



## REPORT 2

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## **Acknowledgments**

The research team would like to extend thanks to the following members of the DEY AGSMB for the collaborative approach adopted throughout this consultation: Seán Ó hAdhmaill, Odhrán Ó Súilleabháin, Micheál Ó Caoilte, and Yvonne Ní Mhurchú. Particular thanks to Pádraig Mac Fhlannchadha for the feedback provided during the drafting of this report and his professional and committed engagement throughout the research/consultation process. Our thanks, also, to DCU colleagues who supported the work internally, in particular, Dr Claire Dunne, Dr Jacqueline de Brún, Orla Dawson, Dr Triona O'Hanlon, Kieran O'Dwyer and Dr Geraldine French. Finally, we wish to note our appreciation for the many participants who welcomed us to their schools, education centres, and laptop screens during consultation focus groups.

## **Citation**

Burke, P., Ní Dhiorbháin, A., Ó Duibhir, P., Nic Craith, D., Ó Breacháin, C., Ahern, P., Ní Dhubhghaill, E., & English, A. (2025). *Teaching and Learning Irish in English-Medium Schools: Perspectives of Children, Young People, Parents, Teachers, Principals and Student Teachers*. Dublin: Department of Education and Youth.

## **Note for the Reader**

Both Report 1 and Report 2 aim to present and summarise the views of a variety of different perspectives on the teaching and learning of Irish expressed during the national consultation. The views presented in the relevant sections do not necessarily represent the views of the SEALBHÚ research team, individually or collectively.



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## Executive Summary

A wide-ranging consultation was undertaken to ascertain the perspectives of a range of participants on the teaching and learning of Irish in primary and post-primary schools. This report examines the opinions and experiences of children, young people, parents, teachers, student teachers and principals in both primary and post-primary education. On the whole, participants expressed a clear desire to learn Irish, in principle, but signalled a range of challenges that hinder learning and progression in the system. Participants offered a series of recommendations to work towards a more successful, inclusive and stimulating environment for learning, teaching and assessing Irish.

### Participants and methods

Two main methods of data generation were adopted. The first method involved 45 focus groups organised in a variety of locations and with a variety of groups throughout the country, leading to a total sample of 404 participants. Over half ( $n=212$ ) of these participants were children and young people. The second method involved two one-day consultations with primary and post-primary school communities, adopting the BEACONS (Bringing Education Alive for Communities on a National Scale) framework. This added a further 120 participants to the overall number, meaning that the views of 524 participants are represented in this report. During all consultative sessions, detailed records were maintained of participants' responses, using commonly agreed templates. Template analysis was adopted to facilitate the line-by-line coding and subsequent thematisation of the data. In order to represent the distinct contributions of each participant group, findings are presented group by group in this summary and throughout the report.

### Primary level

#### Children's views

The participating primary school children were generally positive about the idea of learning Irish. However, their contact with Irish outside school was limited. Children noted a range of positive aspects about their learning of Irish in school, including active approaches (e.g. songs, games), using Irish outside Irish lessons and the positive impact of individual teachers. They signalled a number of factors that had a negative impact on their learning of Irish, including an over-reliance on textbooks and decontextualised approaches to the teaching of spelling, grammar and vocabulary. Notably, children appeared to enjoy learning Irish more during the early years of primary school, with this enthusiasm seeming to decline

in the later classes. Some children in senior classes noted a sense of frustration with their lack of progress in Irish. From an inclusion perspective, children identified the need for more support for those encountering difficulties in Irish or who were new to learning Irish.

### Teachers' views

The primary teachers who took part in the consultation expressed a clear desire that the children they teach would become proficient in spoken Irish. They recognised the role they played in this endeavour, but pointed out that challenges are experienced when there is limited parental support for Irish in school. These teachers generally had limited opportunities to develop their own competence in the language, due to limited contact with Irish in and out of school. The benefits of teaching using interactive approaches and extending Irish using whole school, cross-curricular approaches were contrasted with the negative motivational effects of textbook use, particularly in the senior classes. Teachers also noted the benefits of initiatives such as Seachtain na Gaeilge and the Gaelbhratach. Teachers outlined the challenge of supporting progress and motivation in the senior classes, in particular, as well as the perceived lack of support for inclusion (e.g. learning support for children who need support with Irish). Some suggested that further guidance on standardised assessment in Irish was warranted, to support progression. They also identified the importance of school leadership to support a whole-school vision for Irish.

### Principals' views

A key focus of principals' vision for Irish was supporting the development of children's communication in a welcoming, affirmative manner. They also pointed out the potentially harmful effects of some parents' negative attitudes towards Irish. Their views on effective practice largely aligned with those of primary teachers, including active approaches and the extension of Irish beyond the language lesson. Teacher competence and confidence in Irish was highlighted as a significant challenge, alongside an overreliance on textbooks, a lack of progression and the reduction in time allocation for Irish in the new curriculum. They also expressed concern about the current exemption system.

### Parents' views

The participating parents expressed the view that it was important to them that their children would learn Irish, but indicated that current practice was negatively impacting attitudes. They signalled that their children generally had limited contact with Irish outside school. They expressed a preference for further information sharing and support from school to support home-school connections, noting the value of events relating to Seachtain na

Gaeilge for forging these links. A source of particular concern were the approaches to teaching and testing Irish spelling, which caused significant anxiety for some children and, consequently, negative attitudes towards Irish. Parents expressed disappointment with the progress their children made with communicative competence in Irish.

### Student teachers' views

Student teachers indicated positive attitudes towards Irish and highlighted practices that had proven successful on placement. However, they also signalled the challenges they, and their peers, experience in speaking and teaching Irish. A lack of confidence led to limited engagement with Irish in their own time, even when opportunities were available in their higher education institution. Though the *Tréimhse Foghlama sa Ghaeltacht* provided some with valuable learning opportunities, this positive experience was not shared by all students. Teaching Irish through Irish arose as a significant challenge for student teachers on school placement, partly due to their own lack of confidence and partly due to a mismatch in expectations between practice recommended by their higher education institutions and actual practice in schools.

### Post-primary

#### Young people's views

A majority of the participating young people expressed the view that learning Irish is important for cultural reasons. However, many students expressed dissatisfaction with their learning experiences in schools. Though some students reported using Irish outside the lesson, very few used the language in any meaningful way outside school. The exception to this was students who had attended and benefited from Gaeltacht courses. Students reported that they enjoyed active approaches and the use of technology, while also highlighting the importance of individual teachers. For the most part, they held negative views about the volume of literature they studied and the lack of authentic, oral language use as part of their studies in school. They expressed frustration with their lack of language awareness, their poor understanding of grammar and their lack of progress in developing communicative proficiency during their time in the education system.

#### Teachers' views

Participating post-primary teachers were aware of the important role they played in instilling positive attitudes towards Irish in their students. However, they regularly cited challenges associated with the current Junior Cycle specifications/Leaving Certificate syllabus and related assessment in achieving this goal. Teachers were of the view that a

predominant focus must be placed on reading and writing, at the expense of speaking Irish, in order to prepare students for the current state examinations. The majority of teachers felt that the volume of literature was having a negative effect on student motivation to learn the language. They expressed particular concern about the standard of Irish attained by children at the end of primary school, as well as the challenge associated with differentiating the curriculum for all learners.

### **Principals' views**

The participating post-primary principals were of the view that significant change was needed to engender more positive attitudes towards Irish. They highlighted examples of good practice and the positive influence of Gaeltacht courses. Similar to the post-primary teachers, they expressed concern at the wide variation in standards of Irish demonstrated by incoming First Year students. They also suggested that significant change was needed to the specifications for Irish at Junior Cycle and the syllabus at Leaving Certificate level. The principals were strongly of the view that the system for allocating Irish exemptions required review.

### **Parents' views**

As with other participant groups, post-primary parents expressed support for students learning Irish in principle but identified a range of negative perceptions and experiences associated with learning Irish at post-primary level. The perceived over-focus on literature and summative assessment (i.e. State examinations) and the lack of focus on spoken Irish was commonly noted as a concern. Their contributions revealed that many of their children had limited or no contact with Irish outside school and thus had limited aspirations for its use outside the formal school subject. They identified that the interactive, engaging approaches associated with learning Irish in early primary school should be extended.

### **Student teachers' views**

Post-primary student teachers were motivated to learn Irish and to teach Irish to their future students. They cited the benefits of interactive approaches to learning, linking in with student interests. They pointed out the benefits of having clear support for teaching Irish on school placement. However, they also noted challenges, such as the sometimes negative attitude of some groups of post-primary students to Irish and the difficulties experienced in teaching Irish grammar.

## Synthesis of recommendations

Throughout the report, the recommendations proposed by each sub-group are presented.

Broadly speaking, the participants' recommendations can be summarised as follows:

- Ensure a clear and coordinated vision for learning Irish throughout the system with clear targets/benchmarks.
- Place a particular focus on the teaching/learning of oral language in Irish.
- Extend the use of Irish beyond the Irish lesson (e.g. through extracurricular activities, content and language integrated learning [teaching other subjects or parts of other subjects through Irish], informal Irish use throughout the day).
- Provide professional learning opportunities to promote teacher knowledge and application of active approaches to language learning.
- Provide opportunities for teachers, primary teachers in particular, to upskill their own Irish proficiency.
- Provide support for the leadership of Irish throughout the school and whole-school approaches to planning/teaching.
- Provide additional support for forging links between the use of Irish within the school and in the broader community, including opportunities for cultural connections.
- Ensure greater progression in Irish learning throughout the school system, and in particular in the transition from primary to post-primary school; there should be greater continuity in the learning of Irish.
- Generate new resources for Irish and bring together those that are already available.
- Provide greater guidance on how to include *all* learners in Irish, including a review of the current exemptions policy.
- Provide additional supports for parents/guardians, including stronger home-school communication about Irish learning.
- Provide greater guidance to schools/teachers on how to teach literacy skills in Irish, and in particular, spelling.
- Review and revise the current specifications/syllabus and state examinations/assessments for Irish at Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate level, focusing, in particular, on the current role of Classroom-Based Assessments, the lack

of an oral examination at Junior Cycle level, and the use of the *sraith pictiúr* in the Leaving Certificate oral.

- Reduce the focus on literature at post-primary level.
- Consider the provision of different Irish courses at post-primary level (e.g. an applied language course and a separate literature course) and the introduction of bonus points for Irish.
- Provide greater funding and availability of Gaeltacht courses for both students and teachers.
- Provide greater opportunities for student teachers to develop competence and confidence in Irish, both in the higher education setting and during school placement.

# Introduction

This report has been prepared by SEALBHÚ, the DCU Research Centre for the Learning and Teaching of Irish, as part of a consultation process to support the development of an Action Plan for Irish in English-medium schools. It is the second of two reports commissioned by An tAonad Gaeilge um Scoileanna Meán-Bhéarla (AGSMB), Department of Education and Youth (DEY).

The first report (Ní Dhiorbháin et al., 2025) presents an abridged literature review, findings from the initial consultative events with education stakeholders held in January 2025, and recommendations suggested by stakeholders during bi-/multi-lateral meetings in April/May 2025. This second report details findings from a range of nationwide consultative focus groups conducted with participants in primary and post-primary schools, including children, young people, parents, teachers, principals and student teachers, conducted throughout February, March and April, 2025.

The work was informed by the three main principles that will guide the Action Plan for Irish:

- I. the importance of fostering a positive mind-set towards Irish,
- II. a commitment to increasing the use of Irish and,
- III. the integration of policies, actions, structures, and resources.

This introduction is followed by two main sections which focus on the methodology and key findings in turn.

## Methodology

This section reports on the methods used to generate and capture multiple perspectives on the teaching and learning of Irish, with a particular focus on those involved in primary and post-primary education. The methodology was guided by the primary research questions set by the DEY:

1. What is working well to support positive attitudes and use of Irish in English-medium schools?
2. What are the challenges to fostering positive attitudes and use of Irish in English-medium schools?
3. What actions can be taken to support the teaching and learning of Irish in English-medium schools?

To ensure that a depth of views could be explored, all data generation and analysis was qualitative in nature (Cohen et al., 2018). The voice of children and young people was particularly important in this consultation. Consequently, the process was informed by the Lundy (2007) model of child participation and guidance from the Department of Education and Youth (Department of Education, 2024). This chapter first details how focus groups were carried out nationally, before detailing how views were gathered through consultation using the BEACONS approach.

## Focus groups conducted nationally

### Participants

Purposive sampling (Cohen et al., 2018) was conducted to recruit participants fitting into a range of subgroups aligned with English-medium primary and post-primary education. Table 1 outlines the subgroups whose views were sought for this strand of the consultation. Recruitment of participants was conducted by the AGSMB in the Department of Education and Youth, with a view to achieving variety according to parameters such as: geographical location, participation in the DEIS scheme, size of school, ethos of school, mixed/ single gender schools, presence of special classes etc. This included participants who had joined the Irish education system more recently, as well as participants from the Traveller and Roma community. The AGSMB worked with the following education partners to ensure participation of different groups: National Parents' Council Primary/Post-primary, Irish Primary Principals' Network, National Association for Principals and Deputy Principals, Irish National Teachers' Organisation, Teachers' Union of Ireland, Association of Secondary



Teachers in Ireland and Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn. Recruitment was also facilitated by local Education Centre directors and contacts in Higher Education Institutions. In total, this involved the arrangement of 45 individual focus groups, in which 404 individual participants took part. These included 17 online focus groups and 28 face-to-face focus groups held at a variety of settings, including schools, higher education institutions and education centres, across the country. The provision of assent/consent from participants was managed by the AGSMB.

**Table 1.** *Categories and subcategories of participants*

Primary	Post-Primary
Children - Upper Primary	Students - Junior Cycle & Senior Cycle
Parents	Parents
Teachers	Teachers
Principals	Principals
Student Teachers	Student Teachers

### Data generation and recording

A range of bespoke focus group interview schedules were generated for each participant sub-category outlined in Table 1 above (See Appendix A). These were generated by the AGSMB and shared with the SEALBHÚ team. Each focus group was attended by at least one member of the AGSMB, who acted as facilitator, and one member of SEALBHÚ, who acted as recorder/note taker. Facilitators welcomed participants, explained the purpose of the focus group, posed questions and generated discussion. Recorders captured accurate notes on the variety of viewpoints put forth during the focus groups using a bespoke template. They also captured some short quotes, where appropriate, to capture a sense of the participants' views. None of the recorded notes were attributable to individual participants or their associated schools. The identifying information from each focus group (e.g. school in which a focus group was held) was removed after the record for each focus group was finalised. Throughout this report, codes are used to refer to the source of any short quotes that are presented (see Table 2).

Table 2. Explanation of code system

Code	Explanation
<b>Primary (Bunscoil)</b>	
PBS	Focus group with Primary School Children
TBS	Focus group with Primary Parents
POBS	Focus group with Primary Principals
MBS	Focus group with Primary Teachers
MFOBS	Focus group with Primary Student Teachers
<b>Post-primary (Iar-bhunscoil)</b>	
SIBS-Sóis	Focus group with Post-primary Students - Junior Cycle
SIBS-Sin	Focus group with Post-primary Students - Senior Cycle
TIBS	Focus group with Post-primary Parents
POIBS	Focus group with Post-primary Principals
MIBS	Focus group with Post-primary Teachers
MFOIBS	Focus group with Post-primary Student Teachers

Note: The letter (A, B, C etc.) in each code refers to the specific focus group session, e.g. **SIBS-A-Sóis** refers to the focus group session with Junior Cycle students in School A while **SIBS-A-Sin** refers to the focus group with Senior Cycle students in the same setting. Note also that these letters do not mean that all focus groups marked with the letter 'A' are linked or took place in the same area/school; the letters are used independently for each set of participant focus groups.

### Data analysis

Template analysis was employed for the current project as it can be applied flexibly to different textual data sets (Brooks et al., 2015) in a manner that produces a clear audit trail (King & Brooks, 2017). In line with the published guidance on template analysis (Brooks et al., 2015; King & Brooks, 2017), the following steps were followed:

1. **Familiarisation with data:** The principal investigators read through all records in full.

2. **Preliminary coding:** The records generated from each sub-category of participant (e.g. primary school children; post-primary principals) were analysed separately, in order to produce a subsection on the views of different populations. Initial codes for each subcategory were generated based on *a priori* themes (e.g. *attitudes towards Irish*) and inductive codes that arose during the familiarisation process. King and Brooks (2017) recommend that these codes are applied to a sub-set of data prior to being formalised and applied to the whole data set. The first set of minutes for each subgroup was used to generate these codes. The relevant units from minutes were transposed into a shared encrypted drive, which kept a record of all data units assigned to a given code.
3. **Clustering:** Codes that were conceptually relevant were brought together and arranged hierarchically. In most cases, these are presented under the major headings of: *attitudes towards Irish, use of Irish and teaching, learning and assessment of Irish*, while subheadings vary from subgroup to subgroup.
4. **Producing a coding template:** Following application of the codes to the data from a range of participant subgroups, an overall coding template was agreed.
5. **Applying and developing the template:** The initial template consisted of a series of related codes/themes against which new transcripts were analysed by the principal investigators. Where necessary, new codes were introduced during the analysis process.
6. **Final interpretation:** The fully coded data set was used to generate a narrative report which reported on the final themes and sub-themes.

A draft report was shared with the full research team (including recorders) to ensure that it captured a balanced and representative account of the discussions held across the various subgroups/participants. This was an important step to validate the accuracy of the report across recorders.

## Limitations

As with all forms of data generation, and indeed public consultations, it is important to bear the limitations of the above methodology in mind. Some key limitations are as follows:

- Though a large number of individuals from a range of contexts, backgrounds and participant groups took part in the focus groups (N=404), it is not possible to rule out the influence of self-selection bias, i.e. that the participants who opted into the research might not represent the views of those who did not participate. In other words, the views expressed in this report cannot be generalised to the entire population of teachers, student teachers, students, parents and principals in English-



medium schools.

- Though researchers carried out thorough note-taking, analysis and cross-checking amongst the team, qualitative research involves a degree of interpretation not found in purely quantitative studies.

## Consultation with school communities (BEACONS)

BEACONS<sup>1</sup> is a form of consultative model in which multiple groups of participants from the same school community come together to discuss a particular issue. It aims to support participants in sharing varying perspectives, developing common insights in the process. Two BEACONS events were organised in Limerick as part of the consultation. One event involved children, parents/guardians and teachers from five *primary schools*, the second event involved young people, parents/guardians and teachers from five *post-primary schools*. The planning and facilitation of each event was led by the Burren College of Art, in coordination with Limerick Education Centre and the DEY AGSMB. Recorders from SEALBHÚ were present to gather data from discussions held throughout both events. In total, 60 primary school participants and 60 post-primary school participants shared their views on each day.

The running order for each day was as follows:

### BLOCK ONE

- Participants wrote a word on cards (either language) - either what comes up when we think of our experience of the teaching and learning of Irish or a word that we want to feature somewhere in today's conversations
- Participants sharing what they feel is most important from their experience
- Plenary feedback
- 'Way forward' exercise - more 'x' (experiences that should be promoted), less 'y' (experiences to avoid)

### BLOCK TWO

- Plenary summary from more 'x', less 'y' - picking up on challenges being identified.
- Share positive stories involving teaching/learning of Irish
- Plenary feedback
- Identifying common elements across tables ('essence' of the positive experiences)
- Generating ideas for how those elements could become more common in practice
- Exploring what would need to happen to make these positive experiences more common
- Plenary feedback

### BLOCK THREE

- Plenary summary of conversation to date

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://burrenresource.ie/strands/beacons-oecd-pilot/>

- Different topics to be discussed at different tables; topics based on those suggested by participants for further conversation
- Conversation in school groups:
  - What have you learnt today?
  - At least three practical ideas that we can do in our school
  - At least three headline messages we want to send to interested people not here today
- Closing remarks

After each block, tables were reconstituted to ensure that ideas were shared within and across schools.

Data from the event constituted written records of discussions/recommendations and photos of the key recommendations captured in flipcharts at each table. Data were analysed using the Template Analysis method outlined previously. Findings from the BEACONS events are presented separately.

## Findings

This section reports findings by sector (primary and post-primary). It explores participants' attitudes towards the teaching and learning of Irish, their use of Irish, as well as their views on positive and challenging aspects of classroom practice and experiences of the language. Out-of-school factors are also explored, showing the holistic and context-embedded nature of language learning. Recommendations arising from each set of focus groups are presented. However, it is important to note that some of the participants' recommendations may fall outside the scope of the focus of the current consultation, which is to design a two-year action plan for Irish. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that, given the self-reported nature of the data, the findings reflect participants' perceptions of what is 'going well' or 'enjoyable' within the confines of their existing practices (in the case of teachers) or current experiences (in the case of students/parents). Though the full sample of participants (N=404, focus groups) is large for a qualitative study, it is not possible to generalise these findings to all contexts and classrooms.

### Primary focus groups

This section presents key findings from participants associated with the teaching and learning of Irish in primary schools. Findings are reported according to each of the five subgroups: (i) focus groups with children (n=65); (ii) focus groups with teachers (n=38); (iii) focus groups with principals (n=17); (iv) focus groups with parents (n=25) and (v) focus groups with student teachers (n= 24). In general, findings are reported under the broad headings of *attitudes* and *use*, followed by both *positive* and *challenging* aspects regarding the teaching, learning and assessment of Irish. The recommendations made by each subgroup are also presented.

### Primary school children

Ascertaining the views of children was particularly important in this consultation (Lundy, 2007; DE, 2024). Children participating in the focus groups ranged in age from 10 to 12 years and were in fourth to sixth class in a diversity of English-medium school contexts. A total of 65 children participated in 5 focus groups, all of which were held on the school premises. Some of the participating children spoke home languages other than Irish or English. Firstly, children's views on the importance of learning Irish are presented. This is followed by findings relating to their use of Irish outside of school. In-school factors related

to the teaching, learning and assessment of Irish are then presented according to experiences that support positive attitudes and use, and subsequently, challenges in this regard. Children's recommendations are presented at the end of the section.

