



An Roinn Oideachais
agus Óige
Department of
Education and Youth

Inspectorate Report (2024) and Thematic Review





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Foreword



Welcome.

This *Inspectorate Report (2024) and Thematic Review* provides details of the inspection programme carried out by the Department of

Education and Youth Inspectorate in the period January 2024 – December 2024. It presents summary analyses of inspection findings from early learning and care (ELC) settings, primary schools, special schools and post-primary schools. It also presents thematic reflections on aspects of education provision in Ireland today, drawing on the research, inspections and advisory engagements carried out by inspectors during 2024 and the first half of 2025.

This is the Inspectorate's first annual report. Previously, the Inspectorate published reports that covered longer periods, the most recent being the *Inspectorate Report (2021–2023) and Thematic Review* which was published in December 2024. It is intended to publish an annual report from now on.

2024 was a year in which curriculum redevelopment and enactment continued. Special class and special school provision grew and there was an ongoing focus on preventing and addressing bullying behaviour in schools.

As with the 2021–2023 period, there are many positive findings to report about the quality of education provision in Ireland during 2024. These are set out in this report. During 2024, inspectors observed, at first hand, many children and young people actively engaging in a range of appropriate learning activities. They also witnessed the dedication and professionalism of teachers, educators, principals, setting leaders, management teams, special needs assistants, and support staff – all

of whom play a vital role in supporting children and young people to achieve their full potential.

There are also some important areas where improvement and development are required. The advice and recommendations provided in individual inspection reports are intended to foster ongoing improvement at the level of the individual school or setting. Collation and analysis of inspection findings around particular themes, such as curriculum enactment, inclusion and perspectives on bullying behaviour, also provide some system-level direction as to how education provision can be improved.

Insights from inspections are relevant to individual schools, settings, centres for education, teachers, principals and other setting leaders and boards of management. They also have relevance for curriculum makers, teacher educators, student teachers, professional support services, management organisations, parents' councils at local and national levels, education support centres, administrators, and policy makers. It is hoped that this report and thematic review will help all of these groups as they continue to support and improve the learning, wellbeing and inclusion of children and young people, so that they continue to grow and flourish.

In conclusion, I would like to acknowledge the remarkable children and young people we, as inspectors, meet in our day-to-day work in schools and settings. Their insights, creativity and ideas are vital to the inspection process and, ultimately, to improving schools and educational environments. The contributions of children and young people consistently inspire and energise the work we do.

Yvonne Keating
Chief Inspector

October 2025

Acknowledgements

The Department of Education and Youth *Inspectorate Report (2024) and Thematic Review* draws on the evaluation and advisory work carried out by inspectors in 2024. The contributions of all inspectors are recognised. The 2024 work programme would not have been possible without the valuable support of the administrative staff who work closely with the Inspectorate, as well as the assistance provided by officials in various policy and administrative divisions across the department.



Chapter 1

The Inspectorate and inspection
January – December 2024



Introduction

The Inspectorate is a division of the Department of Education and Youth. Its duties are outlined in the Education Act 1998, which sets out evaluative, advisory, research and capacity-building functions.¹

The Inspectorate operates with statutory independence in inspecting schools and other education settings. Its overarching mission is to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of the Irish education system experienced by children and young people. One of its central functions is to provide advice to the Minister on any matter relating to education policy and provision, including curriculum, assessment and teaching methods. It has statutory responsibility to evaluate the teaching, development, promotion and use of Irish in schools and centres for education and to report to the Minister on those matters. The inclusion, wellbeing and safeguarding of children and young people are core purposes in the Inspectorate's work.

The Inspectorate inspects in a range of educational settings. These include state-funded early learning and care (ELC) settings, recognised primary and post-primary schools, special schools, centres delivering the Youthreach Programme, agricultural colleges, Irish-language colleges, prisons, and other educational settings. Through the evidence gathered during inspection visits, the Inspectorate evaluates and reports on the quality of education provision to promote improved learning outcomes and experiences for all children and young people.

Inspection activities

The Inspectorate uses a range of inspection types to evaluate the quality of education provision and how wellbeing, equity and inclusion are promoted. At the end of each evaluation, inspectors provide feedback to the school or setting inspected. The purpose of this feedback is to affirm positive aspects of practice and to advise on any improvements needed. Written inspection reports, setting out the inspection findings and recommendations, are provided to the individual school or setting and are published on the Department's website.

In addition, the Inspectorate collates and analyses the findings of inspections with reference to particular themes and publishes these in the form of thematic reports. The purpose of thematic reports is to provide the Minister and stakeholders across the education system, including initial teacher education providers, with up-to-date information on, and insights into, education quality and performance. During 2024, eleven thematic reports were published by the Inspectorate.

Inspection context

The data presented in this section covers the period 01 January to 31 December 2024. During 2024, inspections took place in a context in which there continued to be significant growth in provision for children and young people with special educational needs. In 2024, 408 new special classes were sanctioned and four new special schools were opened.

Curriculum redevelopment also continued. The updated *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework and Guidance for Good Practice*² was launched on 5 December 2024. The redevelopment of the primary curriculum continued with the rollout of the new *Primary*

1 Available at: <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1998/act/51/section/13>

2 Available at: <https://www.curriculumonline.ie/early-childhood/aistear-2024/>

Mathematics Curriculum in 2024, following its publication in September 2023.

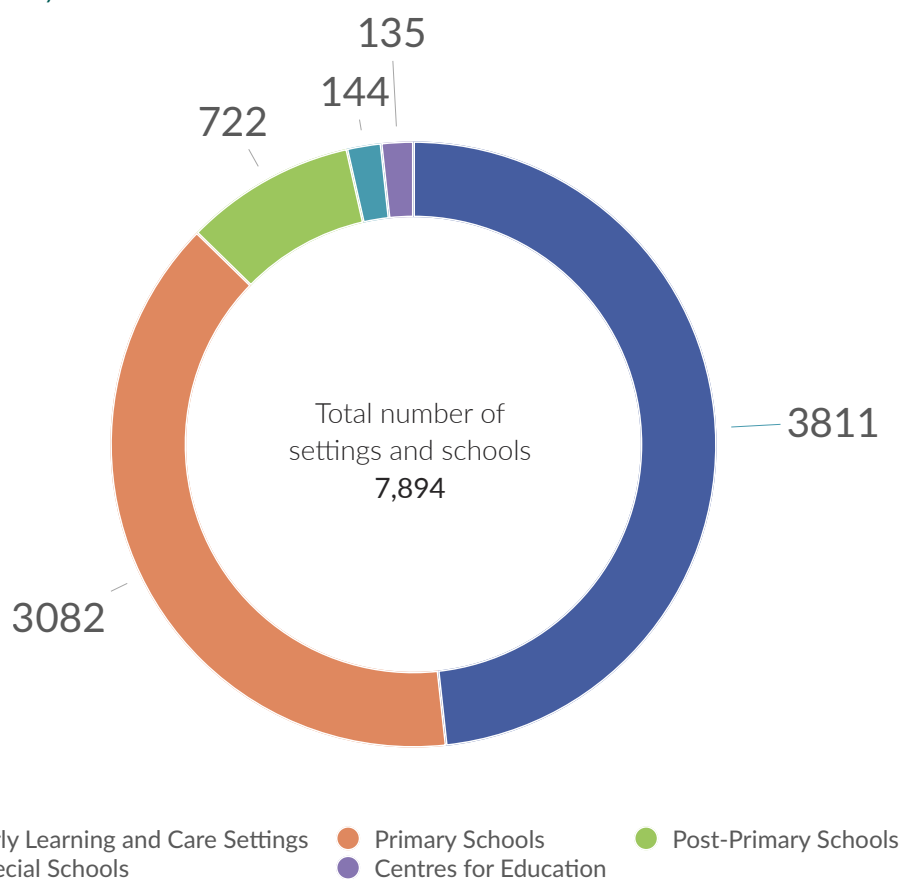
Senior Cycle redevelopment continued in 2024, with ongoing work on new and revised subjects, professional learning for teachers and the development of Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes. A new Transition Year Programme Statement³ was introduced. Nine leaving certificate subject specifications, including two new subjects, were published in 2024.

In June 2024, the department published the *Bí Cineálta Procedures to Prevent and Address Bullying Behaviour for Primary and Post-Primary Schools*.⁴

Inspection focus 2024

During 2024, inspections continued to focus on teaching, learning, leadership and management across a broad sample of schools and settings. In addition, new inspection approaches were developed with a particular focus on inclusion and access to education. The programme of full day-care evaluations in early learning and care settings was extended. A review of inspection approaches also began and is continuing during 2025. The aim of this review is to bolster the agility and effectiveness of inspection approaches in supporting improvement in education provision for all.

Figure 1: The number of schools, early learning and care settings, and centres for education at the end of 2024 where inspection may be undertaken



3 Available at: <https://www.curriculumonline.ie/senior-cycle/transition-year/>

4 Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/policy-information/b%C3%AD-cine%C3%A1lta-procedures-to-prevent-and-address-bullying-behaviour-for-primary-and-post-primary-schools/>

Counts of inspections

Table 1: Summary of Inspectorate activities 2024

Summary of inspections	2024
Inspections of early learning and care in state-funded settings	546
Inspections of primary and special schools	907
Inspections of post-primary schools	715
School self-evaluation advisory visits	246
Inspections of centres for education	13
Other inspections, advisory visits and evaluation activities	568
Total inspections/advisory visits to early learning and care settings, schools, centres for education and other educational settings	2,995

Table 2: Inspections of early learning and care in state-funded settings

Early years education inspections	2024
Early years education inspection	476
Early years education inspection: Follow-through	70
Total early years education inspections	546

Table 3: Inspections of primary and special schools

Primary and special school inspections	2024
Actions following final child protection and safeguarding inspection (CPSI) ⁵	1
Boarding facility child protection check	1
Child protection and safeguarding inspection: Final	13
Child protection and safeguarding inspection: Initial	11
Curriculum evaluation	388
Evaluation for recognition as a Gaeltacht school (primary)	17
Evaluation of provision for pupils with special educational needs	26
Follow-through inspection	23
Home-school-community liaison (HSCL) inspection	15
Incidental inspection	204
Inclusion and access focused inspection	108
Level two learning programme inspection	3
Pilot evaluation	7
Whole-school evaluation – management, leadership and learning	90
Total primary and special school inspections	907

5 This is a follow-up inspection conducted to verify compliance in areas identified as non-compliant in a final published CPSI report

Table 4: Inspections of post-primary schools

Post-primary school inspections	2024
Actions following final CPSI	3
Boarding facility child protection check	14
Child protection and safeguarding inspection: Final	12
Child protection and safeguarding inspection: Initial	11
Child protection and safeguarding inspection – boarding facility: Final	2
Child protection and safeguarding inspection – boarding facility: Initial	3
Evaluation for recognition as a Gaeltacht school (post primary)	16
Evaluation of provision for students with special educational needs	14
Follow-through inspection	17
Home-school-community liaison (HSCL) inspection	15
Incidental inspection	149
Inclusion and access focused inspection	72
Level two learning programme inspection	28
Pilot evaluation	10
Programme evaluation	18
Subject inspection	289
Whole-school evaluation – management, leadership and learning	42
Total post-primary school inspections	715

Table 5: School self-evaluation advisory visits

School self-evaluation visits	2024
School self-evaluation advisory visits to primary schools	178
School self-evaluation advisory visits to post-primary schools	68
Total self-evaluation advisory visits	246

Table 6: Inspection of centres for education

Inspection of centres for education	2024
Evaluation of centres for education	12
Follow-through inspection	1
Total centre for education inspections	13



