school in this study is a model that is worthy of consideration for extension to other post-primary schools. *Droichead* is a programme, where junior-cycle students with low proficiency in Irish, are placed on a transitional basis and given bespoke support to develop their proficiency in Irish and engage with the curriculum through Irish, so that they are enabled in time to access education fully through Irish. Such an arrangement enables the Gaeltacht school to protect its Irish-language ethos and policy of Irish-medium instruction, while also accommodating the needs of students with low proficiency in Irish.

The *Droichead* programme is resource intensive, and the question arises, whether it would be feasible to provide the same level of language and teaching resources (i.e., up to one fifth of total cohort of teaching staff) to all Gaeltacht post-primary schools. The question also arises whether this model could be replicable in different school contexts without the necessary conditions in place to support its successful implementation. The successful delivery of such a model is contingent on strong school management and leadership, effective planning processes, and the whole-school commitment of staff. Nonetheless, it is a model that has worked very successfully in gaining the support of parents and the local community for the language policy of the school and in supporting the integration of the students in question into full instruction through Irish.

### ***Key drivers of Irish medium education in Gaeltacht schools***

The case studies identified a number of key drivers that were critical to the delivery of Irish-medium education in Gaeltacht schools, namely:

- leadership and management
- shared vision
- whole-school planning and school self-evaluation
- teacher proficiency in Irish and pedagogical knowledge and skill
- parental involvement and support
- resources and supports for Gaeltacht schools (including supports for first-language speakers of Irish)
- information and communications technology (ICT)
- community links

There were some excellent examples of practice in individual Gaeltacht schools of how most of these drivers were manifested in support of Irish-medium education. For example, there was evidence of useful links in terms of the promotion of the Irish language among learners between primary schools and their local *naíonraí* and between primary and post-primary schools. Attendance at *naíonraí* was reported to have an important impact on the development of learners’ proficiency in Irish. It is important that the experiences of schools in relation to the drivers described in this report is leveraged for the benefit of all schools, perhaps through the development and dissemination of good practice guidelines for Gaeltacht schools.

### ***Challenges***

The case studies also highlight a number of challenges in relation to each of these drivers. For example, principals and teachers in Gaeltacht schools do not always have an opportunity to develop their understanding and knowledge of pedagogical practice relating to Irish-medium instruction and immersion education.

It was found that appointing teachers with the necessary proficiency in Irish is not always possible, due to the small pool of teachers across subjects at post-primary level in particular, who are sufficiently proficient in the language to teach through Irish. The differentiation of teaching and learning through

the medium of Irish to meet the needs of learners from varying linguistic backgrounds, including native speakers of Irish, is a particular challenge for teachers.

Some primary Gaeltacht schools reported difficulties with the recruitment of teachers with sufficient proficiency in the language from the redeployment panels. The Department has since made improvements to the operation of the redeployment process with a view to addressing such difficulties. Teachers on redeployment panels are now required to indicate whether they are particularly interested in being redeployed to teach in an Irish-medium school. This assists the operation of the redeployment process for Irish-medium schools. This approach has been positively received by all the relevant education partners.

While the range of Irish-medium resources has improved considerably in recent years, there is need for ongoing enhancement of Irish-medium resources so that the Irish language is comprehensible to students and so that, at post-primary level, sufficient resources are available to cover all subject areas. At primary level, *Séideán Sí* has greatly supported schools in the development of learners' proficiency in Irish, but may not be sufficiently challenging for some first-language speakers of Irish. The potential for the use of ICT to support teaching and learning, develop linkages, and share resources and examples of effective pedagogical practice also needs to be fully realised. Practice on the deployment of the Language Assistant (*Cúntóir Teanga*) varies greatly across schools in terms of the focus of the support provided. There is need for the DES to liaise with the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht with regard to clarifying the role and responsibilities of the Language Assistant and the provision of guidance on the use of the resource, so that its potential for enhancing the Irish language of learners and first-language speakers of Irish is more fully realised.

### *Actions*

In light of findings and challenges outlined above, a number of key actions should be considered:

- Development of a definition of a Gaeltacht school that is based on the full instruction through Irish model in accordance with good practice and national and international research
- Development and dissemination of good practice guidelines for Gaeltacht schools in relation to key drivers such as language planning, leadership and management, use of resources, provision for the language needs of first speakers of Irish, Irish-medium pedagogical practice, use of ICT, parental involvement and community links. Such guidelines could usefully build on the language planning template that has been designed by Eagraíocht na Scoileanna Gaeltachta and published by COGG
- Building awareness among parents in Gaeltacht areas of the value of Irish-medium education, perhaps through information booklets, seminars and/or local and social media
- Consideration of the potential of ICT to support the expansion and delivery of Irish-medium education in Gaeltacht schools, including communication between host schools and Irish-medium units, extension of subject provision in units and in smaller Gaeltacht schools and classrooms, and provision of support to teachers
- Consideration of the extension of the 'Bridging Support' bilingual programme (*Droichead*) to all post-primary Gaeltacht schools that provide full instruction through Irish
- Ongoing review of the effectiveness of the arrangements for the redeployment of teachers at primary level including, in particular, for Gaeltacht schools.
- Provision of bespoke continuing professional development (CPD) for principals and teachers and the development of community learning and development networks (CLDN) in order to share good practice and develop their knowledge and understanding of Irish-medium education, particularly immersion education, differentiated language pedagogy, and language policy planning processes
- Consideration of options to increase the pool of teachers available to teach through Irish, including the provision by one Initial Teacher Education (ITE) provider of a bespoke Irish-medium course for primary teachers, and the extension of supply on the ITE course that currently prepares post-primary teachers for Irish-medium teaching

- Consolidation and extension of the CPD support currently available for teachers in Irish-medium schools in order to develop their knowledge and understanding of Irish-medium education, particularly immersion education, and differentiated language pedagogy
- Expansion of opportunities for principals and teachers to engage in post-graduate research on Irish-medium and immersion education, and language pedagogy for first and second-language learners of Irish
- Consideration of the potential of ICT to support teachers and facilitate the sharing of expertise, resources and materials, perhaps through a dedicated Irish-medium education website
- Consideration of options in collaboration with DAHG and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) to strengthen linkages between early childhood care and education and primary schools in the Gaeltacht
- Consideration, in consultation with DAHG, on how to optimise the use of the Language Assistants' Scheme (*Scéim na gCúntóirí Teanga*) for Gaeltacht schools, through perhaps the provision of Guidelines and a language programme for delivery by the language assistants
- Enhancement of COGG's capacity to ensure that a satisfactory supply of high quality teaching and learning resources is available to strengthen Irish-medium education in Gaeltacht primary and post-primary schools
- Ongoing revision and development of Irish-medium educational materials and resources to ensure that they are comprehensible to learners and that the range is sufficient to cover all subjects at post-primary level. Development of supplementary digital materials for *Séideán Sí* to provide additional challenge for native speakers of Irish.

It should be noted that further work needs to be undertaken on the implementation of a cost analysis of the above, such as the possible extension of the 'Bridging Support' bilingual programme (*Droichead*), the establishment of a national redeployment panel for Gaeltacht primary and post-primary schools, and increasing the number of teachers in ITE courses with a focus on Irish-medium education. There will also be a need to look at how the support structures for CPD for leadership and teachers will be delivered to enhance Irish-medium provision in Gaeltacht schools.