### Attitudes towards Irish

Children across focus groups were generally strongly in favour of learning Irish for various reasons. Culture, identity and heritage were cited as reasons for learning Irish, with children stating that it was important to learn Irish as it is the native language of the country: *"It's the country's language. We are in Ireland. It can't die out."* (PBS-A). Children relayed that it was important to *'keep the language alive'*, with some noting that Irish is spoken as a daily language in some parts of the country. Some children highlighted the importance of transmitting Irish to the next generation in order for the language to survive. There was a strong sense that many children associated learning Irish with being Irish and/or living in Ireland. Along with cultural benefits, some children also stated that there were cognitive benefits to learning Irish as an additional language. *"Yes because it might challenge your brain and keep your mental health good"* (PBS-D). Children also recognised that there were advantages to learning Irish in terms of employment in certain professions, such as teaching. Some children viewed learning Irish at primary school as important to support their learning of Irish in post-primary school. The majority of children viewed learning Irish as important and they wanted to be able to speak Irish. There was very little difference in opinion in this regard, although challenges emerged with regard to children's experiences of learning Irish in school.

### Children's use of Irish outside of school

The majority of children had limited contact with Irish outside of school. However, interaction with Irish, when it did happen, supported positive attitudes. For example, in two schools, children attended a club where Irish was the language of communication. This had a very positive impact, as they engaged in everyday, enjoyable activities—such as singing songs, going to the shop, and getting pizza—all through Irish. As one child explained: *"I also go to the same club as her. I find it good. It gives me a grá for Irish"* (PBS-D). Children reported using Irish when helping younger siblings with homework and also teaching some words in Irish to parents who were new to the language. Some children attended Irish music and dancing lessons where some Irish was used, which they viewed favourably: *"I like Irish because I play the concertina, and I learn a lot of Irish tunes"* (PBS-F). While the vast majority of children were in favour of learning Irish, the lack of opportunities to use the language outside of school negatively impacted on the attitudes of some children, *"I just don't think it will be that*



*important in my life*" (PBS-C). It is of note that children were often found to associate Irish with schoolwork rather than meaningful use of Irish outside of school.

### Children's views on positive aspects of teaching, learning and assessment of Irish

Three main subthemes can be identified from the positive features of teaching, learning and assessment identified by children: (i) active approaches, (ii) extending the use of Irish beyond the formal lesson, (iii) the role of the teacher.

#### Active approaches

Children in all focus groups said that they enjoyed singing songs, learning poems and playing games in Irish. They found that these activities were fun and engaging ways to use the language: *"I like the way that teachers come up with good games for Irish."* (PBS-C). Many of the games children mentioned were memory-based and focused on vocabulary linked to specific themes. These included games like bingo, Deir Ó Grádaigh, word tennis, and tic tac toe—all of which children enjoyed. When children had opportunities to engage in role-play and drama this also supported positive attitudes and use: *"Speaking is more practical, it is easier to speak than read or write"* (PBS-A). Positive memories from junior classes were also associated with using the language in a fun way through games, songs, drama and role-play. Technology was also used for language games in a minority of schools (e.g. Kahoot) and, again, this was viewed favourably by children. Some children also said that they liked learning new words associated with themes in Irish and that they enjoyed the sounds of the language: *"When I was in fifth class I heard the word 'luas lasrach'. I can really remember this."* (PBS-C). Overall, children appeared to gain enjoyment and satisfaction from opportunities that focused on *speaking* Irish.

#### Extending the use of Irish beyond the formal lesson

The use of informal Irish - for greetings, asking questions, making short statements in class - supported positive attitudes towards and use of Irish. One school was participating in the Gaelbhratach, which was seen to make a difference as all members of the school community focused on key phrases to use every week: *"We do like the phrase of the week and we each get a turn on the intercom calling out the Irish phrase - people just say the phrase when they meet each other in the hall - use it when they can - instead of 'enjoy your day' - bain taitneamh as - siúil ar chlé"* (PBS-D). Participating in the Gaelbhratach scheme gave children an opportunity to focus on Irish and to take part in formulating a plan to increase the use of Irish on a whole school basis. Children were of the opinion that they used more Irish in school as a result of engaging in Gaelbhratach. In some schools, the informal use of Irish was

incentivised through reward systems (e.g., tickets, points, Gaeilgeoir na Seachtaine), and children viewed this positively. Children also viewed Seachtain na Gaeilge as a good opportunity to use more Irish in a fun way and to engage in a variety of activities on a whole school basis through Irish.

### **The role of the teacher**

Children reported that teachers were their main support in learning Irish and that they helped them through teaching strategies (e.g. how to break up words), modelling pronunciation and explaining when something was difficult. On the basis of children's accounts, it appeared that teachers used translation from Irish to English in the majority of schools. Children reported this as being helpful to support their understanding.

### **Children's views: Challenges to teaching, learning and assessment of Irish**

Challenges can be identified under four main subthemes: (i) reading and writing based on the textbook; (ii) grammar and spelling; (iii) progression in Irish and (iv) inclusion.

#### **Reading and writing based on the textbook**

In general, children reported that reading and writing was based on the textbook in middle and senior classes, which they viewed negatively. Some children found reading difficult as they were unsure how to decode and pronounce words in Irish. Answering questions in the textbook was viewed as boring, difficult and repetitive: "*The questions are designed so you can just copy the lines out into your copy*" (PBS-E); "*I hate so much writing in the books.*" (PBS-C). According to the children, technology was rarely used to support the teaching and learning of Irish in school. Learning Irish from the textbook was a dominant feature of children's learning of Irish in middle and senior classes. In general, this was viewed negatively and contrasted with more positive attitudes towards more interactive approaches which had been used more frequently in junior classes.

#### **Grammar and spelling**

Children also reported that it was difficult to understand and remember grammar rules in Irish. These attitudes and experiences may be due to a textbook based approach to teaching grammar, along with limited opportunities to use the grammatical structures in a meaningful context. Children indicated that spelling and spelling tests were both unenjoyable and stressful. Rote learning of spellings was perceived as very difficult for some children: "*Tests are very stressful.*" (PBS-E). It seems that in certain cases, children were learning spellings that were difficult to learn and that they did not use in context.

## Progression in Irish

Some children in senior classes expressed disappointment and frustration that their standard of Irish was not higher and that they were not making enough progress to be able to speak Irish confidently. This was linked to lack of opportunities to use Irish inside and outside of school and also with the dominance of a textbook-based approach: *“Not enough time is spent using Irish. We should be a lot further with Irish than we are.”* (PBS-B). It seems that in certain cases, according to children, Irish may not have been taught everyday: *“I’d say that my class, we don’t do Irish every single day. We do three days – people always forget about Irish – they forget it.”* (PBS-C).

Some children indicated that Irish lessons based on reading and writing in the textbook were repetitive and that this approach was not supporting them to develop spoken Irish: *“We do the same thing all the time. We just read and then answer questions.”* (PBS-B). Some children indicated that learning Irish was much more fun in junior classes. Children suggested that more variety was needed, along with more continuity and progression, to support them to learn Irish and to be able to speak the language. *“I would prefer speaking Irish like in a conversation”* (PBS-B). A small number of children indicated that they were concerned that they would not have an adequate standard of Irish for post-primary school. *‘I saw the homework for secondary school from my brother – it’s a big jump – I feel I’m not ready’.* (PBS-C)

## Inclusion

Some children noted that no learning support is provided for Irish, which contrasts with English and mathematics. Children considered this to be a challenge as some had different levels of Irish, yet they were not getting extra support in school. This was particularly the case when children joined the school in older classes and they were new to learning Irish. It was suggested that learning support in Irish and supporting children in smaller groups would be beneficial for Irish as is the case for English and maths: *“One thing I noticed from my teacher in fifth class is if a child doesn’t understand she’ll give them extra help – maybe teachers could do this for Gaeilge – instead of just standing and walking around to different students – they could just take all the children who find Irish difficult in a group”* (PBS-C).

## Children’s recommendations

### ***Focus more on speaking the language rather than using the textbook***

Children indicated a need for more opportunities to speak the language and that less time should be focused on reading and writing from the textbook.

### ***Use more active approaches***

Children suggested the need to focus on more interactive approaches - games, songs, role-play, drama and practical activities through Irish - to support their learning.

### ***Use Irish outside the Irish lesson and have a reward system***

Children indicated that Irish could be used outside the Irish lesson, throughout the day and on a whole-school basis. Some children suggested that a reward system could incentivise the use of Irish on a whole school basis.

### ***Provide learning support for Irish***

Some children recommended that children receive extra support for Irish as is the case for English and Mathematics. Learning support would be beneficial for children with varying levels of Irish. They suggested that extra support was needed in particular for children who were joining the school in middle and senior classes and who were new to learning Irish.

### ***Use technology to support learning Irish***

Children in all focus groups suggested that technology could be used to support the learning of Irish. Some children were using Duolingo to learn other languages and they used technology in other subjects. They recommended digital games, using language learning apps such as Duolingo, using translation tools, accessing Irish language websites and having digital resources to support homework.

### ***Learn how the language 'works'***

Some children expressed the opinion that they would like a better understanding of the structure of the language and to learn how Irish grammar works in relation to other languages.

### ***Make connections between Irish in primary school and post-primary school***

Some children indicated that they would like to see a link between learning Irish in primary and in post-primary level and that they wanted to be prepared for post-primary school in terms of their level of Irish.

### ***Teach other subjects through Irish***

Children recommended using Irish in other subjects such as PE, maths, music, history, art and outdoor activities to give them more active, contextualised and meaningful ways to use the language.

### ***Provide more opportunities to use Irish outside of school***

Some children recommended that it would help if parents were supported to use Irish at home and if Irish was used more in the community outside of school, e.g. in shops. This would provide more context and motivation to learn Irish.

## **Primary teachers**

Findings from focus groups with primary school teachers ( $n=38$ ) are presented here. Data were gathered from one face-to-face focus group and three online focus groups. Participating teachers were teaching in a wide variety of English-medium primary school contexts nationwide and had varying years of experience (from more recently qualified teachers to those with more experience). Firstly, attitudes towards Irish are considered along with the use of Irish outside of school. Positive aspects associated with teaching, learning and assessment of Irish are then presented and subsequently challenges are discussed. Recommendations from teachers are presented at the end of the section.

### **Attitudes towards Irish**

In general, participating teachers had positive attitudes towards Irish. Many stated that they had a personal ‘grá’ for the language and enjoyed teaching it. Teachers considered that learning Irish was particularly important for cultural and historical reasons. They also pointed out that learning Irish helped children to develop language awareness and broader language learning skills that would support them to learn additional languages. In terms of a vision for Irish, teachers indicated that they would like children to develop the ability to speak Irish confidently and competently and to enjoy learning and using the language. *“Being able to hold a conversation is the primary goal of any language”* (MBS-C); *“You want kids to enjoy it, to use it. It has to be more than “Seachtain na Gaeilge”* (MBS-B). Teachers recognised a challenge in terms of children’s attitudes to learning Irish in middle and senior classes of primary school, which they linked with lack of opportunities to actively use the language, the reliance on textbooks as a teaching method and lack of communicative proficiency in Irish. It is of note that teachers observed children from multilingual backgrounds to have particularly positive attitudes towards Irish and in general to be successful in learning Irish: *“They don’t have the hang ups, they are making language connections straight away. Their language acquisition skills are more in tune.”* (MBS-C)

Teachers recognised that they had an important role to play in instilling positive attitudes towards the language in children. However, they also emphasised the importance of parental attitudes towards Irish and the role of other peers in later years. According to

teachers, negative parental attitudes were a significant challenge. They suggested that some parents perceived Irish to be less important than other subjects, particularly in terms of its economic value and career progression. This meant that some parents expressed little interest in their children's progress in Irish: *"If you don't have buy-in from home, you will be fighting an uphill battle all the time. Attitudes from home have a huge impact on how the children look at Irish and value it"* (MBS-C). It was noted that some parents were negatively affected by their own experiences of learning Irish, but this was not the case for all parents. For example, one teacher spoke of a parent taking Irish classes to support their child's learning of Irish. Developing positive attitudes towards Irish at primary level was also considered important for transition to post-primary level.

### Use of Irish

Some teachers provided examples of how they used Irish themselves. This included using Irish informally in school to speak to other teachers (depending on the person), listening to podcasts and using social media in Irish. A minority of participating teachers spoke Irish at home. The majority of teachers had very limited opportunities to use Irish outside of school. While they considered the recent revival of Irish to be positive, it was perceived that this is centred more around the arts rather than opportunities to actively use the language. In general, teachers seemed to want more opportunities to use Irish. Teachers also indicated that children had very limited opportunities to use Irish outside of school and that this negatively impacted their motivation to learn Irish.

Teacher confidence and competence to use Irish emerged as a main theme across all focus groups. It was reported that many teachers may lack confidence in speaking Irish and that this inhibits them from speaking the language. It was also suggested that the fear of making mistakes discouraged some teachers from speaking Irish: *"Teacher confidence is a massive issue."* (MBS-B); *"There are a lot of teachers just afraid of making mistakes in front of others. It was a bit regimental growing up"* (MBS-C). It was suggested that the standard of Irish of newly qualified teachers had fallen and that this was an issue of concern. Some teachers had worked as learning support teachers and had not taught Irish for a period of time. In this case, teachers reported that they would welcome a 'refresher course' in Irish when returning to whole class teaching. As there is now a diversity of teaching positions and career changes, it was suggested that more ongoing supports for teachers would be welcomed. Some teachers had engaged in summer courses in the Gaeltacht and found this to be very beneficial and enjoyable as the focus was on conversational Irish.

## Teachers' views on positive aspects of teaching, learning and assessment of Irish

### Active approaches

There was a consensus among teachers that children really enjoyed interactive approaches used for teaching Irish in the junior years such as games, songs, rhymes and stories. Teachers also appeared to enjoy teaching Irish to junior classes. The shift in emphasis to more textbook-based learning in middle and senior classes was viewed as problematic. Teachers stated that there was a sense of excitement and engagement in learning a new language in junior classes: *"Children love games, songs, drámaí, comhrás, deir Ó Grádaigh, jumbled up words on the white board. You can be silly in Gaeilge - children too. Children love learning their Gaeilge up to second class"* (MBS-A). Some teachers explained that children enjoyed approaches when they were moving and using the language.

In middle and senior classes, learning Irish was considered more enjoyable and effective when it was linked with functional communicative language use, for example, telling the nuacht, writing in different genres, role-play and drámaí. One teacher gave the example of having a fashion show in Irish, while another gave an example of using readers' theatre in Irish. One school had station teaching for Irish, which was seen as effective. In this case each group had a set focus - reading, phonics work, role-play. Some teachers acknowledged that investigating grammatical structures and the sounds of the language with children was worthwhile to develop their language awareness across languages. They emphasised the importance of linking Irish with other languages, along with developing an understanding of the basic structure of Irish. There was some indication that teachers would welcome more support with the enactment of the *Primary Language Curriculum* to fully realise the potential of transfer of skills across languages. Teachers considered that active language use was important so that children would be motivated to learn to communicate in Irish. Pair work was considered important to provide speaking opportunities, and the importance of repetition for language acquisition was also acknowledged. They noted the value of talking about the 'Why?', i.e. discussing the cultural importance of learning Irish, with middle and senior classes in particular. Many teachers also noted the importance of praising the children's efforts in Irish, suggesting that reward systems were an effective way to incentivise the use of Irish.

### Irish outside of the Irish lesson: Informal Irish, CLIL, whole-school approaches

Using Irish informally outside the language lesson was considered an effective way to support positive attitudes and contextualised communicative use of Irish. Using key phrases



was considered effective. One teacher, for example, explained how the school focused on a specific number of key structures which were developed from class to class, for example, ‘an bhféadfá...’. Giving children opportunities to regularly share their *nuacht* was considered effective in that it facilitated the reinforcement of language relevant to the children’s lives and could be differentiated to give all children an opportunity to participate.

Irish was integrated with other subjects in some schools, for example Maths, Art and PE. In these cases, teachers reported that this was an effective way to facilitate authentic context-embedded use of Irish and to give children additional input in Irish in a way that “*They don’t even notice they are learning*” (MBS-C). Integration with other subjects worked best when there were practical activities in which to use the language, for example, counting or measuring in Maths. It was considered that using some initial Irish in PE for example, could be gradually built upon over time.

A whole school approach to supporting Irish was considered important, for example using Irish at assembly, focusing on key phrases, songs, having Irish displays and Irish books in the library. Where there was support from school leadership and a visible presence of Irish in school, positive attitudes towards and the use of Irish were strengthened. Seachtain na Gaeilge was considered as a worthwhile whole school approach which encouraged positive attitudes and use, as it was a move away from textbook learning: “*They absolutely loved it. It just reinforces the idea that you have to inject fun into Irish, to be enthusiastic about it – raise the profile of it a bit*” (MBS-D). Individual schools had other initiatives such as an Irish language podcast (comhrá) with the principal or a buddy system when children in senior classes supported children in junior classes to support the use of Irish. Two schools linked with local post-primary schools to have a treasure hunt or fun day in Irish, and this was perceived very positively as it gave children the opportunity to see Irish being used outside of school. Teachers considered that Gaeilgeoir na Seachtaine, reward schemes and praise were effective to support children’s confidence in Irish. Having distributed leadership for Irish through post holders or a school committee was also perceived positively. It should be noted that at least some of these initiatives were annual events rather than daily or weekly practice.

### **Resources and supports for Irish**

Some teachers praised Irish language schemes provided by publishing companies as they found them a useful resource to support their teaching and to support interactive use of Irish in the junior years in particular. The Eleathanach - a weekly Irish language newsletter - was used as a resource in some schools and was praised by teachers. Teachers reported that the stories in the Eleathanach were relevant to the children’s lives. The Gaelbhratach scheme



and Seachtain na Gaeilge were viewed positively to create meaningful and enjoyable opportunities to use Irish on a whole school basis. In some cases, teachers were designing their own resources.

## Teachers' views on challenges of teaching, learning and assessment of Irish

### Teaching based on textbooks in middle and senior classes

A main theme across groups was the perceived shift from more positive attitudes towards Irish in junior classes to more negative attitudes towards learning Irish in middle and senior classes. For example, one teacher stated that the difference in attitudes was *'like night and day'* (MBS-B). In general, teachers indicated that children in middle/senior classes often did not enjoy Irish lessons, which they linked to the dominance of the textbook compared with more interactive spoken activities in Junior classes: *"I find it a little challenging because the enthusiasm isn't there with the kids themselves. When I introduce the lesson - 'take out the XXXX books'- there is always an 'awwww'"* (i.e. a bad reaction) (MBS-D). Some teachers indicated that there was too much content to cover in the textbooks and that they felt under pressure to cover all of the material. They also raised the point that the reading material in the textbooks was often not at a suitable level and that it was too difficult for children. For this reason, some children therefore were not experiencing success in reading in Irish. Some children struggled with reading the textbooks as they had not acquired foundational skills in Irish. For example, teachers reported that children were decoding words in Irish using English phonics. Many teachers recognised that they needed textbooks as a resource to guide and to structure their teaching of Irish. However, teachers reported that lessons based on answering questions from a textbook made Irish more of a 'subject' than a 'language'. It was also suggested that learning Irish from a textbook 'devalued' the language and detracted from time needed to practise speaking the language. Teachers across all focus groups concurred that learning Irish from textbooks was not effective to develop children's language and literacy skills. They raised the need for a structured reading scheme in Irish for English-medium schools so that children could develop reading skills. A structured scheme could build on children's reading skills in a progression way that would support children in developing reading skills in Irish. Textbooks used for spellings were also problematic in that words were presented in a decontextualised format and focused on themes rather than spelling patterns.

### Continuity and progression

Teachers also linked the more negative attitudes and waning motivation of children in middle/senior classes with children's lack of communicative capacity in Irish. They explained

that although many children had learned words in Irish, they may not have acquired the sentence structure to enable them to use the words in a communicative context. There seemed to be insufficient time in middle and senior classes to focus on the development of oral language skills in Irish. Some teachers indicated that it was difficult to prioritise time for Irish. In general, teachers were concerned that many children were not progressing to use the language independently.

Teachers indicated the need for clear, structured guidance on learning outcomes for every stage of learning. In its current format, teachers reported that it is not clear what the targets are at each stage in the *Primary Language Curriculum*. In their view, the curriculum is overly broad and lacks clarity around continuity and progression. A teacher who had worked abroad contrasted this with her experience in other jurisdictions, in which there were clear targets for each stage of learning. Teachers were also concerned about continuity and progression from primary to post primary school: *'What should children know in first class, second class, third class?'* (MBS-B).

## Inclusion

Inclusion emerged as a main theme across focus groups. Teachers recognised and valued the importance of ensuring the curriculum is inclusive of all learners. Some teachers expressed concern about the practice of granting exemptions from Irish to children in primary school. This was noted as particularly problematic as Irish was seen as more than a subject: teachers viewed it as a language that should be used throughout the day, integrated with other subjects and embraced as part of the wider culture of the school. Teachers were concerned that children were being excluded from participating in the full curriculum and from the broader benefits of learning Irish and from school life. Concern about the absence of any learning support in Irish was also raised. Some teachers highlighted that there was no learning support provided to children who were newcomers to the school and that there were no learning support guidelines focused on children for whom English and Irish are additional languages. It is of note that teachers relayed positive stories of multilingual children experiencing success in Irish.

One SET teacher explained that although the children say they struggle with Irish, in their opinion, children would welcome support with Irish if it were provided: *"Irish is a core subject ... we do receive SEN assistance in English and Maths but not in Irish. Why is that? Students have difficulties in Irish- why don't we focus more on helping them?"* (MBS-C). In the experience of the participating teachers, there was an increase in exemptions in senior classes in advance of post-primary school. No participating teacher indicated that they were

in favour of excluding children from Irish, on the basis that it is a part of school life and it is not assessed in formal examinations at primary level: *"I think that the idea of any child being excluded at primary level is needless when we are not doing exams in Gaeilge. We differentiate in every other subject area so I don't know why we don't in Gaeilge"* (MBS-C).

### **Assessment**

Some teachers were of the opinion that standardised assessments should be carried out in Irish. There were several reasons for this. Some teachers said it would give them a sense of children's level in Irish and that it could potentially provide valuable information for post-primary school. The opinion was also shared that learning Irish was devalued as it was not explicitly assessed in this manner in comparison to English and mathematics. A teacher in one of the participating schools who carried out standardised assessment tests in Irish felt that this had supported progression in Irish reading in their particular school.