Table 7: Other inspections and advisory visits

Other inspections and advisory visits	2024
Evaluation of summer continuing professional development courses for primary teachers	52
Inspection of Coláistí Gaeilge (Irish colleges)	25
Inspection in European schools	5
Inspection of settings other than recognised schools	2
Inspection of DEIS literacy and numeracy camps for children (English and Irish-medium)	42
Summer inclusion programme inspection	151
International tests	50
School excellence fund – advisory visits to schools	9
SEN-focused incidental inspection (primary)	26
SEN-focused incidental inspection (post primary)	14
Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme – advisory visits to schools	2
Section 29 appeals (primary)	76
Section 29 appeals (post primary)	114
Total other inspections and advisory visits	568

Table 8: Publication of inspection reports⁶

Publication of inspection reports	2024
Child protection and safeguarding inspection: Final (primary and post primary)	8
Child protection and safeguarding inspection: Initial (primary and post primary)	17
Child protection and safeguarding inspection – boarding facility: Final (primary and post primary)	2
Child protection and safeguarding inspection – boarding facility: Initial (primary and post primary)	2
Curriculum evaluation (primary)	386
Early years education inspection (early years)	380
Early years education inspection – Follow-through (early years)	55
Evaluation of centres for education	10
Evaluation of provision for pupils with special educational needs (primary)	21
Evaluation of provision for students with special educational needs (post primary)	11
Follow-through inspection (primary and post primary)	11
Programme evaluation (post primary)	9
Subject inspection (post primary)	196
Inspection of settings other than recognised schools	2
Whole-school evaluation – management, leadership and learning (primary)	61
Whole-school evaluation – management, leadership and learning (post primary)	27
Total inspection reports published	1,198

⁶ This table includes details of reports published in the period from January 2024 – December 2024

Chapter 2

Early years insights



Introduction

The landscape of early learning and care (ELC) provision in Ireland continued to evolve during 2024. A key development was the update of *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*,¹ which provides guidance on supporting children's learning and development from birth to six years.

Aistear was the first curriculum framework for early learning and care in Ireland, published by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in 2009. *Aistear* was updated in 2024 to acknowledge and incorporate the significant societal, policy and educational developments that have occurred since the original version was published. The update also reflects the substantial body of educational research that has emerged since the late 2000s about how babies, toddlers and young children learn and develop and how educators can enrich and encourage this appropriately.

The updated framework strengthens the focus on children's rights, slow relational pedagogy, diversity and inclusion, outdoor learning, wellbeing and sustainability. Greater emphasis is placed on experiences that support children's creativity and their engagement with the arts, emergent literacy and numeracy, and STEM education. The framework aligns with *First 5*² and the *Primary Curriculum Framework*³ for primary and special schools, launched in 2024. This alignment promotes continuity and progression in children's learning and development.

In addition, in 2024, the then Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth⁴ introduced Equal Start, a new initiative designed to ensure that children experiencing disadvantage can access, participate in and benefit fully from early learning and care.

As highlighted in *First 5 Annual Implementation Report for 2024*,⁵ other key developments in the ELC sector during 2024 included:

- a 24% increase for early learning and care and school-age children in Budget 2025, bringing funding up by €266 million to over €1.3 billion
- the extension of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) outside time spent in the ECCE universal two-year, pre-school programme for children enrolled in the programme
- the allocation of €1.3 million to services under the Building Blocks Expansion Scheme for services to undertake renovations or to upgrade existing space to cater for more children
- the introduction of childminder-specific regulations to facilitate childminders to register with Tusla and to take part in the National Childcare Scheme.



1 Available at: <https://www.curriculumonline.ie/early-childhood/aistear-2024/>

2 Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-children-disability-and-equality/campaigns/first-5/?referer=https://first5.gov.ie/>

3 Available at: <https://curriculumonline.ie/primary/>

4 Now the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (DCDE)

5 Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/95557-Department_of_Children-First_5_Annual_Implementation_Report_2025-v4.pdf

The Tusla Early Years Inspectorate is the statutory regulator of ELC settings. Of the total 4,045 Tusla-registered ELC settings at the end of 2024, 3,877 were funded by the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (DCDE). The Department of Education and Youth (DEY) Inspectorate evaluates the quality of education provision in DCDE-funded ELC settings under a memorandum of understanding between DEY and DCDE. The DEY Inspectorate focuses on the quality of pedagogy, the opportunities for learning, and the educational experiences and achievements of babies, toddlers and young children.⁶

Inspection types

The DEY Inspectorate uses two inspection types to assess the quality of education provision in ELC settings. Typically, the inspections have a short notice period of up to two days. Inspections include oral feedback to the early years educators and the leader and manager of the setting about the strengths in education provision in the setting and, as relevant, aspects of provision that need to be improved. In addition, a written inspection report containing the inspection findings is published on <https://www.gov.ie/en/departments-of-education/education-reports/>

Table 1: Inspection types

Inspection Type	Detail	Notice Given	Outcome
Early years education inspection (EYEI)	Focuses on evaluating early learning pedagogy in a diverse range of ELC settings	Normally, a minimum of two working days in advance of the evaluation	Publication of final report
Follow-through inspections	Assesses the extent to which an ELC setting has implemented recommendations from earlier inspections	Normally, a minimum of two working days in advance of the evaluation	Publication of final report

6 While inspections evaluate the quality of education provision and practice across the diverse settings and contexts that babies, toddlers and young children aged from birth to six attend, this chapter uses the term ‘children’ to support readability

Inspection numbers – January 2024 to December 2024

In 2024, the Inspectorate conducted a total of 476 EYEl in ELC settings. This included 440 EYEl in settings delivering the ECCE⁷ programme and 36 EYEl in full day care ELC settings (which involves inspection of education provision for children aged from birth to six years). 11 of the inspections were in Irish-medium ELC settings, both within and outside the Gaeltacht. A total of 70 follow-through inspections were undertaken during the period.

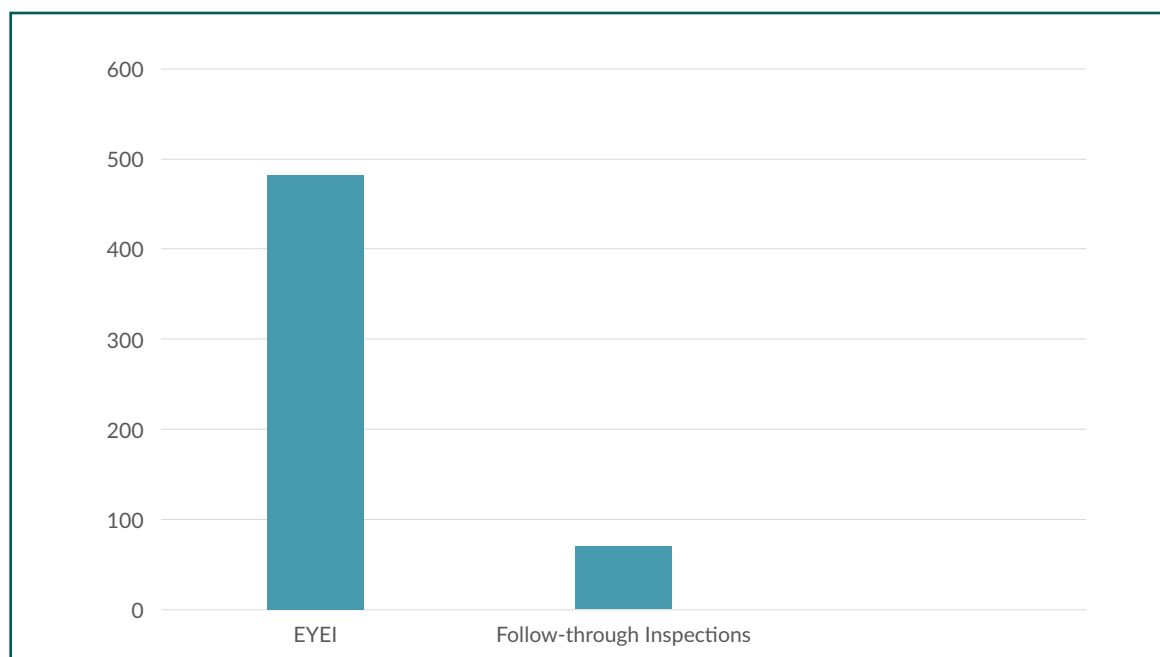


Early years education inspection findings

Early years education inspection (EYEl) is based on a quality framework⁸ that is informed by the principles of *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*⁹ and *Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*,¹⁰ as well as national and international research related to early education and inspection. During EYEl, inspectors evaluate and describe essential aspects of early years education with reference to the four areas of practice in the quality framework:

- Area 1: The quality of the context to support the children's learning and development
- Area 2: The quality of the processes to support the children's learning and development

Figure 1: Inspection numbers January 2024 – December 2024



7 The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme is a free, universal two-year preschool programme available to all children within the eligible age range funded by the DCDE. It provides children with their first formal experience of early learning prior to commencing primary school

8 The EYEl guide is available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/a-guide-to-early-years-education-inspection-eyei-updated-january-2025.pdf>

9 Available at: <https://curriculumonline.ie/early-childhood/aistear-2024/>

10 Available at: <https://siolta.ie>

- Area 3: The quality of the children's learning experiences and achievements
- Area 4: The quality of management and leadership for learning.

Drawing on an analysis of the 476 EYElS conducted in ELC settings delivering the ECCE Programme and in the 36 full day care settings, findings for each area of the EYEl quality framework are set out below.

Area 1 – The quality of the context to support children's learning and development

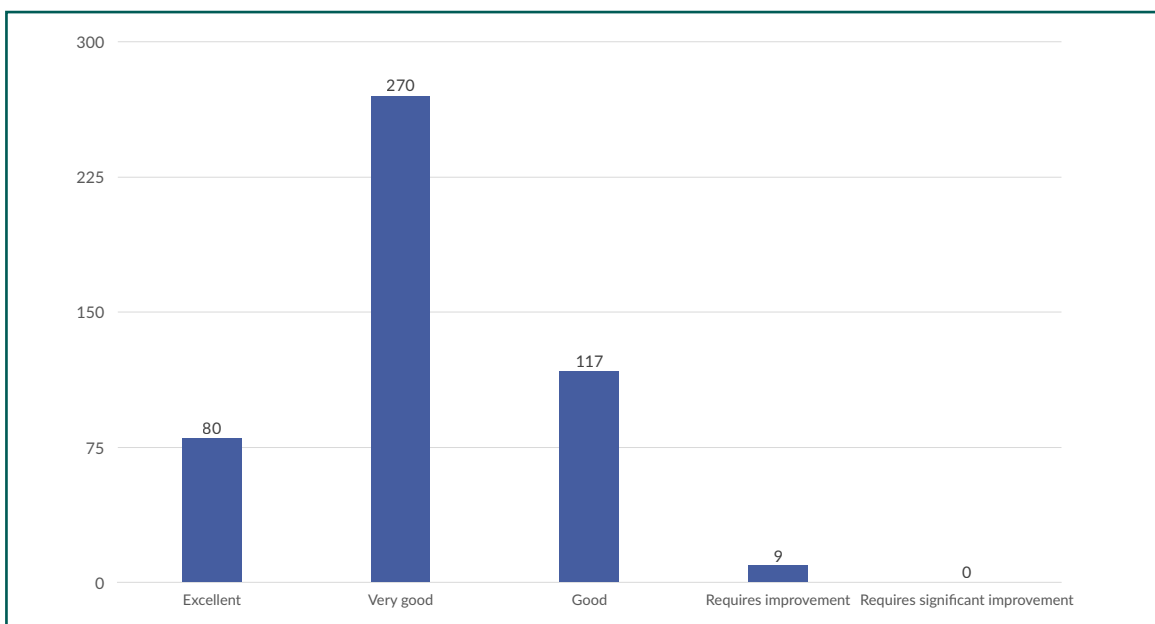
This area of the quality framework evaluates the atmosphere, environment and relationships in the ELC setting, focusing on how these promote positive interactions, nurture the children's sense of identity and belonging, and celebrate cultural backgrounds.