### **Teachers' recommendations**

#### ***Emphasise and support oral language***

Teachers proposed that an emphasis should be placed on supporting children to develop oral language skills in Irish throughout all of their years in primary school in a structured, progressive and transparent way. They acknowledged that supporting communicative language use and development required supports inside and outside of the Irish lesson and school. Adequate time is needed in middle and senior classes to allow for a focus on an integrated approach to oral language, reading and writing.

#### ***Provide support for Irish outside the language lesson***

Teachers emphasised the importance of creating opportunities for children to use Irish outside the Irish lesson through the informal use of Irish on a whole-school basis. Teachers also agreed that there should be more school events through Irish and a visible presence of Irish in the school. Teachers advocated for a structured whole school plan to promote the use of informal Irish and Irish language activities and events rather than this happening on an ad hoc basis and being confined to Seachtain na Gaeilge.

#### ***Provide support for the use of Irish outside of school***

Teachers indicated that providing opportunities to use Irish outside of school would reinforce positive attitudes and strengthen the use of Irish in schools. Suggestions were that schools could link in with sports clubs, other schools and community events through Irish. Outdoor activities through Irish, cultural activities and competitions, school tours through Irish and

afterschool clubs were also suggested. Teachers suggested that trips to the Gaeltacht would be beneficial and that subsidised or funded courses could be offered to teachers, parents, children and families. Linking in with home and supporting parents to become involved in their child's learning was recommended. The importance of promoting the use of Irish outside of lessons and outside of school emerged as a main theme to support the use of Irish as a living language that exists beyond the gates of the school.

### ***Provide further resources for Irish***

In particular, teachers recommended that a structured reading scheme should be provided for English-medium schools that included decodable readers and was in line with children's interest and level of reading. They also suggested that the books should be available digitally and in different canúintí with QR codes for use at home so that parents could participate in their children's reading in Irish. It was recommended that readers could be provided according to band levels rather than class levels to facilitate an inclusive approach and progression in reading in Irish. The importance of teaching foundational skills (phonics; the connection between letters and the sounds of the language) in Irish was raised and that this should be approached in a structured way.

Teachers also recommended the provision of more books that they could read aloud to children in Junior classes as this is something that the children particularly enjoyed and which supported their language development through repeated 'read alouds'.

Teachers stressed the importance of developing resources that would be relevant and of interest to the children. Some teachers were designing their own resources. Ready-made resources to support oral language in particular are needed, for example, structured language games, key phrases and audiovisual materials. According to teachers, more digital resources are needed in Irish comparable to those available in other subjects, for example digital games and language learning apps.

### ***Provide a coordinated vision and approach for Irish***

Teachers recommended that a specific progressional plan for the teaching and learning of Irish be provided that would set clear targets for children's learning in Irish and build on their language learning in a clear and formative manner. They reported that there should be more clarity around learning outcomes and 'what can be reasonably expected' across the stages of primary school in English-medium schools, including for the transition from primary school to post-primary school. The idea of greater 'alignment' between the different levels of schooling was recommended.

### ***Support teacher education/professional development***

The need for additional supports to strengthen teachers' confidence and competence in using Irish was strongly endorsed across all focus groups. Teachers recommended that subsidised courses and opportunities to achieve additional qualifications in Irish be made available. The need for greater opportunities for teachers to use Irish, for example, *ciorcail chomhrá* and *imeachtaí trí Ghaeilge* was also highlighted.

Supporting pedagogy of Irish was also recommended - through modelling/coaching models of professional learning and the provision of exemplars of good practice. Teachers suggested that social media could be utilised to share information and resources. It was suggested that education centres could play a role in supporting teachers regionally.

### ***Provide further guidance and supports for including all learners in Irish lessons***

Teachers recommended that learning support should be provided for Irish to support the participation of all children in this aspect of school life and culture. Differentiating teaching and learning of Irish was recommended rather than excluding children through the granting of exemptions. Further supports should be provided to enable all children to learn Irish, including children with additional needs and children who are newcomers and joining primary school in middle/senior classes.

### ***Examine further opportunities for assessment of Irish***

Some teachers recommended that standardised assessment tests of Irish should be administered in English-medium schools.

## **Primary principals**

Findings from focus groups with primary school principals ( $n=17$ ) are presented in this section. Data were gathered from two focus groups, one of which was face-to-face and another of which was held online. Principals were working in a diversity of English-medium school contexts nationwide. First, principals' vision for Irish and their views on out of school factors that impact on attitudes towards learning Irish are reported. This is followed by factors that support positive attitudes towards and use of Irish, as well as associated challenges. Recommendations from principals are presented at the end of the section.

### ***Primary principals' vision for Irish***

Principals were in agreement that they wished for children to be able to communicate effectively and confidently in Irish. All participating principals would like children to be able to

speak the language comfortably ‘without fear or pressure’ and to develop a ‘grá’ for the language. Principals suggested that Irish should be used outside the Irish lesson on a daily whole school basis to provide children with more opportunities for use. They also suggested that Irish should be integrated into other subjects: *“Irish is not spoken as a living language daily outside of school – so they want to be able to use language informally in school – not be afraid of it – become more comfortable at talking”* (POBS-A). In terms of developing a ‘grá’ for the language, some principals indicated that children should learn about the historical and cultural reasons for learning Irish to help them develop a sense of pride in learning and speaking the language: *“We need to ask kids why they think it is important to have this language”* (POBS-A). Principals stressed the need for engaging, interactive approaches to promote spoken Irish and called for a shift away from textbook-driven teaching.

### Out of school factors that impact on attitudes to Irish

Principals differed in opinion regarding societal views to learning Irish. While some thought attitudes were negative, others thought that there was a renewed interest in Irish and that learning Irish had become more ‘cool’. Principals recognised that negative or apathetic attitudes from parents were problematic. It was noted that some parents may undervalue Irish as they don’t see it as being linked with economic benefits. Notably, some principals suggested that children from immigrant backgrounds had very positive attitudes towards Irish. In their view, these positive attitudes may have been reinforced by parents who held no negative associations with the language. The point was also made that children who do not have English as a home language are on more ‘equal footing’ with other children when learning Irish. The need to support Irish as part of a linguistically diverse society was raised.

### Principals’ views on positive aspects of teaching and learning Irish

Positive practices supporting favourable attitudes and use of Irish can be considered according to the following themes (i) Active approaches, (ii) Irish outside of the Irish lesson - Informal Irish and CLIL, and (iii) support schemes and resources.

#### Active approaches

Principals were of the opinion that the use of games, songs/action songs, traditional songs, poems, rhymes, drama, role-plays, pair work, project work, Irish in other subjects and informal Irish supported positive attitudes and use. In one school, for example, each class learned two Irish songs, so by sixth class the children had learned 16 Irish songs. Playful

interactive approaches were more predominant in junior classes rather than middle/senior classes, according to principals.

### **Irish outside of the Irish lesson: Informal Irish, CLIL and whole-school approaches**

The informal use of Irish outside of lessons—such as in greetings, announcements, key phrases, and during assemblies—was viewed positively. Principals reported that focusing on key phrases (e.g. *frása na seachtaine*), focused children and teachers to use the target phrase. One or two schools encouraged the use of Irish on particular days with staff, but some noted this was not always received positively. When parts of other subject lessons were taught through Irish this was also positive. Some schools reported success with gradually introducing Irish into other subjects such as PE and art, beginning in junior classes and progressing. In these cases, principals noted that focusing on a subject at a time allowed for language progression and for children's confidence to increase over time. Having a whole school approach where there was accountability, for example, a postholder for Irish and a school plan was considered important. As reported by primary teachers, reward systems for speaking Irish were in use in some schools, for example, *Gaeilgeoir na Seachtaine* or awarding homework passes for continued use of Irish. Having a visible presence of Irish in the school, for example through displaying a print-rich environment in Irish and having Irish books in the library was also considered helpful.

### **Support schemes and resources**

Principals praised a particular scheme in use in the junior classes that supported learning Irish through games and songs so that children were learning Irish unknown to themselves. This was seen as a useful resource for teachers in junior classes. *Eleathanach* was also mentioned as a valuable support. One school was participating in the DEY CLIL project, which principals viewed as beneficial in increasing use of Irish and positive attitudes. Another school principal whose school was participating in *Gaelbhratach* said this provided a “*new lease of life for the language*” (POBS-A). *An Fhéile Scoil* *drámaíochta* was also considered to be a successful initiative in supporting positive attitudes and use. In another school, the local credit union encouraged the use of Irish in the community and again, this was beneficial as children were incentivised to use Irish in certain shops outside of school. *Scór* was noted as another potentially supportive initiative.

### **Principals' views on challenges of teaching, learning and assessment of Irish**

Challenges regarding attitudes and use are considered according to the following subthemes: (i) Teacher competence and confidence, (ii) teaching based on textbooks in



middle and senior classes; (iii) time allocation for Irish and class size and (iv) exemptions from Irish.

### **Teacher competence and confidence**

Principals acknowledged that teacher competence and confidence in using Irish was an issue of concern. Some principals were of the opinion that the standard of Irish of teachers who were newly qualified had declined from previous generations. It was argued that teachers need to be competent in the language to have the confidence to use it and that lower levels of competence were linked to a lack of confidence and more negative attitudes. Principals recognised the critical role of teachers in promoting the language.

### **Teaching based on the textbook in middle and senior classes**

It was considered that there was a shift in practice from interactive, playful approaches in junior classes to more textbook based teaching in middle and senior classes. The decrease in emphasis placed on speaking Irish and the increased emphasis on reading and writing in textbooks in middle and senior classes was seen to be negative in terms of attitudes and language use: *“The shift from fun to academic subject is where the difficulty lies”* (POBS-B). It was also considered to be more difficult to teach solely through Irish in older classes, compared with junior classes, an issue that was linked with the language used in textbooks: *“Somewhere along the way from J1 to sixth class we are losing tumoideachas”* (POBS-A).

### **Continuity and progression**

Principals also raised concerns about the lack of continuity and progression in language learning from first to sixth class. They stated that there was repetition of similar content from year to year, which was not transferring or culminating in independent communicative language use over time.

### **Time allocation for Irish and class size**

The decreased time for teaching Irish along with large class sizes were also seen as negative: *“There is the practicality of less time now spent on the teaching of Gaeilge”* (POBS-A). The wide variety of needs experienced in large classes created challenges in terms of differentiation, which was compounded by the lack of learning support for Irish.

### **Exemptions**

Principals voiced concern about the rising number of exemptions at primary level. It was suggested that this was creating a worrying mindset among parents: *“One parent will say*



*my child needs an exemption and it is contagious – next thing there is another parent in looking for it” (POBS-A).* Exemptions were a difficult and complex issue for principals, which was made more difficult by growing requests from parents. The principals who participated in these focus groups indicated that they would prefer a more inclusive approach to teaching and learning Irish at primary level.

### **Recommendations from primary principals**

#### ***Promote positive attitudes towards Irish***

Principals stated that it was important to encourage positive attitudes towards Irish and to create a sense of excitement in using the language, similar to the ‘Say yes to languages’ project. They also highlighted the importance of linking the learning of Irish with culture, to encourage pride and ‘grá’ for the language. The importance of inclusivity, that is, showing that Irish is a language for everyone, was considered important. Inclusivity in the teaching profession was also raised as a factor.

#### ***Promote interactive language use***

Emphasising spoken interactive use of Irish on a whole-school basis was considered important.

#### ***Develop strategies and supports for using Irish outside the Irish lesson***

It was recommended that Irish be used nationally as an informal means of communication throughout the day on a whole school basis to increase children’s opportunities to use the language. Teaching other subjects through Irish was recommended. Seachtain na Gaeilge was seen as beneficial in terms of supporting positive attitudes and use of Irish. It was suggested that this could be extended. In their view, reward systems could also be used to incentivise the use of Irish.

#### ***Promote the use of Irish outside of school***

Principals recognised that linking with a language community outside of school could also be beneficial, for example linking with local sports clubs, trips to the Gaeltacht, guest speakers who speak Irish or use Irish in their career, television shows, school tours through Irish, using Irish in the community, creating links with home and classes for parents.

#### ***Provide additional, readily accessible resources***

Increasing the amount of digital resources for Irish and making resources readily available to teachers was recommended as a ‘one-stop shop’. Principals acknowledged that there are many new resources and that teachers may not be aware of all of the resources available.

### ***Provide further teacher education/ professional learning opportunities***

Professional learning to support teachers' language competence, confidence and pedagogies to support the use of spoken Irish was recommended. Time in the Gaeltacht for teachers was considered as important. It was suggested that teachers with expertise in teaching Irish could provide in-school support for teachers through modelling.

### ***Develop a coordinated vision and approach for Irish***

It was recommended that there should be a coordinated effort for Irish rather than organisations working independently of each other. Linking with CEFR was another recommendation with the potential to support continuity, progression and transparency in the teaching and learning of Irish.

## **Primary parents**

The main themes arising from focus groups with parents of primary school children are presented in this section. Twenty-five parents participated in four focus groups as part of the consultation. Two focus groups were held face-to-face and two online. The participants were parents of children in a range of classes in a diversity of primary school settings nationally. Participating parents included parents who spoke home languages other than Irish or English.

First, parents' attitudes towards the importance of their children learning Irish are reported, followed by findings related to the use of Irish outside of school. Positive aspects and challenges relating to the teaching, learning and assessment of Irish are presented. Recommendations shared by parents are presented at the end of this section.

### **Attitudes towards Irish**

Parents who participated in focus groups were of the opinion that it was important for their children to learn Irish. A main motivation to learn Irish was for cultural reasons. Learning Irish was considered important across all groups in terms of preserving the native language of Ireland and Irish culture: *"It is also a culture – it would be very sad not to teach it"* (MBS B). For example, learning Irish was seen to give an insight into the meaning of place names, which in turn supported children to have a better understanding of their local environment. The point was raised that Irish is spoken in some parts of the country and that it is important to learn Irish for that reason. Links were made between learning Irish and gateways to certain professions (e.g. civil service, teaching) and this was also a motivating factor. Some parents indicated that competence in Irish would be an advantage educationally.

Some also expressed the view that learning languages in general benefits children, noting that learning Irish can help develop cognitive skills associated with acquiring additional languages. Parents with immigrant backgrounds explained that it was important for their children to learn Irish as they are living in Ireland and that the Irish language is an important part of Irish identity. In some cases, parents associated their children's learning of Irish as a source of pride and integration in Ireland. While a minority of parents felt it was not very important for their children to be able to speak Irish well, many parents maintained that the goal of teaching the language should be to enable the children to speak the language.

Many parents recommended that less emphasis should be placed on reading and writing from textbooks to facilitate a greater emphasis on speaking the language. Many parents indicated that they would like their children to be able to converse in Irish. While these focus groups focused on teaching and learning of Irish at primary level, some concern was raised about Irish language examinations at post-primary level. Specifically, parents were of the view that post-primary exams in Irish are difficult, which, in their view, could disadvantage their child academically. Some parents questioned the obligatory nature of Irish at Leaving Certificate due to the exam system and the implications of exams in Irish in terms of outcomes and attitudes.

### Use of Irish

In general, parents indicated that children had very little or no opportunities to use Irish outside of school. The vast majority of children were not using Irish at home except for homework. One parent gave an example of a child learning words from Kneecap and that this was appealing as it was relevant to their interests. The lack of opportunities to use Irish or to witness Irish being used outside of school was associated with lower levels of motivation, in that some children questioned the value of learning the language if there were no opportunities to use it. Parents of primary children were frequently not aware of what their children were learning at school. When they were aware, it mainly related to the list of spellings their children had for homework. Some parents indicated that further resources are needed for parents to support their children in Irish and this is discussed later.

### Parents' views on positive aspects of teaching, learning and assessment of Irish

Parents' views on positive aspects of teaching, learning and assessment of Irish are presented according to three subthemes: (i) active approaches, (ii) support from school and (iii) the impact of individual teachers.

## Active approaches

Parents shared mixed reports on their children's experiences of learning Irish in primary school. Parents reported that many children had very positive experiences, particularly in junior classes. The majority of parents reported that children enjoyed singing, games and interactive approaches to learning Irish. According to parents, children enjoyed when Irish was integrated with other activities and associated with cultural festivals, e.g. Seachtain na Gaeilge, Lá Fhéile Pádraig. Some children were excited to learn a new language. For some children, the positivity from Junior classes waned in middle and senior classes as a greater emphasis was placed on reading and writing from the textbook (this is discussed later).

## Support from school

When support was provided from school this was welcomed by parents. For example, one parent reported how the school sent home key phrases with a QR code for pronunciation. Another parent was also appreciative of key words and phrases associated with a particular theme being shared with parents. A parent who was new to the country was attending Irish classes and enjoying learning Irish with her child. In one school a teacher had sent home a recording of the Irish reading and this was considered helpful. One parent whose child started learning Irish in a senior class explained that the child was working independently at home on Irish using digital tools and that the teacher kept her up to date on her child's progress. Some parents praised the fact that their school kept them informed of their children's progress in Irish, particularly as many parents could not gauge their child's progress in Irish themselves.

## The impact of individual teachers

It was acknowledged in focus groups that individual teachers played a significant role in children's attitudes towards Irish and their learning of Irish more so than other subjects. It was considered that there was variance across teachers in terms of attitudes and that this could change from year to year. Where teachers had a 'grá' for the language this was passed on to the children and positively impacted on their learning. In contrast to this, it was considered that if a teacher has a negative attitude towards Irish that this impacts negatively on children's attitudes and learning. For example, one parent recounted their own positive experience of learning Irish which was linked with an effective teacher. The issue of whether specialist teachers would be beneficial was raised in one focus group.

## Challenges of teaching, learning and assessment of Irish

Some parents explained that children had negative attitudes towards learning Irish in terms of its usefulness and also in terms of perceived difficulty. According to some parents, learning Irish was difficult and unenjoyable for some children, particularly in more senior classes. While learning Irish in junior class was perceived as being more interactive, specific challenges emerged in middle and senior classes. Challenges are considered according to four subthemes: (i) spelling, (ii) continuity and progression, (iii) exemptions from Irish and (iv) supports for parents.

### Spelling

Learning spellings emerged as a challenge and source of stress for some children and, in turn, parents. Parents reported that, in some cases, children were learning spelling lists that were not based on spelling patterns, phonics or common words in Irish. Parents shared examples of children learning how to spell words that they could not understand, pronounce, decode or use in context. It would appear that children's experiences of learning Irish spelling - spelling tests in particular - were having a significantly negative impact on their attitudes towards Irish and their confidence in using the language. In some cases, parents reported that the anxiety associated with Irish spelling was having an effect on children's overall wellbeing. It seems in certain cases that spelling tests were not differentiated and the children could experience a lack of success for an ongoing period. The manner in which Irish spellings were both taught and assessed was viewed as a source of significant stress for some children.

### Continuity and progression

In certain cases, parents highlighted the fact that their child was not conversing competently in Irish by fifth and sixth class. The point was raised that children often learned words (nouns not in the context of a sentence) associated with themes which were repeated from year to year without progression to communicative competence in the language. Many parents argued that more time should be spent on the development of oral language skills in a structured way: *"If it is a cultural thing - we should be speaking it. I'd echo what others have said. Eyes on the prize - can people have a conversation in Irish? The very same as others have said - it's very important to learn Irish and the emphasis should be on the oral and speaking it - questions and answers, little comhrás, it is a great way of learning. Not too much emphasis on a (text)book and following a (text)book"* (TBS-D). Concern was expressed about continuity and progression in Irish: *"The only thing that gets sent home for homework is the words. What's the point? Parents need a sense of what we are working towards in a term or year .... They're still*

*learning the same thing in fourth class. Resources should be sent home to give a sense of what they are working on and a clear target"* (TBS-D). Some parents were disappointed by the communicative competence achieved by their children in Irish, particularly in senior classes. They identified a need to better link primary and post-primary school, given the variety in Irish levels experienced at this key transition point. The need for more targeted, structured, transparent progression in learning was highlighted.

### **Exemptions from Irish**

Although exemptions from Irish fall outside the remit of the current consultation, exemptions from Irish arose as an issue in some focus groups. One parent explained that they were grateful their children had an exemption from Irish as they had been experiencing difficulties. A small number of parents provided anecdotal examples of children seeking exemptions on the basis that they had been granted to their friends. Exemptions were not a source of discussion in all focus groups.

### **Supports for parents**

Some parents indicated that they felt unable to support their children's learning in Irish and that they would appreciate more supports from school. This could include further information on what their children are learning in Irish lessons and how they could support this learning at home. Sending home a list of words or an Irish book without any additional supports was considered insufficient for parents who were not proficient in Irish.

### **Recommendations from parents**

#### ***Focus on oral language use in a positive way***

Many parents indicated the need to focus on oral language in Irish and developing skills to communicate in Irish. Some parents emphasised the need to learn language as sentence structures/phrases that children could use in a communicative context throughout the day. Learning nouns in isolation was not considered beneficial for children's learning. Parents recommended that maximising opportunities to use Irish throughout the day would be beneficial for children's learning.

#### ***Promote the use of Irish outside the Irish lesson***

Parents advised that Irish should be linked with enjoyable, relevant activities outside the Irish lesson. Some parents acknowledged that children needed more opportunities to use the language in school and that some subjects (for example PE) could be taught through Irish.

They recommended that whole school events hosted during Seachtain na Gaeilge could be extended throughout the year.

### ***Promote the use of Irish outside of school***

Parents suggested that the use of Irish in the community would also support children's learning of Irish and their opportunities to use the language in a meaningful context. Suggestions to provide domains for children to use Irish outside of school included: summer camps, sports clubs, music clubs, youth clubs, movies through Irish, use of Irish in shops, trips to the Gaeltacht or shorter options for younger children.

### ***Provide additional supports for parents***

Some parents suggested they would like more information about what their children were learning in school in Irish. They would also welcome supports for home. Suggested supports were translations from Irish to English or other languages, audio and video recordings of class materials, digital books, apps such as Duolingo and a bank of resources for Irish. Having an app for Irish that was approved by the DEY was also recommended. Parents' classes were held in some schools and this was also viewed favourably.

### ***Provide clear learning goals and a progressional plan for learning Irish***

The need to provide an overall progressional transparent structure for learning Irish from primary and into post-primary was recommended.

## **Student primary teachers**

Findings from focus groups with primary student teachers ( $n=24$ ) are reported here. Focus groups were held face-to-face in two different institutions, and one online focus group was facilitated. Student teachers were from a range of counties and all had engaged in school placement in a variety of school contexts nationwide. Findings are discussed according to attitudes and use of Irish, followed by positive aspects and challenges related to the teaching, learning and assessment of Irish on school placement. Student teachers' experiences on teacher education courses are also presented.

### **Attitudes towards Irish and a vision for Irish**

Student teachers were in agreement that children should learn to speak Irish and that the primary goal of teaching Irish should be for children to be able to communicate in Irish "Success for Irish is using your own language every day" (MFOBS-A). The point was also raised that learning Irish is an opportunity to link with other languages and that this can be



beneficial for learners. Student teachers were of the opinion that a main emphasis in the teaching of Irish should be placed on the development of oral language skills and teaching Irish as a language rather than as a subject: *"To be able to use the language creatively - to have fun with the language rather than keeping it as an academic subject"* (MFOBS-B). Discussing the cultural value of learning Irish, the 'why', was also considered to be important.

In terms of student teachers' own attitudes towards teaching Irish, it was suggested that many student teachers may lack confidence in their own competence in Irish and that this negatively impacts their teaching of the language. Student teachers acknowledged that it was important for teachers themselves to be competent and confident in their use of Irish to support children's learning. It was considered that many student teachers would benefit from further supports to enhance their own confidence and competence in Irish and that this is a prerequisite for effective teaching.

### Use of Irish

Some student teachers used Irish outside of formal classes - in informal conversation with friends, attending the Cumann Gaelach, Pop up Gaeltacht and using Irish on social media, Tik Tok for example. In certain cases, it was considered that there were opportunities to use Irish and that this was optional for students. Some student teachers indicated that there was not a strong enough culture of using Irish or presence of Irish as part of their teacher education and that they would welcome further supports to maintain and improve their Irish during teacher education.

As students themselves are a product of the education system, it was suggested that many students lacked confidence in Irish and that this impeded their use of the language: *"The root of most problems in Irish is the Leaving Cert curriculum. Even the kids that have loved Irish all throughout primary school, once they get into secondary school, the love and grá for the language is beaten out of you by essays. We all want to save Irish - but you are missing the demographic who have given up on it. There are so many people in our course who have given up on Irish because of the way that the Leaving Cert has treated them"* (MFOBS-B). It was noted that many students may not attend Irish language events, for example *Tae agus Plé*, if they lacked confidence in Irish. It was proposed that greater supports and opportunities to use the language are needed for students who lack confidence in Irish during their teacher education. In terms of teacher education courses, the activities that were of most benefit to students were activities that practically prepared them for the classroom, for example designing resources rather than writing essays as an assessment. In certain cases, students were dissatisfied with the link between their lectures in teacher education and classroom practice.



Student teachers had mixed experiences and views on Gaeltacht placement. While some students reported the Gaeltacht placement as being hugely beneficial in terms of supporting confidence and competence in Irish, a smaller number of students were less positive. There seemed to be some variance across the colleges in terms of students' experience. Some students found that the period of immersion really benefited their language learning and cited the *tréimhse sa Ghaeltacht* as being memorable, enjoyable and worthwhile in terms of language learning. They suggested that differentiated provision was likely needed to ensure that Gaeltacht courses were beneficial for all students, regardless of their level of proficiency.

### Views on positive aspects of teaching, learning and assessment of Irish

Student teachers based their opinions on their experiences on school placement and indeed agreed that school placement was a very valuable and formative learning experience for them. Positive aspects are considered according to the following subthemes (i) active and interactive language use, (ii) resources and (iii) differentiation.

#### Active and interactive language use

Student teachers agreed that the teaching and learning of Irish was most effective when active and interactive language pedagogies were employed such as songs, tongue twisters, games, role-play, dramaí, making videos, informal use of Irish and language tasks. Activities focused more on speaking the language rather than using the textbook were perceived as worthwhile: *"It's not anything new but I found the kids were much more engaged when I got them to stand up and walk around the classroom, e.g. surveys, speed dating, just getting them up out of their seats. That brings a whole new atmosphere or energy to the lesson. Different to 'sit down and do your Gaeilge'"* (MFOBS-B). Students used visual materials, audiovisual materials and realia as supports. Another student recounted: *"I tried to make it more fun for them - e.g., eadaí for Irish - I asked them all to take in their teddies. They all landed in showing their teddies. I brought up my baby clothes and put them on. Dressing up their teddies in different clothes - they were so excited. They didn't even know they were learning Irish. Sometimes teachers are too focussed on writing it down - spoken Irish is just as good - it's really the bun rud - it's the foundation for their learning - being able to speak it first"* (MFOBS-A). When learning Irish was relevant to children's lives, for example learning songs from Coláiste Lurgan, this was deemed to be enjoyable for children. Drawing children's attention to the form of the language in Irish was also considered to be beneficial to provide them with some sort of a code, for example examining long vowels in Irish with children. Some student teachers emphasised the

importance of creating a positive learning environment where it was acceptable for children to try the language and have the freedom to make mistakes.

### Resources

Many students reported that they created their own resources for school placement and that although this was worthwhile, it was very time-consuming. Some students acknowledged that some programmes available from publishing companies were a useful resource for them.

### Differentiation

Student teachers showed an awareness of the need to differentiate teaching and learning in Irish and gave examples of how they enacted differentiated approaches on school placement. Students reported using visuals, realia, differentiated templates, providing scaffolding, for example through modelling, word mats and sentence starters to support children's use of Irish. Student teachers emphasised the importance of developing oral language skills in particular. The point was raised that children with dyslexia should be supported to focus more on oral language in Irish rather than being excluded from participating in learning Irish.

### Views on challenges of teaching, learning and assessment of Irish

Challenges are considered according to the following subthemes (i) attitudes towards Irish, (ii) standards of Irish, (iii) teaching Irish through Irish and (iv) resources and the use of resources for teaching Irish

#### Attitudes towards Irish

In certain cases, student teachers reported that teachers and children had negative attitudes towards learning Irish and that this impacted on their experiences on school placement. It was challenging for student teachers to motivate children if there was a preexisting negative attitude towards Irish in the school. Some student teachers indicated that children saw Irish more as a subject than a language and that this was problematic: *"An dearcadh atá acu (páistí) maidir leis an teanga - ní fheiceann siad í mar theanga. Is abhár é - ní úsáideann siad Gaeilge neamhfhoirmiúil mar sin"* (MFOBS-A). When students positively impacted on children's learning during placement, this created a sense of pride. Some students also highlighted the importance of parental attitude and that this was problematic in terms of Irish in some schools: *"We know parents play a huge role in students' lives, but it is not targeted in the Irish language. If your parents had a growth mindset that would help"* (MFOBS-A).

Attitudes towards Irish, the time allocated to teaching Irish, and indeed the emphasis placed on Irish seemed to vary across schools according to student teachers.

### **Standards of Irish and resources**

In certain cases it was difficult for student teachers to plan as the standard of Irish in middle and senior classes was below what they would have expected. They reported that some children had not acquired sufficient language to engage in the activities and that there was a disconnect between children's level of Irish and age-appropriate resources. Many student teachers indicated that the level of Irish in the textbooks was too challenging for the children. Concern was also expressed in terms of how resources were being used in some schools. For example, some students were of the view that videos/digital programmes were being overused, to the extent that there was limited teacher input or opportunities for children to use the language. Although students created a lot of their own resources during school placement, they indicated that it would be difficult to sustain this long term. They suggested that it can be difficult to source relevant resources, to know how best to use them and to differentiate them appropriately when they were available. It was also suggested that practising teachers may not be aware of all of the available resources and that it would be valuable to collate all of the high-quality Irish teaching resources in one place for ease of access and also to be sure that the resource was high quality in terms of Irish.

### **Teaching Irish through Irish**

Teaching Irish through Irish emerged as a main theme as all students were encouraged to do this as part of their teacher education. This was seen as a source of stress for some students who felt that they did not have sufficient proficiency to teach the full lesson through Irish. Students were concerned that they would 'lose marks' if they used English during an Irish lesson: *"Sometimes I think the priority is not in the right place. I'm focused on my own Irish rather than teaching"* (MFOBS-B). It was suggested that some students would teach through Irish for the purposes of a supervision visit by a placement tutor but then 'return to normal' afterwards as teaching through Irish was not typical practice in the school. Teaching through Irish was seen as very challenging if it was not current practice in the school. Some student teachers appeared to require further support in appropriately scaffolding children's understanding of new language, particularly when taught entirely through Irish. Student teachers who put this scaffolding in places reported that children had made progress by the end of their placements.

## **Recommendations from student teachers**

### ***Provide further supports in teacher education***

Student teachers would welcome further supports in teacher education to develop student teacher competence and confidence in Irish. It was highlighted that greater opportunities to use the language are needed, along with creating a strong presence of Irish in teacher education and that additional supports are needed for students who lack confidence in Irish. Student teachers indicated that it is important to ensure strong links between teacher education courses and classroom practice.

### ***Support teaching Irish through Irish***

Teaching Irish through Irish was challenging for some students if it was not in keeping with current practice in schools. Further supports for student teachers, practising teachers and the wider school community should be considered.

### ***Focus on oral language use***

Students recommended the need for clear supports and planning so that children could develop a level of communicative competence in Irish.

### ***Extend the use of Irish beyond the Irish lesson***

Student teachers recommended that Irish be used as an informal language throughout the school day. They also recommended that other lessons or parts of other lessons could be taught through Irish to provide more meaningful contexts for children to use the language. Linking Irish with home and the community outside of school would also be beneficial.

### ***Develop a repository of high-quality resources***

Student teachers indicated that they would welcome accessible high quality resources to support the teaching and learning of Irish. It was recommended that technology be utilised to advance teaching and learning of Irish as digital resources can be motivating for many children.

### ***Ensure continuity and progression***

It would be helpful for student teachers if the broad learning outcomes in the curriculum could be broken down into clear and achievable learning outcomes. The need for clear progressional learning outcomes in Irish across all stages of the curriculum was highlighted.

## Post-primary focus groups

In this section, findings are presented from five subgroups associated with the teaching and learning of Irish in post-primary schools. These draw on data gathered from focus groups conducted with (i) students ( $n=147$ ); (ii) teachers ( $n=30$ ); (iii) principals ( $n=14$ ); (iv) parents ( $n=28$ ) and (v) student teachers ( $n=10$ ). In general, findings are reported under the broad headings of *attitudes* and *use*, followed by both *positive* and *challenging* aspects regarding the teaching, learning and assessment of Irish. The recommendations of subgroups are also presented.

### Post-primary students

This section reports key findings from focus groups held with students in six post-primary schools. These schools were spread across different locations in the country and included a mix of DEIS and non-DEIS schools, urban and rural schools and schools close to the Gaeltacht. A focus group was held with junior cycle and senior cycle students in each school, leading to a total of twelve focus groups. In all, 147 students expressed their views in this strand of the consultation. The composition of the groups included students from diverse backgrounds. Findings are presented as follows: (i) Attitudes towards Irish; (ii) Use of Irish; (iii) Positive aspects of Teaching, Learning and Assessment of Irish; (iv) Challenges of Teaching, Learning and Assessment of Irish.

#### Attitudes towards Irish

A large majority of the participants indicated that they thought it was important to preserve and speak Irish, at least in principle. They cited a range of reasons to support this view: that it is a core part of our history, culture and identity (*"It's our native language - something we should be proud of"* SIBS-B-Sin); that it is one of the characteristics that distinguishes Ireland from other countries; and that it was particularly important to keep it alive given its suppression in previous times. Many of these statements were made while acknowledging the current status of Irish, signalling that it would be a "shame" if the language were lost. Some other reasons cited for the need to preserve the language included connections with relatives - grandparents in particular - who may have spoken the language, the greater understanding it provides for understanding place names, and the benefits of knowing multiple languages like is typically the case in other European countries. Attitudes towards Irish tended to be most positive when they were associated with other cultural activities, such as folklore or Irish music/dancing.

However, students also shared alternative views. Some felt that Irish was not part of their identity: *"I don't feel ashamed of not knowing Irish. I don't feel a connection to me personally."* (SIBS-A-Sin). Some saw little point in learning Irish because it was, in their view, no longer a living language. Views such as this were accompanied by the sentiment that there was little practical use for Irish outside of school or in the future. For some who *did* deem the learning of Irish important, the experience of learning Irish in school dimmed their desire to actually put this aspiration into practice. As one student noted: *"I find learning Irish a chore. I'm doing it because I have to. There was no time during school when I found it enjoyable."* (SIBS-A-Sin) Students expressed a sense of frustration that despite spending many years learning the language in school, they lacked confidence in speaking it. The feeling that the way Irish is taught in school was having a negative impact on attitudes towards the language was common. One student noted: *"You associate the language with the Leaving Cert – you're not learning it because you want to learn it"* (SIBS-B-Sin) while another stated: *"I feel like school can ruin it on you sometimes – when they are pushing literature"* (SIBS-E-Sóis). It was common for students to report liking Irish in primary school, but to report the opposite feeling on entry to post-primary school. Sentiment towards Irish was bound up in general negative feelings about the examination system at post-primary level. Though it was not a focus of the current consultation, a few students indicated that they felt that Irish should not be a mandatory subject at post-primary level.

### Use of Irish

The extent to which students used Irish during school time was mixed. Some students reported practising their own language skills during Irish classes (e.g. Tae agus Plé sessions), but many students reported that class time tended to be spent on activities *other than* speaking Irish (see more below). Some indicated that their experience of Irish involved little active use: *"Do you speak Irish to the teacher? Not really. The teacher does most of the talking, telling us about the poem or literature"* (SIBS-F-Sóis). When they *did* use oral Irish, usually in preparation for Leaving Cert Orals, they reported enjoying it. Outside of the Irish class, Irish tended to be used most frequently during activities relating to Seachtain na Gaeilge. They enjoyed activities such as bake sales held through Irish, excursions held through Irish (e.g. archery, go-karting), céilithe, singing, watching movies (e.g. Cailín Ciúin) and Gaeilge 24. However, for the most part, their experience of Irish was that it *"stops when we leave the room"* (SIBS-E-Sóis). Some noted that Irish was more widely experienced during their time in primary school.

In most cases, students reported limited use of Irish outside school. When directly asked, students tended to offer few (or no) examples of how Irish is used, or they cited how it might be used *in theory* (e.g. they noted the existence of TG4 but rarely if ever watched it). When asked what is preventing them from using Irish, answers such as “*people would not understand it*” or “*people would think it was strange*” (SIBS-A-Sóis) were not unusual. Some of the few examples of use included helping younger siblings with homework. Students in most cases reported little exposure to Irish outside of school apart from public signage and announcements: “*the only Irish I hear is on the bus*” (SIBS-B-Sóis). Students also reported limited contact with Irish on the traditional or social media platforms. Interestingly, students who *did* have opportunities to use Irish in the local area did not report regularly availing of these opportunities. For example, some students had relatives who spoke Irish or had opportunities to use Irish in the local Gaeltacht community (e.g. cafés, clubs, ciorcail chomhrá) but indicated that they did not frequently participate. Some noted that their lack of confidence in using Irish made this participation less likely. One student whose family included native Irish speakers noted that the dialect used at home did not match the language used in school.

Though only a minority of this sample of students had done so, the most obvious exception to the trend reported above was provided by those who had attended the Gaeltacht. For example, one student from an urban area had received a scholarship to attend and noted “*speaking the language 24/7*” had meant he “*started thinking in Irish instead of thinking in English – the activities like sports that I liked in Irish really helped as well*” (SIBS-B-Sin). Some students indicated an interest in going to the Gaeltacht but expressed a reticence that their lack of Irish might prove a barrier. However, on the whole, Gaeltacht experiences were deemed to have a positive impact on attitudes towards and use of Irish.

Thinking beyond school, students tended to think of a narrow range of options or professions for using Irish in the future. When asked how Irish might come into play after school, they mentioned jobs such as teachers, Gardaí, civil service or politicians. Students tended not to have a clear vision of how Irish might be used outside the education system.

## Views on positive aspects of teaching, learning and assessment of Irish

### Focus on oral language

Students tended to identify that classes in which they spoke the language themselves were the most engaging and most rewarding in terms of language learning. This is captured in one student who stated: “*I think when it comes to speaking it really helps... I progress more when*



*speaking than when I am writing*" (SIBS-B-Sin) and another who noted: *"I like speaking but not writing, I like talking to the teacher instead of all the time writing. When you are writing you are not learning as much"* (SIBS-F-Sin). They enjoyed the collaborative approach of oral tasks, i.e. working with their peers. It should be noted that students tended to state that far fewer of their lessons were spent on oral language than literature/reading/writing (see below).

### Active approaches

Students reflected positively on approaches that involved music and drama, as long as they were experiential in nature and did not involve exam-focussed analysis afterwards: *"We did role plays...dramas last year. All were given a part and acted it out. Then we went into the literary part of it and we had to learn the answers. It just kind of ruined it"* (SIBS-E-Sóis). Students tended to enjoy that the approaches they experienced in primary school: *"I think primary school is better because there is not as much literature in it, like acting out dramas like Oisín in Tír na nÓg, but here it is very heavy with vocab and all that – you remember it better when you are actually doing it"* (SIBS-E-Sin). Other active approaches that were welcomed included quizzes (e.g. Kahoot, Blooket), language games (e.g. bingo, Jenga to practice oral work) and activities that involve movement (e.g. *"We get up and walk around and describe one of the Sraith Pictiúr to another student which helps us to learn it. It gets stuck in your head"*; SIBS-D-Sin). Students also cited activities completed in Transition Year like making a podcast or a booklet in Irish to welcome first year students to the school. Work experience in Transition Year also provided opportunities. For example, one student had completed her experience in a Naíonra, and reflected that *"it was nice to go and to see that it (Irish) did have a purpose – all the wee kids were using it"* (SIBS-E-Sin).

### Use of technology

When asked about technology use in Irish, students tended to cite the use of translation tools most frequently (e.g. focloir.ie, teaglann.ie, tearma.ie, Google translate). Technology used tended to be used to facilitate assessment-focused preparation, such as sharing notes for Leaving Certificate exams or preparing presentations for Junior Cycle Classroom Based Assessments (CBAs). Such applications included: the use of MS Teams to facilitate the sharing of notes and resources; review quizzes; teacher recordings of sentences based on the sraith pictiúr; visitings sites such as StudyClix to access sample exam answers. The other commonly cited application included the use of Powerpoint slides for presenting CBAs.



## The role of the teacher

The importance of the Irish teacher was illustrated both implicitly and explicitly throughout the students' contributions. Though it is not unique to Irish, students indicated that they valued a teacher who respected their students, offered support and was willing to have some fun (*"A bit of craic in Irish is important – she'll give you work and you do it but won't keep going on and on about it"* - SIBS-B-Sóis). This was further illustrated in comments such as *"I feel like she always asks what we are struggling with and tries to make it easier for us"* (SIBS-B-Sin) and *"It is all to do with the teachers – there are some subjects that I like, but the teacher makes me not like it"* (SIBS-B-Sóis). Students generally indicated that they valued when they received feedback from their teachers on their progress in learning in Irish. Notably, students appeared to think that it was helpful for their teacher to teach through Irish, but not all the time: *"It's good to use Irish, but not all Irish"* (SIBS-B-Sin). Some students expressed difficulty in understanding content when taught through Irish alone: *"My teacher talks fluent Irish all the time so I don't understand her"* (SIBS-B-Sin).

## Views on challenges of teaching, learning and assessment of Irish

### Literature

One of the most dominant themes in the contributions from post-primary students was the view that there is an excessive focus on literature in the Junior Cycle specifications and Leaving Certificate syllabus. Many students indicated that they did not *"see the point"* (SIBS-B-Sin) of the literature or did not find that it was relevant to their lives: *"It's just learn the poets, learn the emotions- there's nothing that sparks our interest – unless people are interested in literature and poetry"* (SIBS-E-Sin). They also felt that there were unrealistic expectations about what was possible with literature, given Irish was a second or additional language for most students in English-medium schools: *"I feel like in Irish, we are doing the same thing as we are doing in English – it is hard in English so obviously it is much much harder in Irish. The expectation is much too high"* (SIBS-B-Sin). Engaging with literature was associated with rote learning and memorisation in preparation for the exam, and was seen as less relevant than focussing on communicative/oral language: *"I'm never going to read an Irish book outside of school so there is no point in emphasising literature"* (SIBS-C-Sin). Indeed, students noted that at Leaving Certificate level, in particular, the volume of literature was such that their teachers felt they had little time to focus on oral skills: *"it takes too much time away from other things we could be doing – the teacher is always trying to fit in the béaltriail, but can't"* (SIBS-E-Sin). When reflecting on their engagement with literature, students suggested that the Irish course should be more similar to that of Modern Foreign Languages (e.g. French,

German), which do not include a focus on poems, dramas and novels. It is important to note that some students *did* indicate aspects of Irish literature that they enjoyed, naming particular works that were of interest, but this was not a consensus view. For example, students in one school (SIBS-E-Sóis) named particular texts that they found interesting, such as *Stadeolaíocht*, *Cúpla* and *Spás*.

### **Need to focus on authentic language use and active approaches**

Following on from the previous section, students expressed the view that there is not enough focus on meaningful language use. This was positioned as being in opposition to the use of textbooks and focusing on literature: *“There is a lot of textbook learning and not enough speaking”* (SIBS-C-Sóis). Students expressed a level of frustration that the main focus of their work in school did not transfer to other situations: *“We’re not told how to hold a general conversation – you’re never going to go out in town and talk about your school. You’re not going to go out and start talking about the novel with friends”* (SIBS-E-Sin). Relatedly, Senior Cycle students expressed dissatisfaction with the *sraith pictiúr*, on the basis that they do not encourage meaningful language use and tend to encourage memorisation: *“The sraith pictiúr must be changed. You’re not learning Irish if you’re just rote learning”* (SIBS-A-Sin). There was a strong sense from many students that rote learning and memorisation was a dominant theme in their experience of Irish, as they prepared for exams: *“In 2nd and 3rd year you are memorising for the exam, but you don’t understand it”* (SIBS-D-Sóis). In their view, this often involved learning language that they did not understand: *“You just have to learn notes from the board. Don’t have a clue what they mean”* (SIBS-E-Sóis). In some cases, students expressed positive sentiments about the CBAs in Irish. In other cases, they suggested that the current CBAs involve little meaningful language use: *“I was reading off a flashcard and didn’t know what I was reading”* (SIBS-E-Sin). They also suggested that, on the whole, the CBA in Irish was not valued: *“The CBAs are kind of pointless. We don’t get any marks for them, they’re just there”* (SIBS-E-Sóis).