The overall findings regarding the quality of the learning context in the settings inspected were positive, with 98.1% of settings found to be good or better. Notably, 16.8% of settings demonstrated excellent practice in this area, while only 1.9% were assessed as having practice that was less than good.

Inspectors noted many aspects of provision across the settings that led to a high-quality learning context for the children. For example, a key strength of many of the settings was the quality of interactions, with very positive educator-child relationships and warm, nurturing environments evident. The most effective settings had achieved a very good balance between child-initiated and adult-initiated activities. They also used the key person approach to nurture secure attachments between the children and the educators. Families and communities were involved closely in the work of the settings; this fostered the children's sense of identity and belonging.

A small number of settings overused adult-led routines, thereby limiting the children's agency in their learning. While settings generally demonstrated good practice in relation to using mealtimes as learning and social development opportunities for the children, some settings did not.

Figure 2: Area 1 – The quality of the context to support the children's learning and development



Area 2 – The quality of the processes to support children’s learning and development

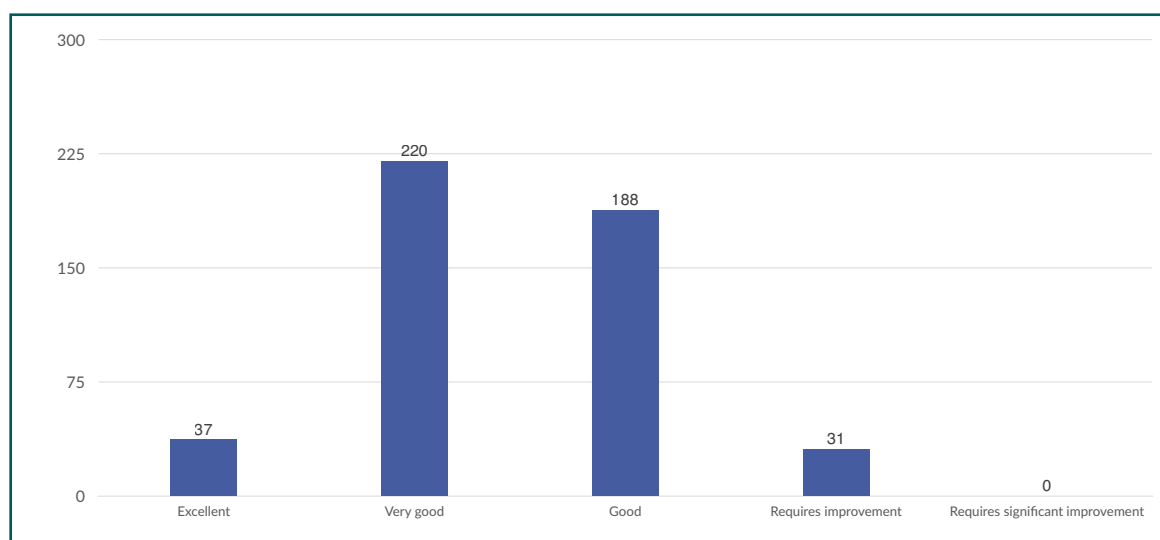
This area assesses the approaches used by early years educators to create meaningful and enriching learning experiences. It includes curriculum planning and interactions. It also includes how children’s learning is observed, assessed and guided.

The overall findings for this area were also positive. Almost all settings had either good (39.5%) or very good (46.2%) processes in place to support children’s learning and development. Excellent practice in this regard was evident in 7.8% of settings. The quality of the processes in place to support children’s learning and development required improvement in 6.5% of settings.

At the core of the effective practices for supporting children’s learning and development evident in many settings was a recognition of play as central to children’s learning. Children were provided with stimulating learning environments, choice in their play activities, and their emergent language and numeracy development were supported through hands-on experiences. Overall, the inspections point to effective provision informed by *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*¹¹ in the early education sector.

Some settings were advised by inspectors to avoid overuse of formal teaching methods. Recommendations were made in relation to educators developing an emergent, enquiry-based curriculum based on children’s interests and making better use of songs and rhymes for language development. Inspectors also noted that there were inadequate learning resources in some baby and toddler rooms.

Figure 3: Area 2 – The quality of the processes to support children’s learning and development



11 Available at: <https://curriculumonline.ie/early-childhood/aistear-2024/>

Area 3 – The quality of the children’s learning experiences and achievements

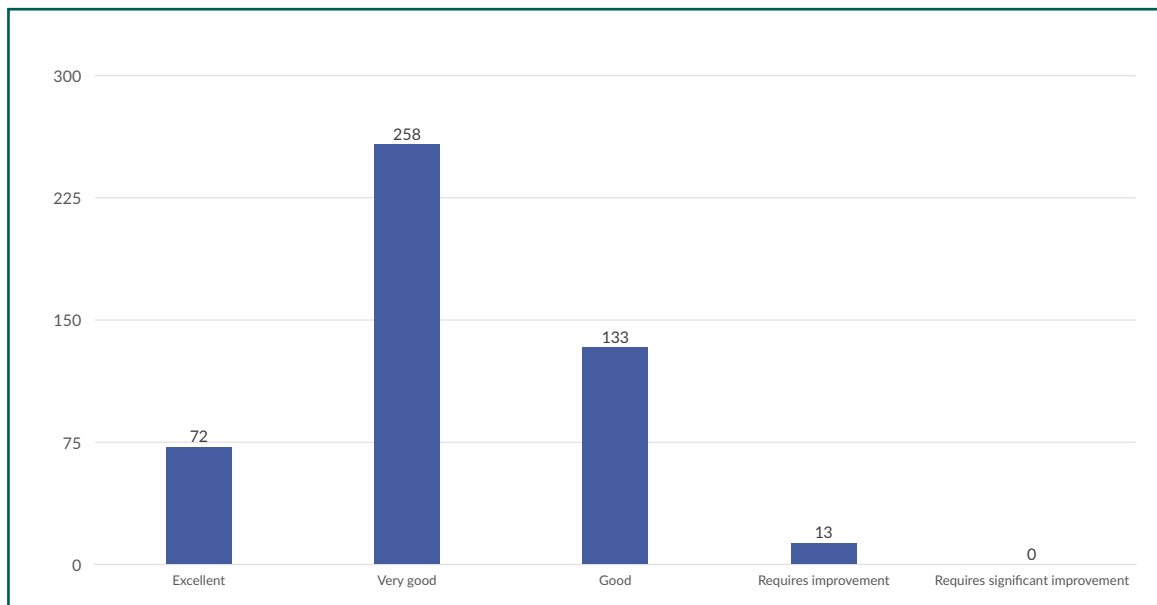
This area of the quality framework looks at children’s learning experiences in the ELC setting. It evaluates the extent to which children have choice and agency in their learning and their active participation in learning activities. Inspectors assess how children’s engagement, enjoyment and wellbeing are nurtured and how each setting recognises each child’s potential.

The overall quality of the children’s learning experiences and achievements was found to be good or better in 97.3% of settings. Of these, the quality in this area was found to be good in 27.9% of settings, very good in 54.2% of settings and excellent in 15.1% of settings. In just 2.7% of settings, the quality of the children’s learning experiences and achievements required improvement to reach a good standard.

In settings where the children’s learning experiences and achievements were positive, the children demonstrated curiosity, persistence, creativity and resourcefulness. They engaged deeply in play and exploration. Cooperative play and effective conflict resolution were evident. Educators facilitated the children’s creative expression through a rich range of media, such as art materials, construction manipulatives, dramatic play props and open-ended materials. The children’s physical development was well supported through both indoor and outdoor play.

Recommendations were made in some settings in relation to the children’s mathematical learning. In addition to providing the children with access to a greater range of hands-on activities to support their mathematical understanding, educators were advised of the need to better promote children’s agency and voice in mathematical learning. Inspectors also noted that, in some settings, outdoor spaces were underutilised; they advised that the children be provided with greater access to outdoor resources.

Figure 4: Area 3 – The quality of the children’s learning experiences and achievements



Area 4 – The quality of management and leadership for learning

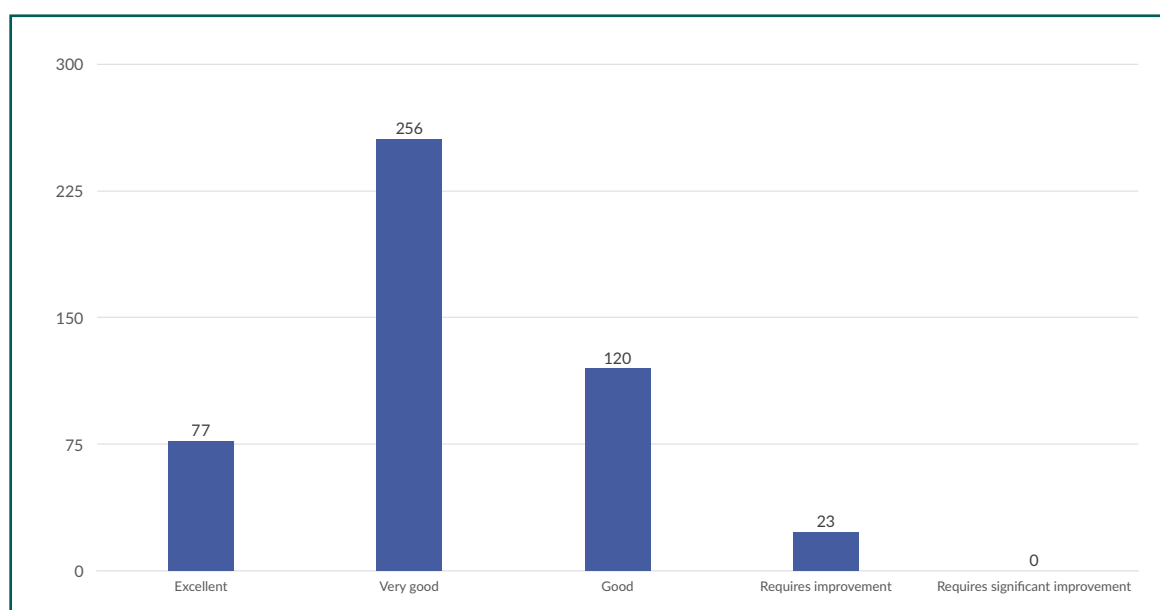
This area of the quality framework assesses how leadership and management support daily activities and foster continuous improvement. It also focuses on the support provided for transitions in children's learning journeys, into and within the setting and as they move on to primary or special school.

The quality of management and leadership for learning was found to be good in 25.2% of settings, very good in 53.8% of settings and excellent in 16.2% of settings. Inspectors found that this quality area required improvement in 4.8% of settings.

The inspections found that professionalism, teamwork and a shared sense of responsibility among staff for the children's learning were features of many settings. Staff in settings commonly completed courses in areas such as Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC),¹² *Hanen*¹³ and *Lámh*¹⁴ and they also engaged with the online *Aistear Síolta Guide*.¹⁵ Many settings had established strong communication with families and facilitated active parental involvement in the setting.

An area for development identified by inspectors in several settings related to self-evaluation practices. Essentially, the inspections point to a need for more systematic embedding of the process of self-evaluation in settings, particularly in relation to implementing decisions arrived at through self-reflection and self-review processes.

Figure 5: Area 4 – The quality of management and leadership for learning



12 Available at: <https://lincprogramme.ie/>

13 Available at: <https://www.hanen.org>

14 Available at: <https://www.lamh.org>

15 Available at: <https://www.nurturingskills.ie/aistear-siolta-practice-guide/>

Follow-through inspection findings

The purpose of a follow-through inspection is to evaluate the progress an ELC setting has made in implementing the recommendations or advice from an earlier inspection. This process involves a consultative, professional engagement between the inspector and relevant setting management, leaders, educators and staff. It also involves inspectors observing, at first hand, education provision in the setting. Inspectors also advise the setting on strategies and actions that enable the setting to fully address the recommendations or actions advised in the previous inspection.

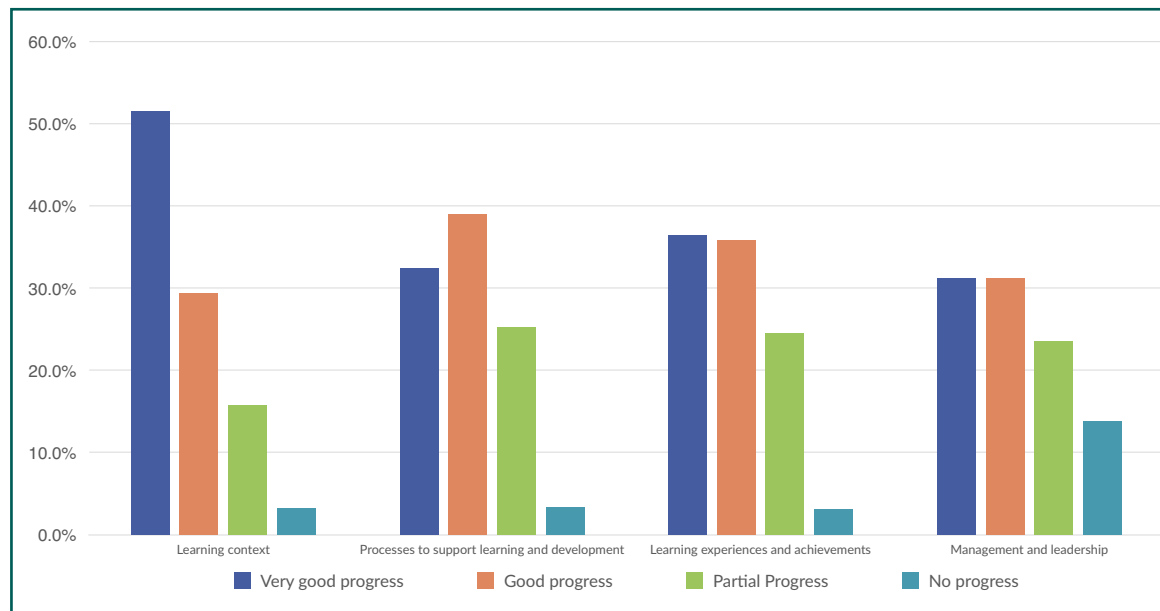
As noted above, there were 70 follow-through inspections in ELC settings in 2024. Overall, there was evidence of positive progress by settings in addressing the recommendations arising from previous inspections, particularly in relation to the learning context of the

setting, the processes that settings used to support children's learning and development and the children's learning experiences and achievements.

Some aspects of provision that featured in inspectors' recommendations in follow-through inspections included:

- the need to document children's interests and to use this information to inform the planning of learning experiences for them
- the need to develop assessment practices to take greater account of children's learning dispositions and progress
- the need to develop reflective, self-evaluation processes in settings
- the need to enhance the representation of cultural diversity and children's home languages in the setting environment.

Figure 6: Follow-through inspections 2024: progress in implementing recommendations and advice from previous inspections



In conclusion

The overall findings from the 2024 early years education inspections are positive, with many notable strengths evident across ELC settings in respect of all four areas of the early years education quality framework. The commitment of early years educators to developing nurturing, caring environments in which babies, toddlers and young children can flourish is evident.

The inspection findings suggest a need for further development of an emergent, enquiry-based curriculum informed by children's interests and better self-evaluation processes across ELC settings. The embedding of self-evaluation practices, as envisaged under *First 5*,¹⁶ will be crucial in ensuring and sustaining high-quality education and learning experiences for our youngest citizens. The findings also highlight the importance of enhancing the learning environments to reflect and celebrate cultural diversity and the linguistic backgrounds of all children.



¹⁶ Available at: <https://first5.gov.ie/>

Chapter 3

Primary insights



Introduction

Primary curriculum redevelopment and enactment continued during 2024. Following an introductory and familiarisation year, implementation of the *Primary Mathematics Curriculum*¹ began in September 2024. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) continued its work in relation to the development of the five new primary curriculum specifications: Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), Languages (including Modern Foreign Languages), Social and Environmental Education (SEE), Arts Education, and Wellbeing.

The increasing number of special classes and special schools that opened during 2024 presented both opportunities and challenges for the system. For special schools, the introduction of the Senior Cycle level one and two modules further supported teachers in providing personalised learning programmes tailored to the individual learning needs of children of students.

Teacher supply issues in primary schools continued during 2024, with challenges experienced particularly in urban settings. Pressures were reported to be especially acute for some Irish-medium and special schools.

In June 2024, the department published new procedures for schools, the *Bí Cineálta Procedures to Prevent and Address Bullying Behaviour for Primary and Post-Primary Schools*.² The procedures are effective from September 2025.

This chapter presents data from inspections conducted in primary and special schools during 2024, main inspection findings in relation to teaching, learning and assessment, as well as some themes emerging from an analysis of curriculum evaluations of Physical Education (PE) and Music.

Inspection types

The Inspectorate uses a range of inspection types to evaluate the quality of education provision in primary and special schools. Almost all inspection types have a short notice period. This is designed to facilitate the gathering of information through the administration of surveys, meetings with children and young people, parents, teachers, school leaders and the board of management. Announced inspections, i.e. inspections with a short notice period, include the following types:



1 Available at: <https://curriculumonline.ie/primary/curriculum-areas/mathematics/>

2 <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/policy-information/b%C3%AD-cine%C3%A1lta-procedures-to-prevent-and-address-bullying-behaviour-for-primary-and-post-primary-schools/>

Table 1: Inspection types

Inspection Type	Detail	Notice Given	Outcome
Curriculum evaluation	Focuses on evaluating specific curriculum areas and subjects	Normally, five working days in advance of the evaluation	Publication of final report
Whole-school evaluation and whole-school evaluation – management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL)	Evaluates key aspects of the work of the school – teaching, pupils' learning, support for pupils' learning and wellbeing, leadership, management and school self-evaluation	Normally, ten working days in advance of the evaluation	Publication of final report
Evaluation of inclusive practices and provision for children with special and additional educational needs	Evaluates the provision for pupils with additional and special educational needs in mainstream classes and support settings	Normally, ten working days in advance of the evaluation	Publication of final report
Child protection and safeguarding inspection	Examines a school's compliance with key aspects of child protection procedures	Between twenty-four- and forty-eight-hours' notice is typically provided. These inspections may also be unannounced	Publication of initial and final reports
Follow-through inspection	Assesses the extent to which a school has implemented recommendations from earlier inspections	Two working days' notice is given, but these inspections may also be unannounced	Publication of final report
Evaluation of action planning for improvement in DEIS schools	Evaluates how schools devise, implement and monitor action plans for improvement under specific DEIS themes	Normally, ten working days in advance of the evaluation	Publication of final report

All announced inspections result in oral feedback to the school about strengths in education provision in the school and, as relevant, aspects of provision that need to be improved. In addition, a written inspection report containing the inspection findings from the announced inspection is published on <https://www.gov.ie/DEInspectorate>.

The Inspectorate also conducts one-day, unannounced inspections known as incidental inspections. These inspections allow inspectors to observe and evaluate the quality of teaching, learning and assessment practices in everyday school situations. Unannounced inspections also result in oral feedback to school leaders and staff about strengths in education provision in the school and, as relevant, aspects of provision that need to be improved. A proportion of unannounced inspections have a thematic focus. The findings of these inspections are collated to provide thematic reports on aspects of educational provision.

In both announced and unannounced inspections of primary and special schools, inspectors visit classrooms and other learning environments and engage with children and young people, teachers and school leaders. Certain types of announced inspections, such as whole-school evaluations, also involve meetings between inspectors and the school's board of management and between inspectors

and parents. Both announced and unannounced inspections are designed to encourage professional reflection, support school self-evaluation, and contribute to improving educational outcomes for children and young people.

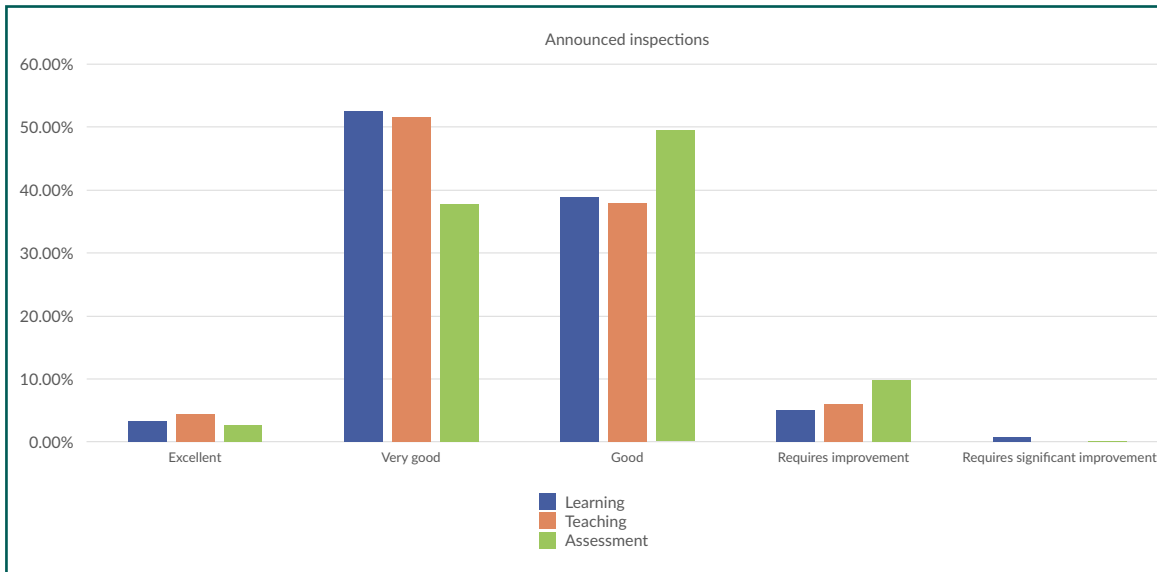
Inspection activities: January 2024 – December 2024

During 2024, inspectors carried out 1,042 evaluations in primary and special schools, with 838 announced and 204 unannounced inspections. Of the schools inspected, 204 were either special schools or mainstream schools with special classes. Inspectors observed a total of 5,079 lessons during the 1,042 evaluations carried out in primary and special schools.

Announced inspection findings: January 2024 – December 2024

The quality of teaching was found to be good or better in 93.9% of the lessons observed during announced inspections. Children and young people's learning was found to be good or better in 94.8% of the lessons. Assessment was found to be good or better in 90% of lessons.



Figure 1: Announced inspection findings January 2024 – December 2024

Unannounced inspection findings: January – December 2024

The quality of teaching was good or better in 87.6% of the lessons observed during unannounced inspections. The quality of learning was found to be good or better in

89.4% of the lessons. Findings in relation to assessment practices were not as positive as those for overall teaching and learning. Assessment was found to be good or better in 79.8% of the lessons inspected through unannounced inspections in primary and special schools.