### **Focus on form/grammar**

Students expressed concern that despite the large amount of time they had committed to learning Irish throughout their time in school, they continued to have difficulty with independently constructing sentences in the language. This sentiment was captured by one student as follows: *“We are not taught how the language actually works. The grammar is all over the place. My 1st year teachers tried, but it wasn’t enough. I am more fluent in Spanish after only five years. It’s all memorisation. If we could make our own answers, we could remember them. We don’t have enough language to say what you want to say”* (SIBS-F-Sin). Students felt that

this was partially explained by the volume of material on the course: *“There isn’t time to learn how to formulate things yourself, and you move on to a new topic”* (SIBS-C-Sin). Irish tended to be compared unfavourably with learning in other languages on this front: *“More emphasis on understanding and sentence structure. I can work out a French sentence, but not an Irish one”* (SIBS-D-Sin). Students also expressed a need to learn more about phonics and pronunciation in Irish.

### **Progression in Irish**

Students expressed dissatisfaction with their overall progress in Irish learning. This manifested in two main ways. Firstly, despite the fact that many students reported *enjoying* how they learned Irish in primary school, some students felt that they were ill-prepared to be successful with Irish in post-primary school. For example, one student who stated, *“I felt in primary school we didn’t focus on Irish much at all”* (SIBS-E-Sin) felt that students from other schools had been better prepared. Other students indicated that there was a lack of accountability for Irish learning in primary school: *“In primary you didn’t have to learn everything, but now you do in post-primary. In primary, it is in one ear and out the other. There are no tests. There should be something to make sure that you understand it”* (SIBS-D-Sóis). Secondly, students indicated that there was a big jump, particularly in terms of literature, from Junior Cycle to Senior Cycle. They also indicated that the lack of an Irish oral as part of the Junior Cycle meant that it was under emphasised in lower post-primary, before being re-emphasised again in preparation for the Leaving Certificate oral examinations. Many students were of the view that a formal oral examination should be introduced at Junior Cycle level: *“In junior cert there was no oral part at all, so when you go to Leaving Cert you’re expected to do a béaltriail – this would provide a foundation to work off”* (SIBS-E-Sin).

### **Student recommendations**

***Increase the focus on meaningful language use; introduce an oral examination at Junior Cycle level; revise the Sraith Pictiúr at Leaving Certificate***

Students indicated that there should be a greater focus on oral Irish throughout post-primary school. In practical terms, some suggested that this would be supported by the inclusion of an oral examination in Junior Cycle and the reframing of aspects of the Leaving Certificate oral (e.g. revising or discontinuing the use of Sraith Pictiúr).

***Reconsider the focus on Irish literature***

Students were generally of the view that the volume of literature at Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate should be reduced or removed completely. Some suggested that the course

should be split into two: one mandatory course focusing on communication and the other focusing on literature. They suggested that any literature kept on the course should be relevant to their lives.

***Provide additional support for learning the form of the language/grammar***

Students suggested that they need further support on sentence construction and general aspects of Irish grammar.

***Re-allocate marks in examinations; consider bonus points at Leaving Certificate level***

Students suggested that state examinations should focus on communication. Towards this end, some suggested increasing the percentage allocated to the oral at Leaving Certificate (up to 50%) and introducing an oral at Junior Cycle (see above). Some also suggested that higher level Irish should be awarded bonus points in the CAO system.

***Ensure the use of active approaches to learning Irish***

Students reported enjoying Irish when it involved activities other than taking down notes and learning exam-focused answers. Suggested activities included excursions in Irish, activities in school (e.g. sport, music), group and project work and using Irish for communicative purposes in the community. Students saw limited opportunities for using Irish outside the classroom at present.

## Post-primary teachers

This section reports key findings from focus groups held with post-primary teachers in different geographical locations and representing a variety of different school types, including those participating in the DEIS programme. Teachers had a range of years of teaching experience. The focus groups included two online sessions and three face-to-face sessions. A total of 30 individual post-primary teachers contributed their views across these sessions. Findings are presented as follows: (i) Attitudes towards Irish; (ii) Use of Irish; (iii) Positive aspects of Teaching, Learning and Assessment of Irish; (iv) Challenges of Teaching, Learning and Assessment of Irish.

### Attitudes towards Irish

The teachers who participated in focus groups were positive about the importance of teaching Irish and instilling a love and respect of the language in their students. Teachers reported that there was a connection between student attitudes and teacher's experiences of teaching the language; where students were positive about learning Irish, this supported

teacher enjoyment. They also pointed out that their enjoyment of teaching Irish varied depending on the year of the students and the aspects of the specification/syllabus they were focusing on. One teacher noted: *“Tá 95% de na páistí/daltaí ag iarraidh Gaeilge a fhoghlaim ach níl an cúrsa oiriúnach”* (MIBS-B). They were particularly positive about opportunities to develop their students’ spoken Irish, citing preparation for the oral examination in 6th year, in particular. A number of teachers noted that they liked teaching literature for its own sake, not just for the purpose of examinations (though other views were also expressed, see below). Teachers also reported that they enjoyed teaching aspects of language such as phrases and grammar, particularly when they could do so over a sustained period. They gained a sense of satisfaction from instances where students recognised their own language development, used Irish in the classroom, and in particular, when students went on to use Irish outside school: *“tá sé de phribhléid againn – cuireann seo bród orainn nuair a chasann muid leo taobh amuigh den scoil agus beannaíonn siad dúinn i nGaeilge”* (MIBS-D). When asked, teachers pointed to a range of factors that caused them to pursue a career as an Irish teacher, indicating influential teachers and family connections in their own lives that inspired them. A key vision for teachers was that students would be able to speak the language and enjoy it: *“Muinín (a bheith) acu an teanga a labhairt”* (MIBS-E)

Post-primary teachers were more likely to express negative views about Irish when it came to particular aspects of the specifications/syllabus in Junior and Senior Cycle, rather than the language itself (see more below). Some noted that teachers were tired of advocating for changes to the course, expressing frustration that it appeared no one was listening to their views. Another key challenge reported by some teachers was the impact of home/parental attitudes towards Irish on students, with some noting that this varied from school to school and region to region.

### Use of Irish

Teachers’ own use of Irish inside and outside of school varied depending on their individual circumstances, and to some degree, their location. For example, teachers working in T2 schools in or near the Gaeltacht used Irish at home with their own children or other relatives, as well as in the community. For these teachers, Irish was a core feature of their upbringing and everyday life. Teachers in other locations reported fewer opportunities for practising and using their own Irish outside of school, particularly after leaving university, indicating that it required active effort to seek out such opportunities. The opportunities that did exist included formal activities such as professional learning events or conferences, as well as informal activities like meeting with friends/colleagues who speak Irish, *ciorcail*

chomhrá and other cultural activities. Where teachers reported that members of the school Irish department used Irish as their daily means of communication, this was perceived as a helpful practice. However, not all teachers reported that this was their regular practice.

When it came to student use of Irish, teachers provided examples of the opportunities available outside of school. These included ciorcail chomhrá being run by local GAA clubs and cultural/arts-groups. Teachers tended to indicate that 'some' of their students participate in these activities. Teachers were generally very positive about the benefits of attending Gaeltacht courses for students' use of Irish. Some also noted the benefits of participating in Irish debates organised by Gael Linn. The flexibility and lack of examination-focus experienced during Transition Year was viewed as largely positive for supporting student use of Irish. The visibility of Irish was viewed as important for supporting use: "*Tá tábhacht leis an timpeallacht – go mbeidh Gaeilge le feiceáil – seo spreagadh*" (MIBS-D). Teachers in schools participating in the Gaeltachtaí were complimentary of many of its core features, including the student committee and the focus on Irish throughout the school day/environment. Teachers acknowledged the key role they played in supporting student use of Irish, emphasising the role of encouragement and praise: "*moladh, moladh agus a thuilleadh moladh*" (MIBS-D).

Teachers also reported on factors that were creating barriers to student use of Irish. As also reported below, the focus on literature was seen as dampening opportunities to practice oral Irish and consequently having a negative impact on student confidence: "*Tá neart acu atá dearfach – ach go leor a bhfuil lagmhisneach orthu; Is ceart an litríocht a laghdú – níl an Ghaeilge acu le bheith chomh cruthaitheach sin*" (MIBS-A). Teachers noted that many students lacked confidence in using Irish for fulfilling communicative purposes such as ordering a coffee: "*níl siad in ann rudaí bunúsacha a rá*" (MIBS-B). This was regularly linked with students' competence and confidence in independently constructing sentences. Despite noting the positive influence of Gaeltacht, trips, teachers acknowledged that in reality only a minority actually have the opportunity to do so: "*is mionlach a théann chun na Gaeltachta - níl deis an teanga a úsáid taobh amuigh den scoil*" (MIBS-B).

### Views on positive aspects of teaching, learning and assessment of Irish

Teachers were of the view that Irish was most successful when linked with the lives and preferred activities of their students: "*oibríonn sé nuair a dhéantar nasc le saol na ndaltaí*" (MIBS-D). This manifested in different ways. Success was experienced when linking oral work with students' lives and activities outside school, e.g. weekend activities. Some teachers were of the view that the literature on the new Junior Cycle course was of more interest to



students and more enjoyable as a consequence (though not all agreed; see below). Some teachers reported that technology supported their teaching, in the form of quizzes (e.g. Mentimeter, Blooket) and through the provision of materials online for students who have missed classes. Some also reported generating their own resources rather than using textbooks, which students found supportive. Other examples of helpful practices included the use of exit tickets for Assessment for Learning purposes or adopting creative approaches such as having students create comic book strips. Some teachers noted that they saw the potentially valuable role of CBAs in Irish learning (e.g. promoting project work), but noted challenges in enactment and a perceived lack of value placed in the tasks by students.

## Views on challenges of teaching, learning and assessment of Irish

### Views on the Junior Cycle specifications/Leaving Certificate syllabus

Teachers spoke at length about their views on the current curriculum and assessment arrangements for students in post-primary schools. They were largely of the view that the current specifications were an impediment to supporting attitudes towards and competence in the Irish language: “*Tá an cúrsa/siollabas mar bhac*” (MIBS-A). Teachers felt pressurised to cover the literature course in time, meaning that, in their view, they did not have enough time to develop language skills. Given the backwash effect of assessment, some were of the view that state examinations were not targeting the right things: “*ag déanamh measúnaithe ar na rudaí míchearta*” (MIBS-B). There was a common view that current arrangements were facilitating rote learning: “*Scoláirí ag foghlaim de ghlanmheabhair agus ansin níl siad in ann labhairt*” (MIBS-B).

At Junior Cycle level, some teachers noted that the CBAs were a good idea in principle, but identified a range of challenges in their enactment. In the view of some, language learning from these tasks was not optimal: “*Braitheann siad faoi bhrú leis an CBA. Níl siad compordach leis an méid ama a fhaigheann siad... ní chuireann siad morán iarrachta isteach dá bharr. Google Translate a bhíonn ar siúl acu*” (MIBS-C). Teachers indicated that the CBA tasks were not taken seriously (“*Má thuigeann daltaí nach bhfuil marcanna ar na CBA’s ní oibríonn siadsan chomh dian*” MIBS-E) and often involved rote performances rather than genuine language use: “*tá seo cosúil le drámaíocht – tá siad ag foghlaim rud de ghlanmheabhair*” (MIBS-D). They also expressed dissatisfaction with the use of common CBA tasks for ordinary and higher level. Though it was not a focus of the current consultation, some post-primary teachers with experience of the T1 Irish specification expressed the view that students taking the T1 specification were at a disadvantage compared to students taking the T2 specification.

## Literature

Some teachers acknowledged that exploring literature helps to develop a broader understanding of the Irish language and culture. Teaching literature did not necessarily *exclude* a focus on developing students' communicative competence in Irish; some teachers experienced success in integrating a focus on written texts with a focus on communication and broader language skills. However, the overwhelming feedback from teachers was that there was an excessive focus on literature in the current specifications/syllabus and that it needed to be reduced. As noted above, some teachers were positive about some of the works included on the Junior Cycle course, but were still of the view that more time was needed to focus on other skills (spoken language in particular). In their view, most students did not see a connection between the literature and their own lives: *"ní fheiceann tromlach na scolairí baint lena saol"* (MIBS-A). The volume and reading level of texts was considered to be too challenging for some students, and for some of the students studying ordinary level at Junior and Senior Cycle in particular. Teachers expressed a level of concern about the challenging nature of some of the literature on the Leaving Certificate course, and also indicated that time was needed to process the new list of prescribed material to be examined from 2027. Teachers identified that students with literacy difficulties encountered particular challenges in navigating the demands of the literature on the course. Thus, while literature was seen as beneficial for some learners, it was seen as problematic for others.

### Lack of time for oral Irish

The emphasis on literature was regularly compared negatively with a perceived lack of emphasis on oral Irish skills (*"Is trua nach bhfuil ár ndóthain ama againn díriú ar an gcaint"* MIBS-D). Post-primary teachers indicated that the time needed to 'cover' the literature on the course squeezed out available time for focussing on communicative activities: *"Tá an litríocht ag baint ó dheiseanna labhartha na scoláirí - níl an t-am ann"* (MIBS-B). More specifically, teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the degree to which the CBA tasks at Junior Cycle supported oral Irish, expressing a preference for a formal oral examination. They perceived a difference in Leaving Certificate students as a result of the increased focus on oral skills for the 40% examination. However, they also noted dissatisfaction with the current use of the Sraith Pictiúr. Some indicated that the total number of 20 was excessive, while others indicated that their existence was, understandably, leading to rote learning on the behalf of students: *"Gach rud á fhoghlaim de ghlanmheabhair... ag cailliúnt deiseanna an teanga féin a mhúineadh. D'fhéadfaí níos mó gramadaí a mhúineadh murach líon na bpictiúr"* (MIBS-A).



## Competence of students on entry to post-primary school

Post-primary teachers regularly expressed the view that there was a disconnect between the level of Irish many students achieved in primary school and the level that is required in post-primary school. They noted large variation in the Irish proficiency of incoming First Years, which they attributed to the degree to which Irish was prioritised in the primary schools students attended. This necessitated a 'back to basics' approach with First Years, in which post-primary teachers assumed little prior knowledge of Irish: "*táim ag cur ama amú ag déanamh obair gur chóir a bheith déanta ag leibhéal na bunscoile*" (MIBS-C). They reported having to teach language such as "*laethanta, aimsir, mé féin*" (MIBS-B). Some post-primary teachers expressed the view that children's learning in Irish had been negatively affected by the Irish competence of their primary school teachers. Teachers also noted that *attitudes* towards Irish were significantly influenced by the practices and outlook of individual primary schools and individual teachers. Some post-primary teachers noted that this is a systemic issue; primary teachers have, themselves, come through the Leaving Certificate system. Some indicated that a grade of H4 in Leaving Certificate Irish was not, in their view, sufficient for entry to primary teacher education programmes.

## Inclusion and differentiation

Post-primary teachers noted challenges in ensuring that all learners felt included and supported in Irish lessons. Some of these challenges related to the use of common-level examination tasks such as the Leaving Certificate oral and Junior Cycle CBA tasks. Teachers indicated that students with less competence in Irish found the CBA tasks to be very challenging, leading to teacher 'spoonfeeding' to get them completed. They also noted that the removal of foundation level Irish at Junior Cycle had led to further difficulties with differentiation, as students who would have previously prepared for a less challenging examination were now expected to meet a higher level of proficiency in the ordinary level examination. Teachers indicated that it was challenging to differentiate for all learners in mixed level classes. Large class sizes and mixed-level classes were also seen as challenges. Some teachers also noted challenges posed by Irish exemptions, particularly in cases where students entered post-primary school thinking they had acquired an exemption at primary level, but they in fact had not.

## Resourcing and timetabling

Some post-primary teachers also noted a range of other challenges. These included textbooks that were perceived as being overly challenging, large class sizes, difficulties with

the timetabling arrangements for Irish in some schools, and the current lack of fully qualified Irish teachers in the system.

## **Recommendations**

### ***Review the focus on literature in Junior Cycle specifications and Leaving Certificate syllabus***

Many teachers were of the view that the volume of literature at post-primary level should be reduced. Teachers also suggested that the course should be split in two: one focussed on communication, akin to the MFL specifications. The other course would focus on literature. Students would be afforded the choice of electing to take the literature-focused course.

### ***Increase the emphasis on spoken Irish and communication***

Teachers were of the unanimous opinion that the specifications/syllabus and examination arrangements at Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate should be revised to ensure that there is a greater emphasis on spoken Irish. The most common recommendation to operationalise this aspiration was to bring in an oral examination as part of Junior Cycle Irish. They noted that to increase the perceived value of CBAs, they need to be further reconceptualised or have marks awarded for their completion.

### ***Revise arrangements for foundation, ordinary and higher level***

Teachers recommended that foundation level Irish would return. They were of the view that differentiation in Irish would be supported by avoiding mixed level classes.

### ***Ensure smoother transition from primary school***

Teachers recommended that more should be done to increase awareness of what is expected on either side of the sixth class - first year transition. They indicated that creating more connections between the school levels increases familiarity of primary and post-primary teachers with what is covered. The need for greater continuity in learning across levels was a clear theme in their contributions.

### ***Increased opportunities for engaging with the Irish language and professional learning for Irish teaching***

Teachers recommended that professional learning for Irish would take place within the school day and on a face-to-face basis, noting that they found online sessions to be less effective. They noted that they would value opportunities for discussion and learning from other teachers as part of this PL, with the focus kept on practical strategies rather than the details of specifications and learning outcomes. They also expressed a desire for further, funded opportunities for developing their own Irish through language courses and Gaeltacht

courses. Some teachers recommended that an allowance would be available for teachers who have completed additional qualifications in Irish.

#### ***Provide funding for Gaeltacht and other trips***

Teachers recommended that funding would be made available for Gaeltacht scholarships and other outings that would support student use of Irish.

#### ***Provide a broader vision and awareness raising***

Teachers recommended that a broader awareness campaign is needed to support parental understanding of the value of learning Irish. They also noted the need for alignment across the various agencies involved in teaching, assessing and otherwise supporting Irish at post-primary level.

#### ***Support the use of Irish in the school and broader community***

Teachers indicated that support should be made available for events taking place through Irish in the school, and that these should be linked with organisations and shops in the local community. Some teachers recommended that funding be made available to employ an Oifigeach Gaeilge who could support Irish clubs within the school and connections with the community.

#### ***Provide funding for resources***

Teachers recommended that funding should be available for a range of items, including technology, Irish language resources and smaller class sizes.

## **Post-primary principals**

Three focus groups were conducted with post-primary principals, generating a sample of 14 participants. These principals were drawn from a range of schools nationwide and represented a range of patron/management bodies. Principals in both DEIS and non-DEIS school contexts participated.

### **Principals' vision for and attitudes towards Irish**

The principals who took part in focus groups were positive about the need to promote and sustain the Irish language. They expressed a desire that the students in their schools would enjoy and take pride in learning Irish as a core feature of Irish culture and identity. They saw that this vision required a focus on communication and oral language use, to ensure student confidence in actually using the language. Furthermore, they indicated that events outside the Irish class in their school helped to support this focus, including Seachtain

na Gaeilge activities, the use of Irish in whole-school assemblies and school announcements, and the inclusion of Irish in school events such as award ceremonies.

However, despite their positive aspirations, principals expressed significant concerns about the current attitudes towards Irish in their schools. Many principals expressed concern about the current status of the language: *"We need a revolutionary change... as a state we have failed in our beautiful language - we have got to get this right"* (POIBS-C). They commented on declining standards in and attitudes towards the language: *"We are at crisis point - our language is being lost on a daily basis"* (POIBS-C). They felt that this attitude may also affect the motivation of teachers, who may in some cases feel apathetic about the language due to what they saw as unhelpful specifications/syllabi at Junior Cycle/Leaving Certificate level. However, some also noted that they thought a more traditional approach to teaching Irish prevailed in some classrooms (e.g. focusing on textbooks, learning answers for exams), leading to student disengagement. Principals regularly noted that parental influences can have a particularly negative effect on student attitudes towards Irish: *"there is a total lack of respect for Irish in the schools. We are a school of two halves. Actually, it is 30/70. A group that is really focused on Irish and then we have 30 percent who would try anything and everything to get out of Irish. And a lot of that is coming from parents"* (POIBS-C).

### Use of Irish

As noted in the previous section, participating post-primary principals were strongly in favour of promoting student use of Irish. They cited the activities outside of Irish class, particularly during Transition Year, were effective (e.g. dances/céilithe, trips to the Gaeltacht). They indicated support for encouraging students to go to the coláistí samhraidh in the Gaeltacht, with one principal noting: *"I believe three weeks in a good Gaeltacht is better than a year in school"* (POIBS-C). Some also noted the success of parent groups for promoting use and positive attitudes amongst the parent body. Despite this strong support in principle, they also identified barriers to student use of Irish. Though Gaeltacht experiences were welcome, they acknowledged they are not possible for everyone: *"there is a struggle to get places and the cost is not affordable for many students"* (POIBS-A). Some also noted that there were limited opportunities for using Irish outside of school in their area.

### Views on positive aspects of teaching, learning and assessment of Irish

Principals felt that one of the most significant positive influences on Irish was the role played by individual teachers and Irish departments in post-primary schools. Many principals praised the efforts made by Irish teachers to extend the use of Irish in the school (e.g.

through coffee mornings) and to enhance student interest. They noted the positive influence of having an engaged teacher in promoting active learning methodologies and encouraging students to remain at higher level Irish. They stated that there is further potential for promoting collaboration within Irish teams and across schools, by providing further time and space. Though they acknowledge that it ran contrary to advice, some principals stated their schools had experienced success in streaming Junior Cycle students into higher and ordinary level classes, particularly in supporting higher achieving students in Irish.