Figure 2: Unannounced inspection findings January 2024 – December 2024

Looking beyond the numbers: A focus on curriculum evaluation

Curriculum evaluation is an evaluation model used to assess the quality of education provision in a subject or curriculum area in primary and special schools. The process involves inspectors conducting activities such as classroom observations, document reviews and meetings with children and young people, principals, teachers, and – where relevant – groups of parents. Each curriculum evaluation results in a published report that highlights strengths in provision for the subject or curriculum area inspected, identifies areas for improvement, and offers specific recommendations to enhance provision.

During Covid, the learning experiences of children and young people in aspects of the curriculum, most notably Physical Education (PE) and Music, were restricted for health and safety reasons. As part of its 2024 inspection programme, the Inspectorate evaluated provision in PE and Music in a sample of primary schools through the curriculum evaluation model. The findings are presented below.

Physical Education (PE)

A total of 160 PE lessons across nineteen primary schools were inspected in curriculum evaluations during 2024.

The overall findings in relation to provision for PE in the schools inspected were positive. Teachers generally prepared well for the lessons and used appropriate methodologies to support the development of children's skills. Among the strengths in PE teaching were the effective modelling by teachers of movement and skills, the use of appropriate equipment to support children's learning, and inclusion of an appropriate balance between individual and group activities. In a small number of schools, inspectors identified a need for greater collaboration, at school level, in teachers' planning for delivery of the PE curriculum. In some schools, the strands of gymnastics and dance were found to be under-developed.





Children's learning was found to be good or very good across many of the PE lessons inspected. Children demonstrated enjoyment, confidence and good skill development in the lessons. In a small number of schools, teachers were advised to place a greater emphasis on subject-specific language during PE lessons. Some schools were advised to integrate digital technologies into PE lessons, particularly in relation to supporting the assessment and tracking of children's learning in the subject. While assessment practices in relation to teaching and supporting children's learning in PE were generally of a good standard, advice on developing assessment approaches further to optimise their value in informing the next steps in children's learning was a theme in several PE curriculum evaluation reports.

Music

A total of 113 music lessons across fourteen primary schools were inspected in curriculum evaluations during 2024.

These evaluations point to a number of strengths in provision for Music in primary schools. Inspectors found that children were generally provided with engaging music learning experiences, particularly in the performing strand of the curriculum. These experiences included opportunities to play and perform using a range of musical instruments. Inspectors noted that, in several schools, musical performance was a celebrated part of school.

While the strand of performing was generally strong, there was, in some schools, a need for better development of the strand of composing. For example, inspectors advised of the need for teachers to provide children with more opportunities to improvise and to create and perform their own music.

The strand of listening and responding also required development in a number of schools. In some lessons, the purpose of listening tasks was unclear. Inspectors also identified a need for some schools to have a more structured and incremental approach to the teaching of musical literacy. Advice regarding the progressive development of children's understanding of standard music notation and rhythmic notation as they moved through the school featured in inspectors' recommendations.

In summary, the curriculum evaluations from 2024 point to some positive aspects of music provision in Irish primary schools, particularly in relation to the strand of performing. They also highlight the need for all schools to ensure that the strands of listening and responding, and composing are adequately provided for, and that there is appropriate challenge, continuity and progression in children's learning across all three music strands as they move from infants to sixth class.



Chapter 4

Post-primary insights



Introduction

During 2024, the number of students enrolled in post-primary schools reached an all-time high. Total enrolments in September 2024¹ were 425,412. This represented an increase of 8,781 students, or 2%, from September 2023 (416,631).²

The increasing number of special classes opened in post-primary schools during 2024 presented both opportunities and challenges for the system.

Teacher supply issues in post-primary schools continued during 2024, with challenges experienced particularly in urban settings. Pressures were reported to be particularly acute for some post-primary subject areas, as well as for Irish-medium schools and special schools.

There was significant progress in relation to Senior Cycle redevelopment during 2024. A revised *Transition Year Programme Statement*³ was published in August 2024. The statement provides a flexible approach to planning Transition Year programmes for all students. In the 2024/25 school year, all schools have the opportunity to audit their current Transition Year offering and should revise it where necessary in line with the programme statement.

The programme statement and initial modules for Senior Cycle Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes for students with special educational needs were published in September 2024. The programmes provide enhanced options so that students can follow the pathways that are most appropriate to their needs.

Specifications for nine new or revised Leaving Certificate subjects were published. These included two new subjects: Climate Action and Sustainable Development; and Drama, Film and Theatre Studies. A new Senior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) specification was also published.⁴

In June 2024, the department published new procedures for schools, the *Bí Cineálta Procedures to Prevent and Address Bullying Behaviour for Primary and Post-Primary Schools*.⁵ The procedures are effective from September 2025.

This chapter presents data from inspections conducted in post-primary schools during 2024, main inspection findings in relation to teaching, learning and assessment, as well as some themes emerging from an analysis of subject inspections in Physical Education and Computer Science.

Inspection types

The Inspectorate conducts an inspection in a post-primary school every two years approximately, using a range of inspection types. Almost all inspection types have a short notice period. This is designed to facilitate the gathering of information through the administration of surveys, meetings with children and young people, parents, teachers, school leaders and the board of management. Announced inspections, i.e. inspections with a short notice period, include the following types:

- 1 Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/services/post-primary-online-database-p-pod/>
- 2 Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/the-department-of-education-inspectorate-report-2021-2023-and-thematic-review-pdf-version/>
- 3 Available at: <https://curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/5849acbf-0326-487a-beec-3db6b5878470/TY-Programme-Statement-ENG-INT.pdf>
- 4 Available at: <https://ncca.ie/en/senior-cycle/curriculum-developments/senior-cycle-social-personal-and-health-education-sphe/>
- 5 Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/policy-information/b%C3%AD-cine%C3%A1lta-procedures-to-prevent-and-address-bullying-behaviour-for-primary-and-post-primary-schools/>

Table 1: Inspection types

Inspection Type	Detail	Notice Given	Outcome
Subject inspection / Programme evaluation	Focuses on evaluating specific subjects and programmes	Normally, five working days in advance of the evaluation	Publication of final Report
Whole school evaluation – management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL)	Evaluates key aspects of the work of the school – teaching, students' learning, support for students' learning and wellbeing, leadership, management and school self-evaluation	Normally, ten working days in advance of the evaluation	Publication of final Report
Evaluation of action planning for improvement in DEIS schools	Evaluates how schools devise, implement and monitor action plans for improvement of DEIS targets	Normally, ten working days in advance of the evaluation	Publication of final Report
Evaluation of inclusive practices and provision for children with special and additional educational needs	Evaluates the provision for students with additional and special educational needs in mainstream classes and support settings	Normally, ten working days in advance of the evaluation	Publication of final Report
Child protection and safeguarding inspection	Examines a school's compliance with key aspects of child protection procedures for primary and post-primary schools	Between twenty-four and forty-eight-hours' notice is typically provided. These inspections may also be unannounced	Publication of initial and final reports
Follow-through inspection	Assesses the extent to which a school has implemented recommendations from earlier inspections	Two working days' notice is given, but these inspections may also be unannounced	Publication of final report

All announced inspections result in oral feedback to the school about strengths in education provision in the school and, as relevant, aspects of provision that need to be improved. In addition, a written inspection report containing the inspection findings from the announced inspection is published on <https://www.gov.ie/DEInspectorate>.

The Inspectorate also conducts one-day, unannounced inspections known as incidental inspections. These inspections allow inspectors to observe and evaluate the quality of teaching, learning and assessment practices in everyday school situations. Unannounced inspections also result in oral feedback to school leaders and staff about strengths in education provision in the school and, as relevant, aspects of provision that need to be improved. A proportion of unannounced inspections have a thematic focus. The findings of these inspections are collated to provide thematic reports on aspects of educational provision.⁶

In both announced and unannounced inspections of post-primary schools, inspectors visit classrooms and other learning environments and engage with children and young people, teachers and school leaders. Certain types of announced inspections, such as whole-school evaluations, also involve meetings between inspectors and the school's board of management and between inspectors and parents. Both announced and unannounced inspections are designed to encourage professional reflection, support school self-evaluation and, ultimately, to contribute to improving educational outcomes for children and young people.



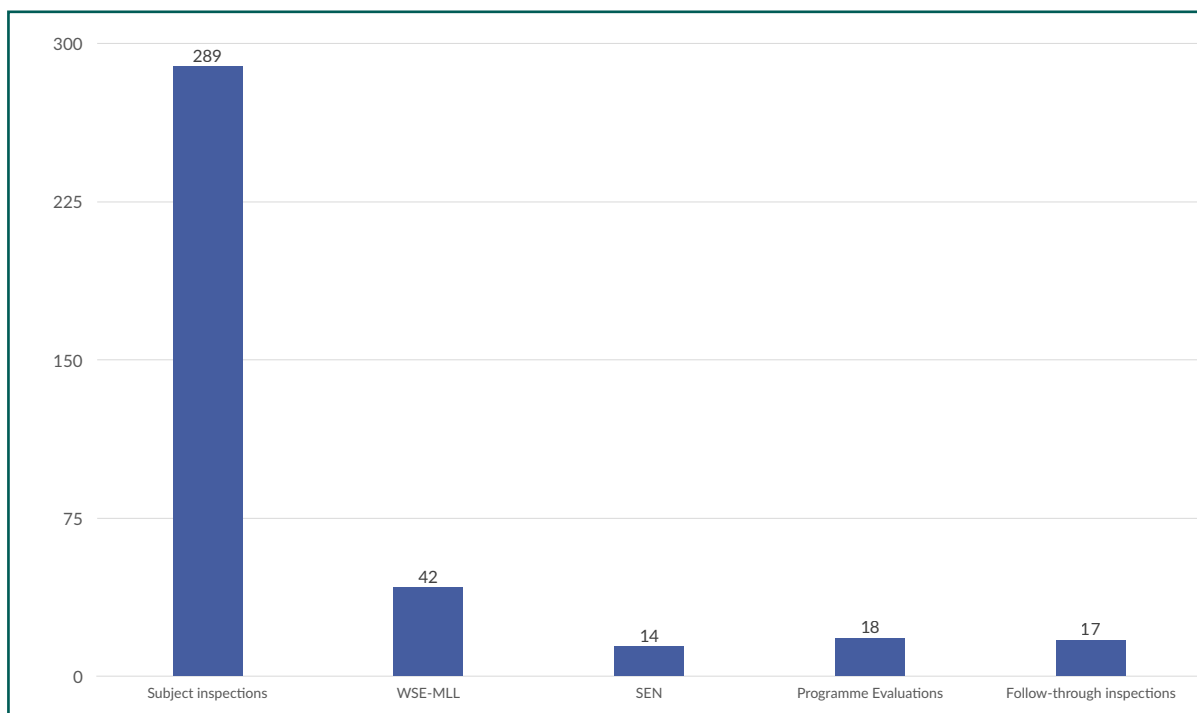
6 Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/20250630_Inspection_Policy.pdf 20250630

Inspection activities: January 2024 – December 2024

Inspection numbers

During 2024, inspectors carried out 529 evaluations in post-primary settings, with 380⁷ announced and 149 unannounced inspections. Inspectors observed a total of 3,045⁸ lessons during the 529 evaluations carried out in post-primary settings.

Figure 1: Announced inspections January 2024 – December 2024



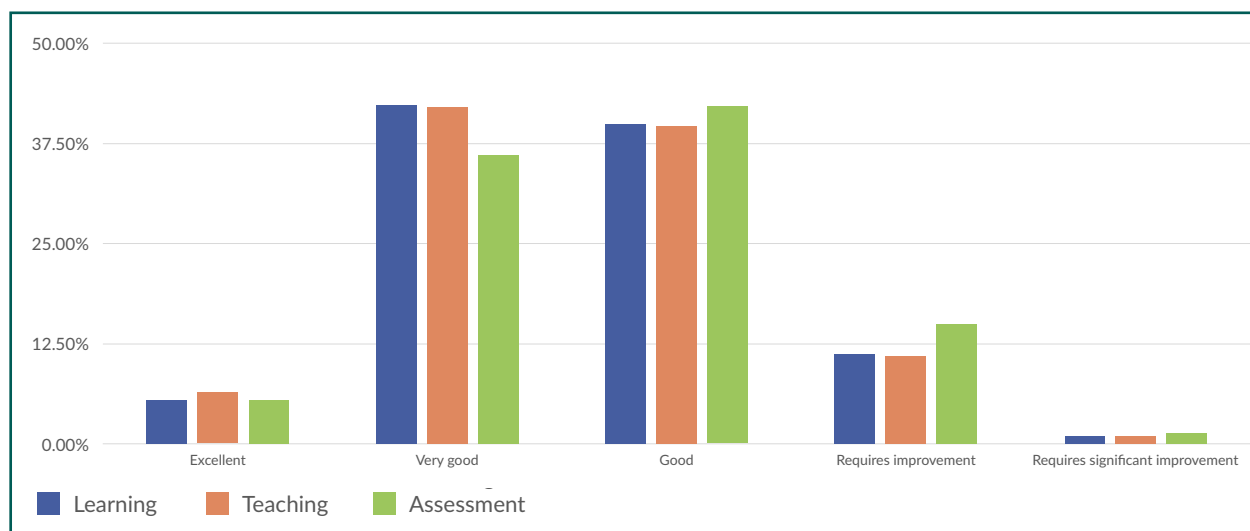
7 This figure includes only those evaluations in which teaching and learning are observed

8 Lessons observed as part of follow-through inspections are not included in this figure

Announced inspection findings

The quality of teaching was found to be good or better in 88.2% of the lessons observed during announced inspections. The quality of learning was found to be good or better in 87.6% of the lessons. Assessment was found to be good or better in 83.6% of lessons. Overall, the findings indicate that most schools and classrooms demonstrated good or better practice. However, there was a need for improvement in certain aspects of practice in approximately one in seven lessons.

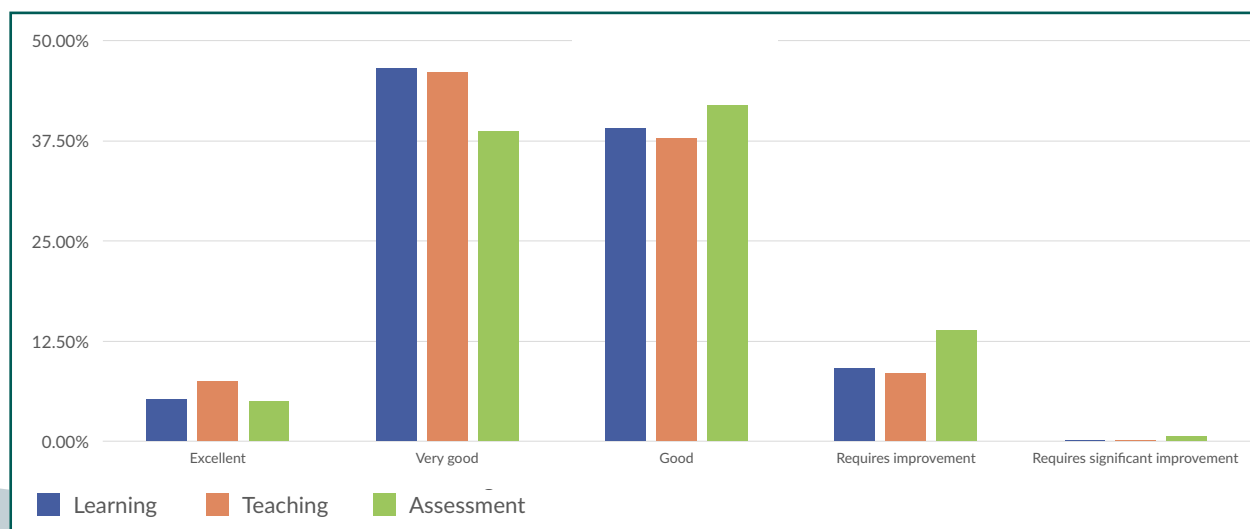
Figure 2: Quality of learning, teaching and assessment – announced inspections



Unannounced inspection findings

The quality of teaching was found to be good or better in 91.3% of the 520 lessons observed during 149 incidental inspections in 2024. The quality of learning was good or better in 90.8% of lessons. Assessment was found to be good or better in 85.6% of lessons. Overall, the findings indicate that most schools and classrooms are demonstrating good or better practice. However, there was a need for improvement in certain aspects of practice in approximately one in nine cases.

Figure 3: Quality of learning, teaching and assessment – unannounced inspections



Looking beyond the numbers: A focus on subject inspection

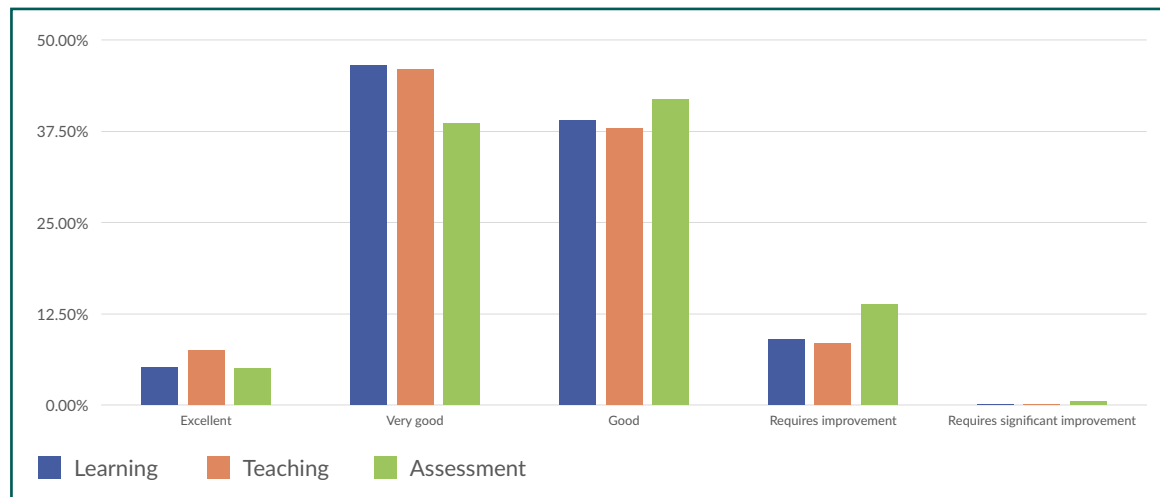
A subject inspection is an inspection type that focuses on individual subject areas within a school with a view to affirming good practice and making recommendations, where relevant, to aid the further development of the area. The process typically involves an inspector visiting classrooms to observe teaching and learning, meeting with teachers and school leadership, and conducting focus group meetings with students. The inspector also reviews subject planning documentation and checks on child protection procedures. Each subject inspection results in a published report that highlights strengths in provision for the subject, identifies areas for improvement and offers specific recommendations to enhance educational provision.

Inspectors use a quality continuum to describe the school's provision in the following areas of enquiry: teaching, learning and assessment; subject provision and whole-school support; and planning and preparation.

Overall, the findings were positive in relation to the quality of teaching, learning and assessment observed during subject inspections. The quality of teaching was found to be good or better in 89.4% of lessons, while the quality of learning was found to be good or better in 88.3% of lessons. It is worth noting that in more than half of the lessons observed, the quality of both teaching and learning was either very good or excellent. The quality of assessment was good or better in 84.7% of lessons observed.

Increasing numbers of post-primary schools are providing Leaving Certificate Physical Education (LCPE) and Computer Science. As part of its 2024 inspection programme, the Inspectorate evaluated provision in these two subjects in a sample of post-primary schools using the subject inspection model. The findings are presented below.

Figure 4: Quality of teaching, learning and assessment – lessons observed during subject inspections, January 2024 – December 2024



Physical Education (PE)

PE is a well-established component of the post-primary curriculum in most schools in Ireland. Provision is evolving in response to national priorities around wellbeing, inclusion and lifelong participation in physical activity. For Junior Cycle Physical Education (JCPE), post-primary schools are required to provide a minimum of 135 hours of the subject spread across the three years, with PE being provided in each of the three years as part of the Wellbeing area. For Senior Cycle, there are two main options: the examinable Leaving Certificate Physical Education, taught over approximately 180 hours, and the non-examinable Senior Cycle Physical Education (SCPE) Framework.

The number of post-primary schools offering Leaving Certificate Physical Education as an optional subject increased from 63 in 2018 to 398 schools in 2024. This growth reflects a strong interest in and commitment to the subject on the part of school leaders, teachers and students.

Subject inspections of PE were carried out in twenty post-primary schools, including 15 schools that provided Leaving Certificate Physical Education (LCPE), during 2024. This involved evaluation of a total of 113 PE lessons across those schools and included

JCPE (50 lessons), LCPE (32 lessons), SCPE (27 lessons) and Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) Leisure and Recreation (4 lessons).

Overall findings from most of the PE lessons inspected were positive. There was strong leadership of PE provision in many of the schools inspected, with strong whole-school support for LCPE as a senior cycle option. Many of the schools had well-structured PE departments with effective collaborative planning and reflective practices evident among PE teachers.

Overall, the schools inspected provided a broad PE curriculum. A small number overemphasised team sports resulting in an imbalance in depth and breadth of provision. Across the schools inspected, there were examples of strong links with local sports clubs and organisations; this extended the capacity of schools to offer diverse and engaging opportunities as part of their extra-curricular provision.

Timetabling of PE lessons was not satisfactory in a small number of schools. For example, in some schools, senior cycle students were not timetabled for the required minimum of eighty minutes of PE lessons per week. In one school, students had no timetabled senior cycle PE.



The quality of teaching of PE was good or better in 75.3% of the lessons inspected. There was scope for improving teaching in one in four lessons. Most teachers demonstrated enthusiasm and enjoyment for PE as well as good subject knowledge and pedagogical skills. In many lessons, teachers used effective higher-order questioning to challenge students appropriately and to encourage them to elaborate on their answers. They modelled key movements and used language appropriate to the age and stage of development of their students. In some of the lessons, there was a need for teachers to connect the practical activities more explicitly with theoretical concepts in order to improve students' understanding and critical thinking.

Findings in relation to students' learning in PE were positive in 74.4% of the lessons. The need for improved student learning was noted in approximately one quarter of the lessons. Students were generally actively involved in the lessons and showed high levels of engagement and enthusiasm. Respectful interactions between teachers and students and among students were evident. During focus groups with inspectors, students often spoke about how they enjoyed PE lessons.

Assessment practices in relation to PE were found to good or better in just 66.4% of the lessons. Examples of effective assessment noted by inspectors included students' self-assessment of their own performance and carrying out observational analysis in collaboration with their peers. The students' use of well-constructed classroom-based assessment booklets and health-related activity cards enabled them to take ownership of their training and improvement plans.

Inspectors identified scope for improvement in assessment practices in 33.6% of PE lessons. In some cases, there was a need for teachers to improve the recorded formative feedback that they provided to their students, particularly in relation to their written work in LCPE. While there was evidence of some use of digital technologies to support provision for PE in some schools, overall use of digital technologies was underdeveloped. The inspection findings point to a need for better digital infrastructure in PE halls or PE Labs to better support PE teaching, learning and assessment.