### **Views on challenges of teaching, learning and assessment of Irish**

#### **Incoming first year students: Variation in attitudes and competence in Irish**

A dominant theme in the contributions of post-primary principals was the concern expressed about how Irish is being taught in primary schools. Many post-primary principals were of the view that there was a need to re-examine why there was such variation in the level of Irish acquired by incoming First Years. For example, one principal stated: *"We need to go back and look at what is happening in the primary schools. We have a number of feeder schools. You know by where the students are coming from whether they have a grá for Irish or not. I'm not sure if Irish is being taught at all in some schools"* (POIBS-C). Principals indicated that while they had helpful information regarding achievement in English and Mathematics, due to the reporting of standardised test scores, there was a lack of information about progress in Irish. This was linked with a lack of value being placed in the language. On the theme of accountability, some principals suggested that the Inspectorate should play a role in examining the inconsistency on this front. In their view, the outworking of poor standards in Irish was that the Junior Cycle curriculum is pitched too high for many of the students, leading to challenges for post-primary teachers. Teachers were, in their view, 'starting from scratch' with some students in first year, despite students having spent eight years learning Irish in primary school. Some principals suggested that this challenge could be linked to the variation in primary school teachers' level of Irish: *"The problem is that we have young people now that are teaching in primary schools and they do not have the ability to teach as Gaeilge and this is a big big problem"*(POIBS-C).

#### **Appropriateness of the curriculum, assessment and associated materials**

Linked with the previous section, principals expressed the view that the current curriculum for Irish at post-primary level may not be appropriate for current students. Some felt that the demands of the curriculum were too similar to that of English, most students' first language, where it should be in fact taught more like Modern Foreign Languages.

Principals perceived that some students could hold more fluent conversations in a MFL after one year than they can in Irish. They noted that the transition from first year of Junior Cycle to second/third year was particularly challenging for students undertaking higher level, and that, compared to Leaving Certificate, there tended to be more problems and complaints at Junior Cycle level. They expressed the view that there was limited weight attached to CBAs: *"The CBAs are not worth the paper they are written on. Because they are not treated as part of the overall marks in the Irish exam they carry no weight at all"* (POIBS-C).

Principals indicated a similar concern that the language expected of students was too abstract, the examinations too hard and unpredictable, and that the number of distinctions being awarded in Irish was too low. Similar to post-primary teachers, post-primary principals expressed the view that the dominant role of literature in the Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate courses needed to be reviewed. This was particularly the case, in their view, for Ordinary Level students. Principals expressed the view that literature was just not a priority for Irish learning with teenagers: *"They're not using it at home, the vast majority of them. The literature means nothing to them. The communication has to be the key"* (POIBS-C).

### **Inclusion - exemptions**

Principals spoke regularly and at length about the challenges they were facing in navigating requests for Irish exemptions. In some cases, principals felt that a culture was developing around Irish exemptions: *"One thing I find frustrating is this culture that we have in Irish middle class society - the idea that I can get out of Irish by exemption"* (POIBS-C). Principals provided anecdotal evidence of what was, in their view, the inappropriate use of the exemption system: *"We are now responsible for giving them, and honest to goodness, you know we have students who have been doing Higher Level Irish who suddenly decide that they are not going to use it for points and then they look for an exemption. It is a big big problem. We have refused Irish exemptions, and they (parents) have appealed and we have lost the appeals"* (POIBS-C). Principals also cited instances of students who had 'unofficially' been granted exemptions in primary school, only to learn in post-primary school that the necessary documentation had not been completed. On the whole, principals in this sample were of the view that the current system for granting exemptions was being too widely applied and in need of revision.

### **Staffing and timetabling**

Principals indicated that having a full complement of qualified Irish teachers made a large difference to successful teaching and learning. However, they noted that the current staffing shortage is proving very challenging in achieving this state (*"In a lot of cases for us trying to get teachers whose primary qualification is Irish is a huge problem."* POIBS-C), citing

instances of teachers without degree-level Irish taking on classes. They noted that the quality of Irish suffers when teachers are lacking in confidence/competence in Irish. This has a knock-on effect on student competence and confidence.

### **Principals' recommendations**

#### ***Provide a visionary, joined up strategy for Irish***

Principals suggested that a connected and ambitious policy and communication strategy for Irish was needed to change attitudes and restore the perceived value of learning the language with students and parents.

#### ***Reduce the focus on literature; consider making it optional***

Principals mirrored the views of teachers in stating that the focus on literature should be reduced and the focus on spoken communication increased. Multiple principals suggested that the course should be split into two: one specification focused on communication and an additional, optional, course on literature.

#### ***Consider providing bonus points for higher level Irish***

Many of the participating principals stated that higher level Irish was deemed to be of little value, particularly when compared to higher level maths. They suggested that some students are deliberately deprioritising Irish in their studies as a result. They suggested that bonus points should be considered to address this.

#### ***Emphasise spoken Irish***

Principals recommended that an oral examination be introduced as part of the Junior Cycle. Some principals also suggested that the percentage for the oral at Leaving Certificate would be increased.

#### ***Address/Revise the current policy for granting Irish exemptions***

Principals indicated that the current system for granting Irish exemptions was too lenient and, on occasion, was causing tension between parents and principals.

#### ***Support trips to the Gaeltacht***

Principals indicated that further financial support should be available for students who wish to attend coláistí samhraidh. They recommended that funding should also be available for teachers to upskill their Irish in the same way.



***Provide professional learning opportunities (and resources) focused on active approaches to teaching/learning Irish;***

Principals recommended that professional learning opportunities and resources that support teachers in using more innovative approaches to teaching Irish should be provided.

***Ensure a smoother transition from primary school***

Principals recommended greater information sharing between primary and secondary schools. They also recommended that the wide variation they perceived in attitudes/competence in Irish from feeder primary schools would be addressed, potentially through conducting further standardised assessments on Irish and sharing the results.

***Provide further supports for the use of Irish outside the classroom***

Principals suggested that schools should be supported in engaging in excursions and extra-curricular activities through Irish (e.g. debates).

## **Parents of post-primary students**

In addition to the focus groups held with the parents of primary school children (see previous section), four sessions were held with parents of post-primary students. Two of these focus groups were held in person, with the remaining two held online. The participants comprised parents from different parts of the country, and also included those who spoke a language other than English or Irish as their first language. In total, 28 parents of post-primary students took part. Findings are presented as follows: (i) Attitudes towards Irish; (ii) Use of Irish; (iii) Positive aspects of Teaching, Learning and Assessment of Irish; (iv) Challenges of Teaching, Learning and Assessment of Irish.

### **Attitudes towards Irish**

Many parents were of the view that it was important for their children learning Irish: “I do think it is very important as our own native language”. They indicated that they held this view for a number of reasons, including for cultural/identity reasons, to gain good marks in State Examinations, to keep professional options open after post-primary school and due to the general benefits of knowing second and additional languages (“*learning languages is very positive... learning a second language...it enriches your understanding of how languages work*” TIBS-D). Some parents identified the role of teachers in building good attitudes towards Irish. Some also noted the beneficial role of events organised during Seachtain na Gaeilge or Gaeilge<sup>24</sup>, suggesting that these should happen more regularly in schools. Parents’ main



wishes were that their children would be able to hold conversations in Irish: *“The emphasis has to be on speaking the language at all levels”* (TIBS-D).

Notwithstanding the positive views held by many, parents identified a range of obstacles and challenges to developing positive attitudes towards the language. Some parents indicated that their children do not like learning Irish in post-primary school: *“My son hates it – they don’t see the real-life applicability and they find it hard”* (TIBS-D); *“I have four children – none of them like it”* (TIBS-D). Many parents thought that the student experience of learning Irish in Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate was such that it reduced their motivation to engage with the language: *“I think they have lost sense of it being a language and it’s more about the exam”* (TIBS-D). They indicated that they associate the language with examinations and rote learning: *“All the focus in secondary school is geared towards exams and points”* (TIBS-A). Some said that this reflected their own experience of learning Irish in school: *“It is the way it’s taught. Bring it into daily life. The rote learning...we spent 3rd year learning essays. We didn’t understand the language”* (TIBS-A). Parents identified that their children’s interest in Irish waned on moving from primary to post-primary school: *“There isn’t the same fun in post-primary school that they had in primary school”* (TIBS-A). They pointed out that Irish was viewed as a difficult subject by many. Some also noted that Irish is not seen as a living language, thus removing the impetus to learn: *“Irish isn’t seen as a living language – it’s not for them – they are not getting to see it as a living language”* (TIBS-D). Some parents questioned whether having Irish as a compulsory subject was having negative effects: *“this compulsory nature of Irish affects the teaching and attitude to it”* (TIBS-D). Parents drew a comparison between how Irish and Modern Foreign Languages are taught, stating that the focus on literature and writing in the former was having a negative impact on attitudes.

### Use of Irish

Use of Irish outside of school was relatively limited. When asked, parents provided examples of when and where their children encountered Irish, such as on street signs and names or TG4. A minority of parents referenced activities external to school which promoted Irish, for example extra lessons provided by university-community partnership. A small number of parents indicated that they had family members who used Irish with their children on occasion. The most substantive examples of Irish use outside of school related to students who attended summer colleges in the Gaeltacht. Some parents indicated that children who were initially reluctant to attend returned from the course with a new outlook: *“he had the time of his life – he loves it now”* (TIBS-D). Some parents indicated that Gaelscoileanna were more likely to have a beneficial impact on use of and attitudes towards Irish. Some parents

noted the potentially beneficial impact of running Irish classes for parents: *“Both my children’s schools run classes for the parents – this is good for schools to offer – some parents from other countries avail of this also”* (TIBS-D).

Despite positive aspirations, parents indicated that some students did not see a purpose for learning or using Irish, particularly when compared to other languages. *“Irish language history and culture is what the subject should be called. There isn’t a clear purpose... why we are learning Irish compared to French, where you know you can go to France and get your train ticket using your French?”* (TIBS-D). Their responses reflected the view that in many parts of the country, Irish is not a language that students encounter outside of school. For example, one participant was of the view that *“In Dublin, you don’t hear any Irish”* (TIBS-A).

### Views on positive aspects of teaching, learning and assessment of Irish

Parents relayed a number of features of Irish teaching, learning and assessment that they deemed successful or potentially successful; these depended to a large extent on individual experiences, meaning that overall themes were not readily identifiable. One parent praised the efforts of her teacher to include their child with additional needs in Irish lessons, praising the level of communication demonstrated. Parents indicated that their children were more likely to enjoy learning Irish when it is taught in an interactive way, using games and competitions, and when it linked with their interests (e.g. sport). They also gave examples of activities completed in Irish that their children had enjoyed in primary school (e.g. making pancakes through Irish). They cited the success of Duolingo in learning other languages, stating that it could be replicated in Irish.

### Views on challenges of teaching, learning and assessment of Irish

Parents were more likely to identify aspects of teaching, learning and assessment that were, in their view, unsuccessful.

Some parents pointed out that their children had entered post-primary school with a less-than-firm foundation in Irish, leading to difficulties: *“My son hates it. He was not taught Irish in primary school. He is so far behind the others”* (TIBS-A). They highlighted inconsistencies from school to school that, in their view, needed to be addressed: *“Big inconsistencies in the system – not taught at the same level in every school”* (TIBS-A). Some parents pointed out that this led to issues with differentiation, inclusion and confidence at post-primary level. Some parents pointed to the competence/confidence of primary school teachers as a partial explanation for the variation from school to school. Some parents also suggested that there

was a lack of continuity in moving from Junior Cycle to Leaving Certificate Irish (e.g. lack of oral at Junior Cycle level).

Like students and teachers, parents were very likely to point to the volume of literature as a problematic aspect of Irish at post-primary level. This led to lower motivation: *“You lose the positivity when you confront them with so much literature. Maybe not so much in 1st year but in 2nd and 3rd. The amount of literature is regurgitation because they don’t have enough language to process the literature”* (TIBS-B). Literature and related examinations were associated with rote learning and a lack of authentic language use: *“My daughter learned off the essay to write it for her mocks. That’s not learning Irish”* (TIBS-B). Parents of students in Junior Cycle expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of an oral Irish exam, noting the limited perceived value of CBAs: *“There is no oral exam at Junior Cycle which is a problem. They do a CBA in Irish, but it is not included in their mark. They are doing work to do the CBA but it is only a statement, no marks”* (TIBS-A).

Parents felt that there was a lack of support for learning Irish, when compared to other subjects. For example, they noted that *“there is no learning support for Irish if students are struggling”* (TIBS-A). Some were also of the view that they had limited information on what their children were learning in Irish: *“My kids don’t talk about it anymore. I don’t know what they are doing in Irish class”* (TIBS-A). Some of the participating parents felt that Irish had been deprioritised at primary/post-primary level, which had been further exacerbated by school closures during the pandemic.

### Post-primary parents’ recommendations

#### ***Provide further opportunities for using Irish outside/inside of school***

Parents recommended that the positive impact of Gaeltacht experiences meant there should be further (funded) opportunities for students to attend Gaeltacht courses. They also suggested that there should be further opportunities for using Irish in the community/locality and for guest speakers/groups who promote Irish to visit schools. Some parents also suggested that technology could provide solutions for developing Irish outside of school (e.g. a Department sponsored version of Duolingo).

#### ***Supports for parents***

Some parents suggested that there would be value in providing further opportunities for parents to learn Irish, though they also acknowledge that not all parents might be able to participate due to busy schedules. They recommended that there should be greater

communication between school and home about what children are learning in Irish, suggesting the potential benefits of online resources.

### ***Emphasise communication and spoken language rather than literature***

Parents were overwhelmingly of the opinion that communication and spoken Irish should be the priority of learning in school. They suggested that activities like debates could support this aim. They suggested that the focus on literature should be scaled back to make Irish more achievable. Some recommended that an oral examination should be introduced at Junior Cycle level.

### ***Ensure continuity and progression within and across school sectors***

Parents were of the view that the curriculum and practice needed to be addressed to ensure that there is consistency in experience and outcomes for all children when moving through the system. They saw a role for upskilling teachers in terms of their competence in the language and their adoption of interactive methodologies.

### ***Place of Irish in the school curriculum/points system***

A small number of parents suggested that it would be worthwhile to examine the obligatory nature of Irish for examination or to explore the potential of offering bonus points for Irish.

## **Student teachers: Post-primary**

Three online focus groups were convened to explore the views of post-primary student teachers. The focus groups included a spread of students from concurrent (undergraduate) and consecutive (Professional Masters in Education - PME) programmes from a variety of institutions. A total of ten individual participants took part. Findings are presented as follows: (i) Attitudes towards Irish; (ii) Use of Irish; (iii) Positive aspects of Teaching, Learning and Assessment of Irish; (iv) Challenges of Teaching, Learning and Assessment of Irish.

### **Attitudes towards Irish**

The participating student teachers generally were motivated to teach Irish, having been inspired to enter the professions for a number of individual reasons. These included Gaeltacht experiences, praiseworthy teachers from their own time in school, or family connections with Irish. They indicated that the most rewarding aspect of their chosen profession was encouraging and supporting students to speak the language themselves:

*“Nuair a úsáideann siad an teanga, spreagann sé sin mé agus mothaím go bhfuil mé ag déanamh*

*rud i gceart*" (MFOIBS-B). Participants explained that the students they had taught were generally interested in the *language*, but not necessarily the material with which they engage on the syllabus. In their view, interest was supported by encounters with Irish in modern culture (e.g. Kneecap, 'Paul Mescal ar an gcairpéad dearg'). However, despite this general interest, they explained that they had experienced varying levels of motivation in students to learn Irish. Specifically, those who had taught in both T1 and T2 contexts noted a significant difference in motivation between the two, suggesting that particular year groups in T2 settings sometimes demonstrated high levels of disinterest in Irish. For example, one student noted: "*Tá an dá thaobh feicthe agam - i scoil mheán-Bhéarla - tá sé saghas deacair scoláirí a spreagadh, anois i scoil lán-Ghaeilge - tá an suim ann, tá an grá den teanga acu - táim ag baint níos mó taitnimh as seo*" (MFOIBS-A). They noted that they experienced particular challenges with behaviour management in Irish classes where students were disinterested or unmotivated. Some student teachers attributed the lack of interest in Irish on students' behalf to the influence of parents.

### Use of Irish

When it came to promoting post-primary student use of Irish, student teachers' recommendations aligned with those of practising post-primary teachers. They emphasised, in particular, the value of having Irish visible throughout the whole school, with a 'cultúr Gaelach' present. Student teachers mentioned a range of ways in which they practised and maintained their own Irish. Some felt that the Tréimhse Foghlama sa Ghaeltacht had been enjoyable and useful in advancing their own Irish (but some had the opposite opinion). They also reported the use of Irish with fellow students on the course (e.g. during Tae agus Plé events in university spaces dedicated to Irish), speaking Irish with friends/family members, and through participating in more organised events such as Pop-Up Gaeltachtaí or events organised by Conradh na Gaeilge.

Student teachers also noted challenges in the use of Irish. They felt that many post-primary students lacked sufficient confidence to attempt using Irish in lessons or during the school day, owing to gaps in communicative proficiency ("*Scoláirí ag streachailt leis na bunrudaí*" MFOIBS-A). Some student teachers also noted that, in their experience, some practising post-primary teachers of Irish were unlikely to use Irish for personal or professional communication in the school. The student teachers noted that, in their view, this could be explained by a lack of confidence on the behalf of practising teachers or by a desire to take a break from Irish. They noted that teacher use of Irish in T1 schools could be inhibited by subject teachers who were not fully competent in Irish.

## Views on positive aspects of teaching, learning and assessment of Irish

### Interactive approaches to learning, linking student interests

Student teachers highlighted that, in their view, the most successful approaches to teaching Irish at this level involved a high level of interaction and engagement with student interests, integrating all language skills. They provided multiple examples from their placement teaching, including games, pair and group work, teaching through tasks (e.g. students working together to design a poster), and making explicit links with modern culture and student interests (*"ag taispeáint na teanga i suíomh nua aimseartha - ceol, Kneecap, TikToks, scannáin an Cailín Ciúin"* MFOIBS-A). They also pointed to benefits of approaches that involved getting students out of their seats: *"Rinne mé siúlóid díospóireachta agus chuir mé ceisteanna orthu chun iad a chur ag plé agus ag comhrá go compordach. Tá níos mo seans go bhfuil siad chun foghlaim"* (MFOIBS-B). A key message from this group was the need to link the teaching of Irish with student interests. The students also spoke about the value of generating and sharing resources to support this way of teaching, rather than relying on textbooks.

### Learning from school placement and teacher education

Post-primary student teachers shared many examples of how they progressed in their ability to teach Irish through experience gained on School Placement. Practical experience in classroom management, teaching through Irish and how to praise students were some of the cited examples. Student teachers also highlighted the positive impact that cooperating teachers (treoraithe) could have on their experience and learning in schools: *"Bhí mo mhúinteoir an-chabhrach anuraidh. Sheol sí an nasc chuig an tiomantán a bhí ag an scoil. Rinne mise amhlaidh léi. Caithfidh tú a bheith páirteach, d'fhreastail mé ar chruinniú a bhí ag Roinn na Gaeilge freisin"* (MFOIBS-B). Students highlighted good practice in their chosen ITE programmes. They particularly valued when they had small classes that facilitated getting to know each other and the lecturers, as this allowed for professional collaboration. They also highlighted the positive role that placement tutors could play in supporting their growth. For example, one student noted: *"Is dóigh liom go bhfuilim muiníneach. Thug an ollscoil straitéisí an-mhaith dom"* (MFOIBS-C).

## Views on challenges of teaching, learning and assessment of Irish

Other than supporting students who were uninterested in learning Irish (see attitudes section above), one of the other challenges cited by post-primary student teachers was the teaching of grammar. Those who were preparing to teach other languages noted the

particular challenge of teaching Irish grammar “*Uaireanta, bíonn sé an-leadránach an ghramadach a mhúineadh. Bíonn sé níos éasca gramadach na Fraincise a mhúineadh*” (MFOIBS-B). Some noted the need to place an increased focus on language awareness *across languages* to support this teaching. Another challenge, which reflects the views of practising post-primary teachers, was that teaching Irish to First Year students can prove difficult due to the varying ranges of competence in Irish on entry to post-primary school: “*Bíonn deacrachtaí sa chéad bhliain, bíonn na daltaí ar chaighdeáin dhifriúla*” (MFOIBS-B). They also pointed out that students tend to be uninterested in literature and thus more difficult to motivate with these aspects of the course. Some post-primary student teachers indicated that they would like more support with some aspects of teaching during their ITE degree, citing, for example, the need for a focus on the language of classroom management or on the prescribed texts at Junior Cycle/Leaving Certificate.

## Recommendations

### ***Support the use of Irish throughout the school environment***

The main recommendation proposed by this group was that the visibility of Irish should extend beyond the Irish lesson: “*Go mbeadh an Ghaeilge fite fuaite tríd an lá*” (MFOIBS-A). Towards this end, in their view, all teachers should play a role in supporting and praising the use of Irish across the curriculum and school day.

### ***Provide further supports for the use of Irish outside the school environment***

It was also recommended that events and excursions should be made available to support the use of Irish in authentic contexts, for communicative purposes.

### ***Provide further support for aspects of teaching Irish during ITE***

Though student teachers were largely complimentary of their teacher education, they also pointed out areas for further support such as the language of classroom management and the teaching of grammar.



# Consultation with school communities: BEACONS

## Primary school communities

This section of the report presents the main themes that emerged from the BEACONS Lá Bunscoile held on 4<sup>th</sup> April 2025. Children from 4<sup>th</sup>- 6<sup>th</sup> class, parents, teachers and school leaders from five English-medium schools in a diversity of school settings in Limerick City/County participated. The day consisted of three 80 minute blocks. Tables were organised according to schools in Session One, while groups consisted of a range of participants from across schools in Session Two and Three. Findings reported here represent participants' views across school groups.

Data are presented according to the main research questions guiding the consultation. Views relating to attitudes and use of Irish outside of school are considered first. Participants' views on positive aspects of teaching, learning and assessment of Irish are presented, followed by an analysis of challenges in this regard. Participants' recommendations to support the teaching and learning of Irish are presented at the end of the section.

### Attitudes to Irish and use of Irish

Participants began the day by identifying one word that they associate with learning Irish in school. Their responses indicated a range of both positive and negative attitudes and experiences, for example *croí, grá, ar fheabhas, brí, bród, cultúr, caint 's spraoi, interesting, muinín, communication, hard, confusing, difficult* and *eagla*. Both adult and child participants expanded on their views throughout the day.

While views on the importance of learning Irish were not explored directly, participants cited the importance of learning Irish for cultural reasons "*It's important to learn Irish - it's part of our culture*" and to preserve the language: "*We owe it to the next generation to keep Irish alive.*" Learning Irish was associated with Irish identity and national pride. Despite positive attitudes towards learning Irish in principle, concerns were expressed that Irish is associated mainly with school. The very limited opportunities for the majority of people to use Irish outside the education system was considered to be a great challenge which affected both motivation to learn the language and language use. Some adult participants recalled the time they had spent immersed in Irish in the Gaeltacht, underlining the value of an immersive period of learning for supporting positive attitudes and use. The attitudes of parents and individual teachers were considered to have a significant impact on children's attitudes, which could be either positive or negative. It was noted that it may be more difficult for parents to



support or participate in their child's learning in Irish compared with other subjects. Participants repeatedly emphasised the need to make connections between Irish and other aspects of children's lives, including: their interests, other subjects, parents/home, the community outside of school, Irish culture and learning Irish at post-primary level. It was suggested that greater opportunities to use Irish outside of the formal lesson and outside of school would support the learning of Irish in school.

### **Views on positive aspects of teaching, learning and assessment of Irish**

Participants expressed a range of different views on the teaching and learning of Irish, drawing on their personal experiences. Irish was viewed positively when it was linked with enjoyable opportunities to use the language inside and outside of the formal Irish lesson. Participants were asked to share positive experiences of Irish from their own lives. When key commonalities from these experiences were identified and shared (the 'essence'), they tended to focus on the need to use Irish in an interactive and meaningful way. Samples of 'essence' included:

- Fun, Interactions, Positivity, Games, Fun, Confidence, Communication
- Learning tied with children's interests, Irish myths and legends
- Bilingual books/reading material, Exposure throughout the day
- Culture, Inclusion, Relevance, Cleachtadh/practice
- Irishness, Pride, Ceolchoirmeacha, Group work
- Drama, Making Connections, Songs, Dancing, Tin Whistle, Seachtain na Gaeilge



Analysis across groups indicates that participants were strongly of the view that Irish needs to be used as much as possible in meaningful communicative contexts in order for it to be relevant to the children. Positive reinforcement may also be beneficial, for example, using praise or incentives. Participants felt that linking Irish with cultural events connected learning Irish with the broader socio-cultural context of the language in a positive way.

### Active approaches

There was a general consensus that learning Irish was viewed as most enjoyable and worthwhile when children had opportunities to actually use the language in lessons. Children gave examples of positive experiences of learning Irish through games, songs, poems and stories. Some children enjoyed learning about Irish legends. Others enjoyed it when the teacher read stories to them in Irish. Linking Irish with cultural activities such as Irish dancing and traditional music was motivating and rewarding for children who had these opportunities. It is of note that some teachers also reported enjoying teaching Irish through songs, rhymes and games in junior classes and building children's vocabulary in a fun and interactive way.

### Extending the use of Irish beyond the Irish lesson

When Irish was used informally throughout the day this was viewed positively. Some schools encouraged the use of some informal Irish, for example, greetings and 'frása na seachtaine'. One school had a buddy system where older children supported junior classes in

Irish reading and this was viewed to be worthwhile. Across schools, Seachtain na Gaeilge was seen to support positive attitudes and the whole-school use of Irish. Notably, Seachtain na Gaeilge encouraged an *inclusive* approach to celebrating Irish, as all members of the school community participated in a variety of language and cultural activities outside of the formal language lesson. Children particularly enjoyed participating in concerts, céilithe, table quizzes etc. Children in some schools were incentivised to use Irish through the day or in the yard through dojo points, jellies, stickers and homework passes. This extended use of Irish was more common during Seachtain na Gaeilge than at other times of the year. Indeed, it seemed in many schools that the initiative and enthusiasm for Seachtain na Gaeilge was not greatly extended upon after this designated time period. However, Seachtain na Gaeilge was viewed very positively where school could ‘cut loose’ and everyone was involved and enjoyed aspects of Irish language and culture. Schools also reported that Irish initiatives such as *Scór*, *Féile Luimnigh*, *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann*, *Féile an Phobail*, *Bualadh Bos Festival* were motivating and rewarding for children. Children enjoyed preparing for the festivals and participation created a sense of pride and reward for children. Linking Irish with placenames and nature was also reported as making positive connections for children.

### Resources and support schemes

Some schools reported that a particular published scheme was a useful resource, in junior classes in particular. The provision of audio-visual materials e.g. songs, digital stories with accompanying sound files were perceived as useful to support the teaching and learning of Irish. As reported in the previous paragraph, linking Irish with cultural festivals outside of school was viewed very positively in terms of promoting positive attitudes to Irish and linking Irish with heritage and culture. It is of note that many of the participating schools were taking part in festivals associated with Irish music and culture.

### Challenges of teaching, learning and assessment of Irish

Some children in the participating schools referred to learning Irish as being ‘confusing’ or ‘difficult’. Challenges emerged in middle and senior classes in particular as there was more of a focus on reading and writing and less time for oral language. The development of Irish language literacy skills seemed to be primarily based on the textbook in the participating schools. Challenges are discussed under the following themes: (i) shifting attitudes in middle/senior classes, (ii) development of literacy skills in Irish, (iii) teacher confidence and competence, and (vi) continuity and progression and (v) inclusion

### **Shifting attitudes and practice in middle/senior classes**

Data gathered across school groups indicated that participants were of the view that there was a shift from more positive attitudes towards learning Irish in junior classes to more negative experiences and perceptions in middle and senior classes. This 'division' or 'gap' emerged as a strong theme across groups. Some participants indicated that there was less enjoyment in learning Irish in middle and senior classes as activities became more focused on reading and writing activities in the textbook and there was less time for oral language activities. It was suggested that some children in senior classes were preparing for learning Irish at post-primary level, which resulted in a greater emphasis on textbook based approaches and less emphasis on interactive oral language use. It was reported that some children lacked confidence in their proficiency in Irish in older classes and that they became more self-conscious about making mistakes.

### **Development of literacy skills in Irish: Reading, writing, grammar and spelling**

Participants reported challenges in terms of literacy skills in Irish. It is important to note the limited amount of time allocated to teaching Irish in primary school when interpreting the views expressed. It was noted that although the teaching of English was based on an approach which included the explicit and systematic teaching of phonics, that this was not the case for Irish. Based on the experience of participants, it appeared that children were sometimes taught individual nouns in Irish as opposed to learning nouns in the context of sentence structures. In the view of participants, this negatively impacted on children's proficiency in Irish. Teaching sentence structure is essential to build communicative skills in an additional language. Children may be reading Irish textbooks without having learned the meaning of words or the necessary Irish phonics patterns to help them decode words. Some children found pronunciation difficult which may be linked to lack of explicit teaching of phonics. Reading and writing in Irish was reported as challenging. This may be due to fundamental skills not being taught in Irish. Some participants also suggested the reading level of texts in the textbooks was too difficult for some children. Children also reported that Irish grammar was difficult, confusing and difficult to remember. Again, this is likely to be due to an textbook-driven deductive approach to teaching grammar and lack of opportunities to use grammar in context. Spelling tests were raised as a concern that could impact very negatively on children's confidence. It was suggested that many children want to do well in spelling tests and that it is a source of upset for them when they do not succeed. In some schools, learning spelling may have involved learning individual nouns that were not linked with spelling patterns.

## **Teacher confidence and competence**

Teacher competence and confidence was also raised as an issue in that teachers may lack confidence in their own proficiency in Irish and be concerned about making mistakes. It was considered that some teachers may be more comfortable teaching younger classes for this reason. It was suggested that teachers should be less concerned about making mistakes and that they should be supported to develop confidence and competence in teaching Irish. Participants stated that further resources were needed to support teachers' language proficiency and also Irish language pedagogy.

## **Continuity and progression**

The need for continuity and progression in the learning of Irish from primary to post-primary level was raised. It appeared that revision and repetition featured in Irish lessons but that this was not resulting in communicative capacity in the language. It was suggested that children in middle and senior classes were less enthusiastic about learning Irish as many children were not progressing to communicative proficiency in the language. The limited time allocated to the teaching and learning of Irish should also be considered in interpreting these findings.

## **Inclusion**

The absence of learning support for Irish was raised as a challenge. The non-provision of learning support for children with additional educational needs and for newcomer children who were learning Irish later in primary school was considered a barrier to children's participation in Irish. Considering the wide range of needs in schools, the absence of any kind of learning support in Irish was considered problematic.

Some teachers in a DEIS context felt that they needed to focus more on English language literacy skills and that Irish was less of a priority. Some teachers in this context stated that they needed more time to consolidate children's literacy skills in English before focusing on reading and writing in Irish.

Exemptions were identified as a challenging issue, with anecdotal reports suggesting that some post-primary principals were advising parents to seek exemptions from Irish during primary school. This practice was placing additional pressure on primary school principals. It is of note that there was positive practice in terms of inclusion and differentiation in some schools where children were participating in oral language, music etc. in Irish, even though they had received an exemption. In such a way, teaching was differentiated to suit children's needs rather than excluding children from Irish.

The table below illustrates a summary of positive and challenging aspects of teaching and learning Irish, revealed in participants suggestions of what they would like 'more of' and 'less of' in Irish. Participants' recommendations are then presented.

More of	Less of
Fun, games	Textbooks
Interactive activities	Tests
Drama	Assessment
Role-play	Homework
Speaking Irish	Translation where at all possible
Comhrá	Focus on perfect grammar, language should be all about communication
Rewards	Negative attitudes
Irish dancing	Less rote learning and testing
Authentic Literature- picture books in Irish, learning vocabulary/ grammar in context	Correcting errors
Teanga bheo- conversation in Irish, model real language, teaching through the medium of Irish	Less Writing Irish,
Resource time for Irish	TESTS!,
Irish outside Gaeilge	Taking (Irish) too seriously make it more fun, words.
Scór	Homework distractions
Seachtain na Gaeilge	Unrealistic expectations
History- Building Pride	Reading & Writing
Conversation Comhrá	Pressure on schools to do all teaching
Duolingo	Fear of messing up
More caint!	Confusing

More videos for parents too (that don't speak Irish)

Reading,

Bridge the gap between Junior and Senior classes

Exposure to the language outside of school

Connection with media

Relevance

Accessibility

More phonics

Learning how the language works

Learning how to read in Irish

More time on topic and some more revision,

More breaking it up so we can understand

## Recommendations

### ***Promote interactive oral language use***

Participants recommended a wide variety of activities that would actively engage children in using the language. It was recommended that the use of Irish should be linked to children's interests. Examples of suggested activities included: songs, games, role-play, drama, quizzes, interest-based projects, Irish stories.

### ***Promote the use of informal Irish***

Participants were of the view that using Irish on an informal basis throughout the day would increase children's contact with the language and create more opportunities to use Irish. Incentivising the use of Irish through reward systems was also suggested.

### ***Promote Irish throughout the school***

The importance of a whole school approach to promoting Irish and the use of informal with support from leadership was highlighted. Creating a visible presence of Irish through a print-rich environment, signage etc. was recommended. Having designated times/spaces to use

Irish outside of Irish lessons was also suggested. Mentoring or buddy systems where older and younger children worked together could also be beneficial, to support Irish reading for example. Having a set time for Irish across all classes was also suggested. It was acknowledged activities and enthusiasm for Irish language and culture created during Seachtain na Gaeilge should be somewhat extended across the school year.

### ***Teach other subjects through Irish/Linking Irish with other subjects***

Participants indicated that learning other subjects for example PE, Art and Geography through Irish would be beneficial. It was suggested that learning phrases for use when doing enjoyable activities, for example, playing hurling would be beneficial.

### ***Link Irish with culture***

Some participants recommenced focusing on the cultural reasons to learn Irish. Providing further engagement in Irish music, sport and dance was recommended. Learning about the history of Irish and linking Irish with placenames etc. was suggested. The importance of promoting Irish as part of a linguistically and culturally diverse society was highlighted.

### ***Linking Irish with home and with the community outside of school***

The lack of connections with a language outside of school was considered to be a barrier in terms of motivation and use. Informing parents as to what their children were learning in Irish and Irish classes for parents focused on the language their children use may be helpful. Parents' participation in their children's language learning could be supported through the use of digital material, digital books with soundfiles and short videos. Irish language events for parents/school may support positive attitudes and use. It was suggested that links could be made with local sports clubs, Irish-medium schools, other English-medium schools, and post-primary schools to organise events through Irish. Pop-up Gaeltacht was also suggested, along with school tours and camps through Irish. Giving children the opportunity to visit Gaeltacht areas was also recommended. It was suggested that visits from speakers who used Irish in their profession could inspire children.

### ***Create more supports for Irish and explore how the language 'works'***

Supports can be considered with regard to resources to support the teaching and learning of Irish and supports for teachers. Providing a specific scheme for teaching Irish in English-medium schools was suggested. Teachers highlighted the need for literacy skills in Irish to be taught in a systematic, explicit, and structured way. The need for supports to teach Irish phonics and age-appropriate reading material was highlighted. Learning the basic structures of 'how the language works' would be beneficial to students. Small group teaching for Irish





was recommended. For example, it was recommended that teachers be supported to enhance their competence and confidence in Irish through summer courses.

***Include and support all children in learning Irish***

It was proposed that learning support should be provided in Irish. It was also recommended that the curriculum would be differentiated to support children to learn Irish, rather than excluding them through the system of exemptions.

***Administer standardised tests in Irish***

Some teachers were of the opinion that children should do standardised assessment tests in Irish.

***A coordinated vision for Irish***

The need for a coordinated vision for Irish and links across all sections was highlighted. It was seen as important that there would be continuity and progression from primary to post-primary.

## Post-primary school communities

This section reports on the one-day event held in April 2025 to explore multiple angles on the teaching and learning of Irish in post-primary schools. As part of this BEACONS event, students, teachers and parents from five post-primary schools of differing profiles in Limerick City/County and nearby shared their views in small group and plenary discussions. The subsections below identify key learning as relevant to the headings of (i) Attitudes, (ii) Use of Irish, and (iii) Teaching, Learning and Assessment of Irish. It concludes with recommendations suggested by participants.

### Attitudes

Participants began the day by identifying one word that they associate with learning Irish in school. Their responses indicated a range of reactions, from the positive (e.g. *suimiúil*, *engaging*, *áilleacht*, *grá*, *taitneamhach*, *cumarsáid*, *identity*) to the more negative (e.g. *complicated*, *boring*, *deacair*, *frustrachas*, *limited-use*, *difficult*, *challenging*, *unapplied*). As the day progressed, these one-word emotions were elaborated on as participants recounted their experiences within and outside the classroom.

Positive attitudes were associated with viewing Irish as an important part of identity and heritage (*"its like our identity – it's something we have to ourselves – if we didn't have it we'd be losing our identity"*) and something of which we should be proud. Participants identified particular experiences with Irish that had fostered positive attitudes, such as using Irish as 'secret language' while abroad, sharing Irish with exchange students and hearing Irish being used authentically in Gaeltacht settings. Young people and adults often identified a particular teacher that had a lasting effect on their perception of Irish. The approaches adopted by these teachers were commended, such as teaching Irish through games, music and activities outside the classroom. However, participants also noted the importance of not only the teacher's pedagogical skill, but their attitude: a playful, fun approach (having 'craic') was singled out. They cited examples of teachers who had gone out of their way to help students with individual challenges in learning Irish. Some participants highlighted the importance of other role models, such as the potentially positive influence of parents or indeed past students who have gone on to use Irish in their personal and professional lives. A school culture in which less formal, 'give-it-a-go' approaches to Irish were facilitated was seen as important.

Though participants could identify positive influences on attitudes towards Irish, they spoke at length on influences that had a negative impact. In general, students were of the

view that the whole approach to Irish at post-primary level was having a severely negative impact on their attitudes towards the language. The emphasis on literature and associated lecture-style, note-taking teaching approaches was seen as putting a “*negative thought in mind straight away*”. Most students indicated that they would like to be able to speak Irish in principle, but that their current school experience was not facilitating this aim. While participants highlighted the potentially positive effect of a good teacher, they also highlighted the inverse, citing examples of teachers who had a poor relationship with students and thus a negative impact on their attitudes towards Irish. Separately, students and teachers identified that the lack of communicative competence of incoming First Year students was adding to the negative attitudes towards Irish in post-primary schools. The influence of negative parental attitudes towards Irish was also noted. Some of these negative influences on attitudes are expanded later in this section.

### Use of Irish

Participants shared examples of activities that had, in their experience, promoted the use of Irish in and out of school. Key among these examples were activities that involved using Irish outside of formal book-based activities. These included outdoor experiences or walks completed through Irish, informal *ciorcail chainte*, learning through games, song and dancing, *Gaeilge24*, quizzes and debates. They also commended teachers who shared Irish media resources (e.g. podcasts) with which students could engage outside of school. In cases where youth clubs were available through Irish, the positive effect of using Irish in various activities such as pilates, yoga, tennis and athletics was commended. Participants also noted the value of activities completed during *Seachtain na Gaeilge* (e.g. treasure hunts), with parents highlighting the potential for these activities to demonstrate their children’s achievements. The fact that *all* children could and should participate in *SnaG* was noted. Participants commented on the value of whole-school approaches to promote the use of Irish, including incentives (e.g. competitions for who could speak the most Irish; *Gaeilge 24*). The potential for the *Gaelbhratach* scheme to promote student-led initiatives in Irish was welcomed, with participants noting the value of making Irish more visible in the school (e.g. signage, Irish announcements on the intercom). As noted in other strands of this consultation, the potentially transformative impact of attending the *Gaeltacht* was a regular source of conversation during the day. Students noted the impact this had on their ability to use Irish as a means of communication in a fun, social and relaxed environment. Parents and teachers also cited examples of how Irish had come alive for the first time during *Gaeltacht* visits. In

sum, use of Irish was promoted when it was associated with oral communication in meaningful, real-life contexts, rather than in more formal classroom settings.

A fear of making mistakes was identified as a key obstacle to student use of Irish inside and outside the classroom. This was linked with a perceived lack of communicative competence (*“people are afraid to speak Irish in a classroom because they are not confident in their ability”*) but also a sense that the examination system penalised grammatical errors. Some teachers noted that as children reach upper primary school and progress to post-primary school, they become more self-conscious and thus more reluctant to engage in spoken communication in Irish. Limited opportunities for using Irish outside school were also noted, with students indicating they were very unlikely to use Irish at home. Adult participants indicated that because students were not hearing Irish in use outside school, this was having a negative impact on their motivation to learn. Though the potential of Gaeltacht experiences was praised, participants also highlighted the financial obstacle facing many parents in sending their children. Teachers identified a lack of funding for extracurricular activities that could promote Irish use in school.

## Teaching, learning and assessment

### Positive aspects

One of the day’s activities asked participants to reflect on and share positive experiences with Irish. Commonalities across these stories were shared at discussion tables and with the full plenary group, with a view to identifying what supportive practice has looked like and could like. The ‘essence’ of these experiences included:

- Cumarsáid, interactive, fun, nádúrtha
- Craic, spraoi, spreagadh, duaiseanna
- Social engagement, enjoyment
- Community, hope, support, proactive, acknowledgement
- Spraoi, support, laethanta saoire, outside classroom, community/togetherness, speaking the language
- Fun, interactive, less focus on writing/more practical
- Motivation, fun, pride, powerful
- Cómhrá, pobal, relevance, nasc
- Individual learning, community, opportunities for natural social interaction

- Gaeltacht, Gaelscoileanna, an Ghaeilge sa ghnáthshaol, is leatsa an teanga, lasmuigh den seomra ranga, eispéaraí - múinteoir le grá don teanga



Drawn together, these characteristics suggest that the teaching of Irish is more likely to be successful when it involves engaging, immersive, and community-driven experiences. In the view of participants, these experiences should focus on fostering confidence, enjoyment, and natural interaction, while emphasising practical use, cultural connection, and meaningful support beyond the classroom.

The previous section reported on a range of activities *outside* the Irish lesson that were viewed as supportive of teaching and learning in Irish. All participants emphasised that pedagogy focused on active learning and interaction through Irish was the most likely to be successful. This extended to game-based activities that included a level of competition amongst students. They highlighted the particular potential of learning Irish *through* other experiences, such as projects and debates or sports and music activities. Some participants identified that the Transition Year programme holds particular potential for developing experiential, modular based learning that is not geared towards exam preparation (though some also indicated that TY was used to prepare for the Leaving Certificate; based on student reports, it varied depending on the school).

## Challenging Aspects

### Literature

Most participants were of the view that the Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate specifications/syllabi place an excessive emphasis on literature, to the detriment of spoken language and communication skills. Many students were of the view that they had “*No business doing a novel at Junior Cycle or Leaving Certificate*”, stating that this should be reserved for English, i.e. the first language of instruction in the school. They were of the opinion that some 15-year-olds would find it challenging to analyse literature in their first language, let alone in their second or additional language. The focus on literature was such that students felt that a very large proportion of their learning in Junior and Senior Cycle was focused on following a textbook, which they found unengaging. Though some students identified works that they found interesting, others were of the opposite opinion (i.e. some enjoyed *Cúpla*, others did not). Participants expressed the opinion that much of the literature is somewhat miserable/gloomy (i.e. focused on negative accounts and experiences) or outdated, leading to negative associations with Irish. Teachers identified that there was limited flexibility (outside of TY) to focus on spoken Irish, while students indicated that they had limited choice in what they got to read in Irish (in contrast to their experience in some primary schools). Participants were generally of the view that literature should be reduced in focus or indeed removed entirely, via an optional course (See later recommendations), thus allowing more time for a focus on communication. The teaching approaches used to explore literature also received comment, as the next section explores.