Computer Science and digital subjects

Many schools offer a comprehensive range of digital subjects at both junior and senior cycle, with increasing student uptake in Computer Science, which is a relatively new addition to the Senior Cycle curriculum.⁹ The number of post-primary schools offering Computer Science increased from 36 in 2018 to 194 schools in 2024.

The range of digital subjects observed during evaluations included:

- Junior Cycle Digital Media Literacy Short Course
- Junior Cycle Coding Short Course
- LCA Introduction to ICT
- LCA ICT Vocational Specialism
- Transition Year Computer Science Sampling
- School-designed Junior Cycle digital wellbeing course
- ICT courses from any year group, school designed or otherwise, including special classes.

⁹ Available at: <https://curriculumonline.ie/senior-cycle/>

Subject inspections of Computer Science and digital modules were carried out in twelve post-primary schools during 2024. This involved evaluation of a total of forty-seven computer science and digital subject lessons.

The overall inspection findings were very positive. The quality of teaching and the quality of students' learning were found to be good or very good right across the computer science and digital subject lessons inspected. Findings in respect of assessment practices in Computer Science and digital modules were similarly positive.

Typically, in most schools where Computer Science was offered, a digital learning plan was in place reflecting a broader prioritisation of digital learning across the curriculum. Teachers created supportive and respectful learning environments that encouraged student motivation and engagement, particularly in developing digital skills. Positive relationships and collaborative teaching approaches reflected real-world practices in software development.

Students were generally progressing well, showing strong computational thinking and problem-solving skills. Collaborative learning was a key feature and many schools offered a wide range of digital modules across year groups. Transition Year programmes often included digital modules to help inform Leaving Certificate subject choices. Many schools actively promoted digital modules through extra-curricular activities such as coding clubs and participation in national competitions and they also fostered links with local businesses and industry. Additionally, some schools empowered students through digital leader programmes, encouraging peer mentoring and fostering a culture of digital competence.

Inspection reports identified some areas for improvement. For example, there was a need for a small number of the schools inspected to further develop specialist expertise among teaching staff, especially given the increasing demand for Computer Science. Collaborative team teaching and peer observation were suggested as strategies to enhance such expertise. A small number of schools and teachers were advised to provide more opportunities for independent learning and student autonomy, thereby reducing teacher-led instruction and increasing student-led activities.



Chapter 5

Enactment of the *Primary Language Curriculum*: a focus on Irish



Introduction

One of the statutory functions of the Inspectorate is to evaluate and publish reports on the quality and effectiveness of the teaching of Irish in state-funded schools and centres for education. In this chapter, we reflect on how the *Primary Language Curriculum*¹ and its pedagogical principles have been enacted in classrooms, with a particular focus on the learning, teaching and assessment of Irish.

The chapter is informed by the outcomes of 51 inspections in primary schools (13 incidental inspections and 38 curriculum evaluations of Irish), conducted in 2024 and early 2025. During these inspections, the inspectors evaluated a total of 280 lessons, engaged with teachers and school leaders and, during the 38 curriculum evaluations, conducted focus group meetings with children.

The Primary Language Curriculum

An integrated curriculum

The *Primary Language Curriculum* (PLC) is an integrated curriculum with the same structure and strands for both English and Irish at primary-school level. It is underpinned by the concept of language interconnectedness within and across languages, encouraging a plurilingual approach to language learning. It recognises that learning languages in an integrated way can result in significant benefits for the child or young person, particularly when the home language is recognised in the learning process. These benefits include enhanced cognitive and linguistic functioning and increased metalinguistic awareness.³ The PLC builds upon the principles of *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and also aligns with the junior cycle specifications for languages for post-primary students, to ensure continuity and progression in children's language learning.

Table 1: Language-focused inspections in primary schools – 2024 to early March 2025

Year	Inspection type	Number of schools	School type		Number of lessons	Language focus	
			English-medium	Irish-medium ²		English	Irish
2024	Curriculum Evaluation (Irish)	38	26	12	250	0	250
2025	Incidental (PLC)*	13	12	1	30	18	12
* Incidental inspections are evaluations of aspects of the work of a school under the normal conditions of a regular school day. These inspections are typically unannounced.							

1 Available at: <https://curriculumonline.ie/primary/curriculum-areas/primary-language/>

2 Irish-medium schools outside of the Gaeltacht

3 Cummins, J. (1978). Bilingualism and the Development of Metalinguistic Awareness. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 9, pp 131–149; Bialystok, E. (1991) *Language Processing in Bilingual Children*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Little, D. (2011). The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: A Research Agenda. *Language Teaching*, 44(3), pp 381–393; Rutgers, D. and Evans, M. (2017). Bilingual Education and L3 Learning: Metalinguistic Advantage or not? *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 20(7), pp 788–806; Cummins, J. (2021). Rethinking the Education of Multilingual Learners: A Critical Analysis of Theoretical Concepts. *Multilingual Matters*, pp 65–70

A learning outcomes-based approach

A key aim of the PLC is to empower children to become confident and competent communicators as well as critical readers, writers and thinkers. The PLC is a learning-outcomes based curriculum. It outlines clearly what children are expected to learn, using Progression Continua⁴ that support children's language learning and development over time. Progress in language learning is influenced by

the school environment, classroom experiences, each child's unique language background and abilities, and parental support and interest, and the child's disposition and motivation towards languages.

In the PLC, learning outcomes are organised by strands and elements to support children's understanding of language concepts and the development of their dispositions, skills and attitudes as language learners.

Figure 1: Elements of language learning⁵



4 Available at: <https://www.curriculumonline.ie/primary/curriculum-areas/primary-language/primary-language-toolkit-2/progression-continua>

5 Source of graphic: Primary Language Curriculum p.14. Available at: <https://curriculumonline.ie/primary/curriculum-areas/primary-language/>

Supporting the enactment of the Primary Language Curriculum

The first phase of the PLC was introduced for junior infants to second class (stages one and two) in 2015. Following consultation and feedback, a revised version, encompassing the four stages of primary education (junior infants to sixth class), was launched in 2019 and implemented for all classes (stages 1–4) in primary schools from September 2019.⁶ The *Primary Language Toolkit*⁷ offers practical resources to support teachers' planning and the delivery of high-quality language learning experiences for children.

The department, through its national agencies, provides extensive support to schools to enact the PLC. Oide, the national service for teacher professional learning, offers ongoing support to schools on request. Schools can also access Irish-language resources and professional learning supports from An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG) and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE).

Inspection

The next section in this chapter outlines the findings from inspections in four key areas: teachers' proficiency in Irish, teachers' preparation, children's learning outcomes, and the enactment of the core pedagogical principles and approaches to support the learning and teaching of Irish.

Inspection findings

Teachers' language proficiency in Irish

The research literature indicates that teachers' language proficiency is positively related to their overall teaching efficacy, which in turn influences children's learning outcomes.⁸ A high level of proficiency in Irish is positively correlated with teacher satisfaction in teaching Irish and their motivation to teach other subjects through Irish.⁹ Research in second-language learning indicates that there is a strong link between teachers' confidence in their own language skills and how effectively they teach.¹⁰ When teachers are more proficient in the language, they are better equipped to deliver lessons effectively, manage classrooms, and engage children successfully in language learning.

Inspectors found that there were varying levels of Irish-language proficiency among teachers in English-medium schools, particularly in relation to grammatical accuracy, pronunciation and fluency. While most teachers demonstrated a good standard of spoken Irish during inspections of Irish, some teachers struggled to use Irish effectively. There was an apparent lack of confidence among many teachers in using Irish in English-medium schools. As a result, in several cases, feedback from inspectors to teachers about the quality of provision for Irish in their classrooms needed to be given in English or using a mix of both languages. Teachers demonstrated a high level of proficiency in spoken Irish in fewer than half of the Irish lessons observed during curriculum evaluations.

6 Department of Education (2019). Circular Letter 0045/2019. Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscóile; Stages 1–4 (junior infants to sixth class): Support and Implementation

7 Available at: <https://curriculumonline.ie/primary/curriculum-areas/primary-language/primary-language-toolkit-2/>

8 Choi, E. and Lee, J. (2016). Investigating the relationship of target language proficiency and self-efficacy among non-native EFL teachers. *System*, 58 (Supplement C). pp 49–63

9 Dunne, C. M. (2019). Primary Teachers' Experiences in Preparing to Teach Irish: Views on Promoting the Language and Language Proficiency. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 10(1). pp 21–43. Marino Institute of Education, Dublin, Ireland

10 O'Sullivan, K., Bird, N. and Burns, G. (2019). Students' Experiences of the Teaching and Learning of Irish in Designated Disadvantaged Schools. *International Journal of Education, Culture and Society*, 4(5). pp 87–97



During incidental inspections, school leaders and teachers reported that they had engaged in a wide range of teacher professional learning opportunities. However, teachers indicated that they gave priority to professional learning sessions for English to support them in the enactment of the curriculum. Teachers also indicated that they needed more targeted support for the teaching of Irish in key areas such as early literacy development, phonological and phonemic awareness, word attack strategies, word study, the writing process and the development of comprehension skills.

Teachers' preparation and children's learning outcomes

The learning outcomes in the PLC support teacher agency in making professional judgements when planning for the learning, teaching and assessment of Irish. Teachers need to focus their teaching on meeting the language-learning needs of all children. They need to reflect on the children's progress and

adjust their pedagogical approaches as needed. This process involves invisible, visible and recorded preparation.¹¹ Invisible preparation is ongoing and often unrecorded. It involves teachers using their experience, their knowledge of the children and the learning environment, as well as their beliefs about the learning, teaching and assessment of Irish to guide their own practice. Visible preparation is about what happens during teaching and learning, involving the delivery of meaningful and appropriate learning experiences to support the intended learning for all children. It requires ongoing reflection on each child's needs, interests, abilities and progress in learning the language.

The incidental inspections indicated a marked difference in how the strands and elements of the PLC were planned for Irish compared to English. Discussions with school leaders in English-medium schools indicated that they were more familiar with the resources, toolkit and teaching supports for English, than those for Irish. Inspectors observed shortcomings in teachers' recorded preparation to support the

11 Department of Education (2021: revised 2023). Preparation for Teaching and Learning - Guidance for all Primary and Special Schools. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/advice-on-preparation-for-teaching-and-learning/>

enactment of the PLC in Irish. In many lessons, inspectors noted that teachers would benefit from using the progression continuum for Irish to inform the next steps and support progression in language learning for all children during lessons. There was notable variability in children's learning outcomes in Irish across English-medium schools, indicating the overall limited enactment of the PLC in these schools.

Inspection findings indicate that children's Irish language learning outcomes in Irish-medium schools were positive overall.



Pedagogical principles and approaches to support language acquisition in Irish

Pedagogical principles and approaches

The PLC identifies key pedagogical principles and approaches that are essential for providing children with high-quality language-learning experiences:

- the communicative approach
- use of language functions
- Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)
- immersion education
- transfer of skills between languages
- language awareness and cultural awareness
- linguistic diversity
- centrality of play
- cross-curricular and disciplinary literacy
- critical literacy
- digital literacy.

Communicative approach

The PLC promotes the use of the communicative approach to enhance second-language learning through purposeful, interactive and engaging activities in meaningful contexts. The main emphasis is on children using Irish to fulfil a communicative need, with the teacher modelling and consolidating the target language as much as possible during the school day. Teaching Irish through the Irish language, as the target language, helps children to become familiar with the language and to learn it more effectively.