### Pedagogy focused on note-taking, rote-learning and exam preparation

The focus on literature was tied with students’ experiences of rote learning. Student participants reported that a significant portion of their time learning Irish was spent on listening to their teacher translate from Irish to English, writing down notes, learning them off and “*throwing it back for an exam*”. This was, unsurprisingly, noted as ‘boring’ and ‘pointless’. Students expressed frustration that it led to unrewarding and nonsensical learning experiences: “*I didn’t actually know what I was writing, I’d just learned it off*”. Students indicated that the focus on grammar/language in First Year was replaced with rote-learning of essays on literature from Second Year onwards. They noted that oral presentations for Junior Cycles CBAs tended to be scripted and learned by heart. Though they were supportive of the 40% allocated to the oral in the Leaving Certificate, students indicated that a huge portion of their time was spent on learning off sentences for the Sraith Pictiúr, rather than spending time on

how the language works or independent language use. Their experience was summarised as follows: *"It's not being taught to learn a language, it's being taught to do the test"*

Students pointed out that the assessment (oral/written) should reward communicative language use, rather than learning material by heart and gambling on its appearance in the examination. They were of the view that independent language use was more likely to happen in the Modern Foreign Languages they studied. Both students and teachers acknowledged that this degree of 'learning by heart' was, in their view, necessitated by the volume of material to be covered in the course and a lack of time to do so. In other words, both students and teachers felt that they had to rush from learning about how the language works to learning material by heart. Some students also noted that the 'pay-off' for investing a large degree of time in Irish at Leaving Certificate did not compare favourably with other subjects with less assessment components, particularly in the absence of bonus points (i.e. Irish requires two written papers and an oral; the majority of other subjects do not). There was also a suggestion that rote learning was necessitated by the requirement to study literature that was too difficult for students. Indeed, some students pointed out that they had a poor or limited understanding of the literature they were studying (*"Even when you are learning the literature – you don't actually understand what you're doing"*)

### **Lack of focus on oral communication/understanding language**

A result of the focus on literature and exam preparation was that participants felt there was insufficient time available for focusing on oral communication. Some Junior Cycle students indicated that they 'never' speak Irish in class, which was linked with the lack of an oral examination. Consequently, participants were largely of the view that an oral examination should be introduced as part of the Junior Cycle, though it was noted that it would need to test skills properly and avoid the potential for rote learning. As reported previously, participants also expressed frustration with the level of rote learning associated with the Sraith Pictiúr. In a similar vein, and related to the previous section, some were of the view that students with better facility for rote learning were advantaged by the current system, while those with better communicative competence but less facility for rote learning were disadvantaged.

Students regularly expressed the view that the focus of learning in MFL was more appropriate and that this should be adopted for Irish also. They indicated that they were more confident in speaking languages like French and German than Irish, despite the more limited time they had spent on these languages.

## Inclusion

Though participants were of the view that every effort should be made to include all learners in Irish, challenges were encountered in doing so. Some participants were of the view that there was a lack of expertise in post-primary schools to ensure that students with dyslexia were properly supported with their literacy needs. In the absence of this support, Irish would, in their view, remain a significant challenge. Others pointed out that there is extremely limited (or indeed no) provision and support for students who were beginning to learn Irish for the first time (e.g. students who have joined the Irish school system at the age of 12/13). This meant that they were more likely to seek an exemption. While some parents were positive about exemptions, stating that they reduced stress for their dyslexic children, others expressed the view that being exempted from Irish limited opportunities for students later on. Some post-primary teachers indicated that their incoming First Years had often been withdrawn from Irish lessons during primary school in order to attend Learning Support, leading to gaps in their Irish learning and consequent challenges at post-primary level.

More generally, students expressed the view that they needed further support to ensure that they *understood* the language. They pointed out that there was often a mismatch between the content of lessons and their own level of language competence. They expressed frustration with the idea that there is a strong foundation in Irish from primary school, when in their view, this was a misconception.

## Varying levels of competence on entry to post-primary school

A recurrent theme in contributions from all participants was a sense of dissatisfaction with the varying levels of Irish achieved by students at the end of primary school. Some compared this to a 'lottery'. This 'lottery' existed between schools, but also within them, as the quality of Irish teaching varied depending on the teacher in different class levels. Some expressed the view that there was significant variation in primary school teachers' confidence and competence in Irish, with a knock-on effect for children. Some students pointed out that their poor competence in Irish dated to primary school (*"We would read from a book in sixth class but not a single person knew how to speak it."*) Other students expressed a level of disbelief about the poor progress in Irish learning: *"It's actually impressive how little Irish I had leaving primary school. I left after eight years not knowing anything about it."* Participants were generally of the view that some students were at a relative advantage/disadvantage on entry to post-primary school, and that this followed through their time in Junior/Senior Cycle. Students who had attended Gaelscoileanna were seen to be at a particular advantage, particularly when it came to communicative proficiency.



## Recommendations

### More of/Less of

Many of the key recommendations from groups were captured in a 'more of... less of...' activity in which they summarised key recommendations to provide a 'way forward'. The statements recorded at each table included:

More of	Less of
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time</li> <li>• Choice/freedom (within Irish learning activities)</li> <li>• Budget - resources, trips</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assumption that all students (are) at the same level</li> <li>• Less emphasis on rote learning</li> <li>• Less course content</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engaging activities</li> <li>• Focus on oral work</li> <li>• Emphasis on actual understanding of the language</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on written texts and learning off</li> <li>• Material on syllabus</li> <li>• Assumptions on level of Irish on students</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grammar</li> <li>• Spoken Irish/Social use</li> <li>• Standardisation in primary schools</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Litríocht</li> <li>• Focus on exams</li> <li>• Assumptions on ability</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gaeilge labhartha across the school community</li> <li>• Visible Irish in signage etc.</li> <li>• Deiseanna for parents to experience Irish in a positive way &gt; Club na nÓg &gt; Gaeilge 24</li> <li>• More learning it as a language</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negativity</li> <li>• Rote learning</li> <li>• Literature!</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interactive</li> <li>• Like a second language</li> <li>• Speaking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Textbooks</li> <li>• Repetitive/revision</li> <li>• Pressure</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gaeilge shóisialta</li> <li>• Engaging texts</li> <li>• Learning by doing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foghlaim de ghlanmheabhair</li> <li>• Content to learn</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Speaking Irish</li> <li>• Basic vocabulary</li> <li>• Relevance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Athrá (repetition)</li> <li>• Literature and writing</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fun</li> <li>• Balance between exam prep and enjoyment</li> <li>• Communication for a purpose</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear of making mistakes</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spontaneity!</li> <li>• Activities (gníomhaíochtaí) - cluichí agus spóirt; roghanna nua-aimseartha (scannáin/cláracha spóirt/ceol)</li> <li>• Múinteoirí Gaeilge áirithe i mbunscoileanna chun Gaeilge na ndaltaí a fheabhsú go nádúrtha</li> <li>• Modúil a chur ar fáil do dhaltaí dara leibhéal</li> <li>• Comhrá v litríocht</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Téacsleabhair</li> <li>• Foghlaim de ghlanmheabhair</li> <li>• Struchtúr</li> <li>• Pian agus brú</li> <li>• Scríbhneoireacht</li> <li>• Prós agus dánta agus drámaí</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Links between primary and secondary (school)</li> <li>• Fun/spraoi</li> <li>• Relevance - communication</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Literature</li> <li>• Writing (more speaking)</li> <li>• Learning off (rote) i.e. sraith (pictiúr)</li> </ul>

The following recommendations draw on the broader discussion and data from the data, including the 'more of/less of' activity.

### ***Provide a clear and communicable vision for Irish***

Teachers, in particular, expressed the need for a joined-up vision for Irish from the Department of Education and Youth that also attends to broader language education policy (i.e. Modern Foreign Languages). Some suggested that greater alignment with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages would assist this endeavour. There were also calls for awareness raising campaigns around the benefits of Irish.

## Using Irish Outside School

### ***Provide further opportunities for engaging with Irish outside Irish class***

Many recommendations focused on providing further opportunities throughout and beyond the school day. These included establishing 'pop-up' Gaeltachtaí on school grounds (e.g. at lunchtime) to bring the Gaeltacht experience into schools; arranging contact (e.g. Facetime calls) with students in the Gaeltacht; arranging swaps between Gaeltacht students and those in English-medium schools. The importance of having Irish visible in school was noted (bilingual signage, announcements).

### ***Make links with the community***

It was recommended that people in the local community who speak Irish should be brought into the school to speak to students, including those who have used Irish in their professional careers (e.g. podcast/radio hosts) and those who could carry out activities with students through Irish. It was further recommended that students should be facilitated to leave school and use Irish in the local community (e.g. in shops). Sponsorship from local businesses was recommended. These connections would, in the view of participants, help students to see Irish as a living language. Competitions between schools were also noted as potential avenues for exploration, including connections between T1 and T2 schools.

### ***Provide greater support for and communication with parents***

It was highlighted that further communication with parents is needed to counteract potential negative attitudes towards Irish in the homeplace. It was suggested that Parents' Associations could issue invites to parents to partake in school-based activities through Irish.

### ***Provide resources to facilitate trips to the Gaeltacht***

Participants stated that further scholarships should be provided for attending the Gaeltacht, and that the way in which such scholarships are managed should be given careful thought to ensure that those who are most deserving are aware of them.

## Using Irish Throughout the School

### ***Establish informal opportunities for students to use Irish***

Suggestions for activities that could be run in post-primary schools (outside of the Irish class) included ciorcail chomhrá, sports/extracurricular activities through Irish (e.g. ice skating, cooking, podcasts), Club bricfeasta trí Ghaeilge. This was sometimes linked with the need for a points or reward system to encourage the informal use of Irish throughout the school building and day. Further opportunities for extending the Gaelbhratach programme were

recommended. The potential for TY to facilitate programmes/modules on experiential approaches to Irish was noted. Teachers advised that funding was needed to facilitate such activities.

### ***Provide funding for Irish Club/Club na n-Óg***

It was recommended that further funding would be made available to run after-school and summer clubs through Irish. Such funding could be used to facilitate enjoyable experiences such as end-of-year trips or excursions.

### **Practice within Irish lessons**

#### ***Ensure Irish is taught using active approaches***

Students emphasised the need to move away from more traditional approaches to those that involve further engagement and interaction. They recommended less use of textbooks and further emphasis on peer/group-based learning, discussion, music, technology use. They also recommended the use of game-based learning, with an element of competition.

#### ***Teach how the language works/language awareness***

Given the high level of frustration with their own lack of understanding, students recommended that they needed to be taught Irish grammar in an engaging way. This extended to teaching about the code in Irish, i.e. phonics/phonology.

#### ***Ensure Irish lessons are inclusive***

The needs of students who encounter literacy difficulties (e.g. dyslexia) require further thought in the context of the practices reported here and the emphasis on reading/writing in State Examinations. More broadly, students urged that the teaching of Irish should be more mindful of the varying levels of Irish proficiency present in a given classroom.

#### ***Explore options to include all learners***

Current arrangements for learning support in post-primary schools mean that some students cannot avail of both additional support and Irish. Some students who previously undertook foundation level Irish were seen to be inadequately included in the new arrangements. There is a need for guidance on including all learners in a differentiated manner. Particular thought needs to be given to how newcomer students are supported with (rather than exempted from) Irish.

### ***Provide guidance on teaching through Irish***

Some students expressed the view that they benefitted from immersion in Irish classes, i.e. where their teacher taught entirely through Irish. Other students were less certain about the value of this approach. Guidance on how best to teach through the target language (in this case, Irish) should be made available.

### ***Ensure an open attitude to trying and making mistakes***

Participants indicated the need to underscore the importance of a 'give-it-a-go' attitude that is necessary when learning any language. Students expressed a preference for less attention to be given to the correction of grammar in the context of state examinations.

## **Curriculum**

### ***Reduce, remove or re-orient the focus on literature***

Some recommended that literature be removed entirely from the Junior/Senior Cycle specifications/syllabi. Others recommended that more relevant literature should be included (e.g. contemporary movies such as Kneecap), while others recommended an overhaul of how literature is taught and examined (e.g. bringing literature into oral rather than written examinations). On the whole, there was a general agreement that the current volume of literature needed to be reduced. Echoing other strands of the consultation, some recommended that Irish at post-primary level should consist of two courses; a mandatory course focused on communication and an optional one focused on literature.

### ***Ensure that the content of the JC/LC course (and Irish lessons) are relevant to young peoples' lives***

It was recommended that the focus of Irish courses at post-primary should be revised to ensure that they are relevant to young peoples' lives. This included recommendations that influencers (e.g. on Tiktok/social media) and contemporary artists (e.g. Kneecap) would play a more prominent role.

### ***Afford choice to students***

Some expressed the need to provide further choice to students in what they choose to study within the Irish course at Junior/Senior cycle level. Further flexibility in the curriculum was recommended. Funding was also sought for purchasing a variety of texts in Irish for school libraries.

## Focus on oral communication

### ***Ensure informal, spoken, conversational Irish is prioritised***

It was recommended consistently that the focus of Irish for the majority of students should be on developing communication skills, with a particular emphasis on oral language. They recommended that conversation in Irish should be a regular feature of Irish classes.

### ***Revise arrangements for oral examinations***

A key action to support oral communication would involve establishing a formal oral examination at Junior Cycle level. Participants also recommended revising or removing the Sraith Pictiúr at Leaving Certificate level.

## Changes to Assessment Arrangements

### ***Revisit arrangements for CBAs in Irish***

There was a general view that CBAs are not valued and were in many cases, facilitating rote learning in the context of Irish at Junior Cycle. It was recommended that the current reporting arrangements be revisited and that consideration be given to a formal oral examination in their place.

### ***Consider bonus points for Irish***

Some participants were of the view that bonus points would incentivise students to commit to the learning of Irish, but this should take place in the context of a course that does not facilitate rote learning.

## Other

Though it was beyond the scope of the current consultation, a small number of participants raised the issue of whether Irish should be compulsory through to Leaving Certificate. A small number of participants also highlighted that the potential of specialist teachers of Irish at primary level should be considered, though this was not a widespread recommendation.

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# Appendix A: Focus group schedules

## Primary school children

### Icebreakers

- Name, class?
- One interesting thing about yourself?
- One word that you think of when you hear the word Irish (language).

### Experience of learning Irish in class

- What is your favourite thing about learning Irish?
- Tell me about something you did in Irish class that you liked (even when you were in the younger classes)?
- Is there anything that makes learning Irish hard?
- Who helps you when you find something difficult in Irish lessons? How?
- Do you use computers in Irish lessons? How? Tell me about it.

### Actions to improve your learning in Irish

- Is there anything you would change about learning Irish at school?
- What would make the learning of Irish better for you?
- Is there anything good that happens when you are learning another subject that you think should happen in Irish class?

### Using Irish

- Do you use Irish in the classroom? When?
- Do you use Irish outside the classroom at school (e.g. extra-curricular activities; clubs)?
- What stops you from using Irish?
- Do you use Irish outside school (e.g. clubs; activities; Gaeltacht etc.?)
- What would help you to use Irish?
- If you were the Minister for Education, what would you do to make learning Irish better?

### Attitudes to / views about Irish

- Do you think Irish is important? Why/why not?
- Do you think it is important to be able to speak Irish? Why/Why not?
- Do you like learning Irish?
  - Tell me more about **why you like** learning Irish?
  - Tell me more about **why you don't like** learning Irish?

### Other

- Would you like to say anything else?



- Have you any questions?

## Post-primary students

### Icebreakers

- Name, class.
- One interesting thing about yourself.
- One word that you think of when you hear the word Irish (language).

### Attitudes to/views about Irish

- Do you think Irish is important? Why/why not?
- Do you think it is important to be able to speak Irish? Why / Why not?
- Do you like learning Irish?
  - Tell me more about **why you like** learning Irish?
  - Tell me more about **why you don't like** learning Irish?

### Experience of learning Irish in class

- What is your favourite thing about learning Irish?
- Tell me about something you did in Irish class that you liked (even when you were in primary school if now in JC/junior cycle classes if in SC)?
- Is there anything that makes learning Irish hard?
- Who helps you when you find something difficult in Irish lessons? How?
- What's different between learning Irish in primary school and secondary school/between junior and senior cycle?
- Do you use computers/digital technology in Irish lessons? How? Tell me about it.

### Actions to improve learning

- Is there anything you would change about learning Irish at school?
- What would make the learning of Irish better for you?
- Is there anything good that happens when you are learning another subject that you think should happen in Irish class?

### Using Irish

- Do you use Irish outside the classroom at school (e.g. extra-curricular activities; clubs)?
- What stops you from using Irish?
- Do you use Irish outside school (e.g. clubs; activities; Gaeltacht etc.)?
- What would help you to use Irish?
- If you were the Minister for Education, what would you do to make learning Irish better?

### Other

- Would like to say anything else?
- Have you any questions?

## Primary/Post-primary principals

### Vision/expectations

- What is your vision/expectations for Irish in your school?
  - Overall?
  - Fostering positive attitudes? Pupils/students, teachers, parents
  - Use of Irish? Pupils/students, teachers, parents

### Working well

- As the principal of the school, what is working well in your school? Why is that working well? Please give examples.
  - Overall?
  - Fostering positive attitudes - Pupils/students, teachers, parents
  - Use of Irish? Pupils/students, teachers, parents

### Challenges

- What are the biggest challenges facing your school in terms of Irish?
  - Overall? (Teacher supply, teacher competence/confidence, attitudes, resources, etc.)
  - Attitudes? Pupils/students, teachers, parents
  - Use of Irish? Pupils/students, teachers, parents

### Supporting Irish

- What are you doing (are you doing anything) in your school to overcome these challenges?
  - Do you see progress/are any of these working?
  - What else can be done to support you and other schools with overcoming these challenges/improving the teaching and learning of Irish?
  - Is there one key thing that we do as an education system to improve Irish?

### Other

- Is there anything else you would like to mention?
- Have you any questions?

## Primary/Post-primary parents

### Icebreakers

- Name/children in this school and what year groups?
- Did your child start learning Irish in infants or later on?
- Anything they said they really enjoyed doing in Irish lessons/outside the classroom?

### Attitudes to/views about Irish

- Do you think that it is important that your child(ren) learns Irish? Why? Why not?
- Do you think it is important that your child can speak Irish fluently? Why? Why not?
- What do you want your child to get out of learning Irish?
- How does your child feel about learning Irish? Like it? Difficult?
- What could be done so that your child/children would like Irish?

### Child's experience of learning Irish

- What does your child/children like best/least about learning Irish?
- What things make a difference? Is there a difference between learning Irish and other subjects?
- Is there a difference in learning Irish in primary, JC, TY and SC?
- Has your child ever been excited about something related to learning Irish? Tell me about it.
- What could be done to help make your child's/children's learning of Irish better? (digital technologies, teaching methods, extra-curricular, opportunities to use)

### Using Irish

- When does your child get a chance to hear (and see) Irish? TG4 etc.
- Do they ever get a chance to use/speak outside school? When? Where?
- Is your child willing to use/speak Irish?
- What stops your child from speaking/using Irish?
- Are there opportunities for your child to use outside the Irish lesson? (Clubs, Gaeltacht, extra-curricular, family members)
- Any ideas on what could be done to help your child to use/speak Irish?

### Support for parents

- Do you help your child with their Irish? (Homework, speaking at home, additional help etc.)
- If yes, what helps you to do this?
- What would support you in helping your child(ren)?
- Any other ideas?

### Other

- Is there anything that we didn't discuss that you would like to say. Any questions?

## Primary/Post-primary teachers

### Icebreaker

- Your name, school and one good thing that has happened you this week?

### Attitudes of teachers

- Do you like/enjoy teaching Irish? Why/why not? (What leads you to say that?)
- What gives you satisfaction from teaching Irish? What doesn't?
- What supports would you need so that you get (more) satisfaction from teaching Irish?
- What sustains your own interest in the language?

### Attitudes of pupils and students

- How do the pupils/students in your class(es) feel about Irish?
- What works well in your class(es) in terms of making the pupils/students positive about Irish?
- Where are the challenges in your class(es) in fostering positive attitudes among your pupils/students?
- What have you tried to overcome these challenges? Has anything been successful?
- Any initiatives happening in the school?
- Any ideas of what supports would be needed to help promote/foster positive attitudes amongst the pupils/teachers?

### Teaching and learning of Irish

- What do you want for your pupils/students when it comes to learning Irish?
- What approaches work best for the pupils/students? Explain.
- What prevents successful learning of Irish? Tell me more.
- What approaches do you find work best? What has not worked?
- Have you tried something that worked well with one group but not another? Why was this the case?

### Use of Irish (pupils/students)

- Could you tell me about the opportunities pupils/students have to use Irish during lessons?
  - How do you get students to use Irish during lessons?
- Do students have opportunities to use Irish outside of Irish lessons in the school?
  - How do you get them to use Irish outside lessons?
- Do students have opportunities to use Irish outside of school?

### Use of Irish (teachers)

- Do you have opportunities to use Irish at school?
- What supports you in using Irish at school?
- Do you have opportunities to use Irish outside school in your personal life?
  - What allows you to maintain your Irish?

### Supports for teachers

- What would help you to maintain/improve your own Irish?
- Is there anything that you have experienced that you found most helpful in teaching Irish to your class(es)?
- How can you be further supported in teaching Irish?

## Primary/Post-primary student teachers

### Icebreaker

Facilitator: My role today is to gather views about Irish and how we can better support the teaching and learning of Irish.

- Your name, county you are living in
- College you are attending and course you are completing
- One good thing that has happened to you this week as part of your course or school placement?

### Attitudes of student teachers

- Have you been enjoying teaching Irish so far? Why/why not?
- What has given/gives you satisfaction from teaching Irish? What doesn't?
- What supports would you need so that you get (more) satisfaction from teaching Irish?

### Teaching and learning of Irish

- What do you want for your pupils/students when it comes to **learning** Irish?
  - During your school placement, what approaches worked best for the pupils'/students' learning of Irish?
    - Making pupils/students positive about Irish?
    - Getting them to use Irish during the lessons?
  - What were the challenges? What did not work?
    - Making students positive about Irish?
    - Getting them to use Irish during the lessons?
- How did you overcome the challenges?
- How do/have you differentiate(d) your teaching to suit the needs of pupils/students during Irish lessons? (inclusive pedagogies)
  - Did what you learned at college align with/deviate from your school placement experience in terms of the teaching of Irish?

### Supports for student teachers

- Did you feel prepared for teaching Irish during your school placements? Explain
- Do you feel prepared to teach Irish? Explain
- Is there any support that you found most helpful in teaching Irish to your class(es)?
- What other supports do you think you would need in your teaching of Irish?

### Use of Irish (student teachers)

- Do you have opportunities to use Irish at school/college/personal life/Irish language settings (ceannaire or other)?
- What supports you in using Irish at school/college/personal life?
- What inhibits you from using Irish at school/college/personal life?
- What would help you to maintain/improve your own Irish?

### Other

- Is there anything else you would like to mention?
- Have you any questions?