The communicative approach consists of three phases. In the pre-communicative phase, children learn and practise oral vocabulary, specific language functions and grammatical structures. In the communicative phase, children are enabled to use the new language, for example, in drama, debates or role play. In the post-communicative phase, children have an opportunity to consolidate and transfer their newly acquired language to different contexts with the support of the teacher.

Overall, the inspections identified a need for teachers to place greater emphasis on the enactment of the pre-communicative, communicative and post-communicative phases in Irish lessons to ensure progression in children's language learning. There was a need for teachers to avoid teaching vocabulary in isolation and, instead, to create opportunities for children to participate in meaningful, learner-centred and authentic language and communication activities. This requires a shift from theme-based, textbook-driven instruction to more dynamic, active-learning practices that connect learner outcomes with children's lives and interests.

Use of language functions

The reinforcement of language functions through the communicative approach helps children to develop their language and communication skills. This includes enabling children to introduce themselves, greet others, ask questions, express themselves, make requests and structure responses. The most effective way to achieve this is through a range of informal interactions during the school day in contexts that are engaging, meaningful and relevant to children's lives and interests.

Overall, teachers tended to focus primarily on the teaching of vocabulary in isolation, relying on textbooks and commercial programmes. Insufficient attention was given to the explicit teaching of language functions and grammatical language structures in meaningful contexts. Consequently, children were not afforded adequate time to experiment with language functions and construct sentences independently.

To enable children to acquire vocabulary and language structures and develop confidence and fluency in using Irish, teachers should embed the children's language learning in authentic, everyday contexts. The purposeful integration of language functions into school life fosters a more natural use of Irish during the school day, ultimately supporting children's broader communicative competence in the language.



Content and Language Integrated Learning

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is an important language-learning pedagogical approach in English-medium schools, as it helps increase children's exposure to Irish. In CLIL, Irish is used as the target language in the teaching of curriculum content, language functions and language structures. The teacher creates partial immersion learning environments where children learn the subject knowledge, concepts and language skills in another curriculum area through Irish. The practical dimensions of subjects such as Physical Education, Mathematics, Visual Arts and Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE) lend themselves well to CLIL, where visual cues, active learning and group discussions are encouraged, and where vocabulary, and language functions and structures are taught in context and practised using cooperative learning interactive activities.

Overall, the findings from curriculum evaluations indicate that the use of CLIL is at a relatively early stage of development in primary schools. To support the effective enactment of CLIL, teachers' proficiency and confidence in using Irish as the language of instruction are crucial.¹² Inspection reports indicate that where CLIL and the communicative approach were used effectively in extending the teaching of Irish, teachers tended to be highly proficient in the language.

Immersion education

Immersion education in the target language is widely recognised as one of the most effective ways to gain fluency in a language.¹³

Immersion education involves language learners being placed in an environment where a language, different from their home or native language, is used. Meanwhile, parents and schools play a key role in maintaining and celebrating the child's home language so that the benefits derived from this may be utilised to help children learn other languages.

Immersion helps children become more fluent and comfortable in a new language, learning it alongside their native language. For example, children who learn English as an additional language (EAL) are immersed in the school's language environment. Children should be encouraged to transfer the skills they have learned in English or Irish to their other languages, and *vice versa*. Immersion experiences also help children to develop a strong sense of their cultural identity.

Overall, inspections provide evidence that immersion education in Irish-medium schools has a positive impact on children's learning outcomes, fostering a positive attitude and greater enthusiasm for Irish. Inspections showed that children in Irish-medium schools benefited greatly from spending their first two-years in infant classes immersed in spoken Irish, with formal reading and literacy introduced at a later stage. Teachers' consistent use of Irish during lessons enabled the children to understand instructions, ask questions and express themselves in Irish. Children in senior classes said that they enjoyed learning Irish and learning through Irish when engaged in interesting activities during group work. In the most effective practice observed, teachers fostered a positive

12 Gabillon, Z. (2020). Revisiting CLIL: Background, Pedagogy, and Theoretical Underpinnings. *Contextes et Didactiques*, 2020, Issue 15, pp 88–116

13 Ó Duibhir, P. (2018). Immersion Education: Lessons from a Minority Language Context. Bristol, Blue Ridge Summit: *Multilingual Matters*; Fortune, T.W. and Tedick, D.J. (2008) Pathways to Multilingualism: Evolving Perspectives on Immersion Education. United Kingdom: *Multilingual Matters*

environment by using engaging language-learning activities and teaching grammar, vocabulary and phonetics in meaningful contexts.

Transfer of skills between languages

Children learn new languages through interaction with others, similar to how they learned their first language. Their ability to speak and understand the new language is influenced by the pronunciation and sentence structure of their first language. While the structure and vocabulary of each language need to be taught separately, they should be taught in a way that encourages the transfer of knowledge and skills whenever possible. By highlighting the similarities and differences between languages, teachers help children to understand languages better. This enhances their ability to learn the language and make connections with their native language.

Overall, inspections noted few examples of effective teaching to support the transfer of language skills between English and Irish or other home languages. It is important that teachers understand how languages are connected and how language transfer helps children to understand that their first language can help them learn a second language. Inspections also highlighted that there was insufficient focus on the explicit teaching of phonological awareness in Irish and on integrating these skills across the strands of the curriculum. Phonological awareness needs to be explicitly taught to ensure that children learn the correct pronunciation of the Irish alphabet from an early age. This forms the foundation for accurate oral, reading and writing skills in Irish.

The multilingual nature of many classrooms provides a valuable opportunity to highlight how language transfer can enhance children's learning experiences and foster their positive dispositions towards Irish and other languages and cultures.¹⁴



14 Inspectorate, Department of Education (2024). Meeting Additional Language Needs: Whole-school and Classroom Approaches for Inclusive Language Learning. Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/meeting-additional-language-needs-whole-school-and-classroom-approaches-for-inclusive-.pdf>

Language awareness and cultural awareness

Language and cultural awareness helps children recognise how people use language to communicate. When children are given opportunities to explore and compare different languages and cultures, this sparks their interest in learning a new language and helps them develop transferable skills they can use across languages.¹⁵

Many inspections affirmed school management teams for encouraging the use of Irish in extracurricular activities such as cultural events, the arts and sport. Schools also promoted Irish through whole-school initiatives such as *Gaelbhhratach*, *Seachtain na Gaeilge*, Grandparents' Day and St. Patrick's Day events. Some schools used the TG4 Irish language television channel as a teaching resource during lessons. There were also examples of teachers enhancing children's cultural awareness by integrating Music, Arts, Drama, poetry and Irish legends into language lessons.

Schools play a vital role in affirming the language skills of children who speak different languages. The introduction of modern foreign languages (MFL) in the redeveloped PLC presents an opportunity to foster and extend teachers' understanding of the pedagogical principles and approaches of second (and additional) language learning, language transfer, language awareness and cultural awareness, and linguistic diversity in a multilingual context. Since its launch, the *Languages Connect* initiative has supported the development of children's language skills and cultural awareness in middle and senior classes. One third of the schools inspected were participating in the MFL *Say Yes to*

Languages ten-week module,¹⁶ provided by Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI). In these schools, teachers were observed helping the children to make connections between Irish and other languages.

Linguistic diversity

The increasing linguistic diversity in classrooms provides a valuable opportunity to enhance children's appreciation of language, identity and culture. Teachers can support plurilingualism by recognising and valuing the diverse range of home languages. In the 2022 Census of Ireland, it was recorded that over 750,000 people spoke a language other than English or Irish at home. This represents an increase of 23% from over 600,000 people who spoke a language other than English or Irish at home in 2016.

Overall, the inspections indicate that the potential of linguistic diversity has yet to be fully realised in classrooms. There is scope, overall, for teachers to approach language interconnectedness, language awareness and cultural awareness, and linguistic diversity not as a disparate set of principles, but as interconnected and integrated elements of language learning.

15 van Dijk, C., van Wonderen, E., Koutamanis, E., Kootstra, G. J., Dijkstra, T. and Unsworth, S. (2022). Cross-Linguistic Influence in Simultaneous and Early Sequential Bilingual Children: A Meta-Analysis. *Journal of Child Language*, 49(5), pp 897–929

16 In the 2024/2025 school year, over 1,300 primary schools opted to participate in the *Say Yes to Languages* ten-week module (Languages at Primary School | Languages Connect. Available at: <https://languagesconnect.ie/primary/>) catering for 15 different languages including Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Hebrew, Irish Sign Language, Italian, Japanese, Lithuanian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Spanish, Tamil and Ukrainian. Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI) provides schools with a grant, training and resources to support the implementation of the MFL module

Centrality of play

Play and inquiry-based learning foster positive attitudes towards literacy and support children's overall literacy development.¹⁷ In the PLC, playful approaches to learning literacy in Irish and English include child-directed play, teacher-led activities and shared play between teachers and children. Children naturally integrate literacy into their play when given practical opportunities to develop their language skills in Irish. By engaging in play, teachers can model authentic literacy activities and encourage imaginary conversations.

Inspection findings suggest that the potential of play as a language-learning pedagogy for the learning, teaching and assessment of Irish is not fully realised in primary schools. Playful learning methodologies in Irish were linked primarily to the use of oral language games in small groups. There is need to extend the use of play, particularly the use of child-directed play and shared play between teachers and children, to cultivate children's capacity to develop their language and communication skills in Irish. Children need to be taught the Irish language vocabulary and language structures explicitly to enable them to take the lead in play-based learning.

Cross-curricular and disciplinary literacy

While cross-curricular and disciplinary literacy are closely interconnected, they serve different purposes for schools with different language contexts. Cross-curricular literacy involves the development of the general literacy skills in reading, writing, speaking and listening used in any subject. Disciplinary literacy focuses on the explicit language and critical thinking skills required within a specific subject. The effective enactment of cross-curricular and disciplinary literacy to support children's language learning

in Irish involves integrating literacy skills across different subjects to deepen children's understanding.

Overall, inspections found limited evidence that cross-curricular and disciplinary literacy was applied to children's language experiences in Irish lessons in both English-medium and Irish-medium schools. A thematic approach to integrating Irish across the curriculum was not a feature of practice in many English-medium schools. Children in Irish-medium schools indicated that they enjoyed learning Irish and learning other subjects through Irish, especially when they were provided with opportunities to work collaboratively in researching topics with the help of technology to support their learning. It is acknowledged that the enactment of the PLC will differ depending on whether the school uses Irish or English as the medium of instruction. During professional learning sessions, it is crucial that teachers receive guidance on how to apply the principles and pedagogical approaches in a way that aligns with their school's specific language context.

Critical literacy

Critical literacy is the ability to analyse and think beyond the text to understand issues, question and challenge ideas and perspectives, such as why an author chooses to write some ideas about the topic and exclude others.¹⁸ While critical literacy learning outcomes apply to both Irish and English, it is important that these skills are developed in accordance with each child's language ability and stage of development, as set out in the language progression continua for both languages in the PLC.

Children's critical literacy in Irish is strongly influenced by the school's language of instruction, their exposure to Irish and by how

¹⁷ National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2024). *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. Available at: <https://www.curriculumonline.ie/early-childhood/aistear-2024/>

¹⁸ McLaughlin, M. and DeVogd, G.L. (2004). *Critical literacy: Enhancing students' comprehension of text*. New York: Scholastic

effectively the PLC is implemented throughout the school. Inspections found that the development of children's critical literacy skills in Irish was receiving limited attention in classrooms. Teachers are central to the process of selecting suitable texts in Irish that encourage children to engage in reflective discussions, think critically and express their opinions orally and in writing. To develop critical literacy in Irish, teachers require a high level of proficiency and confidence in the language.

Digital literacy

In today's digital world, it is essential for children to be digitally literate so that they can communicate effectively, think critically and act responsibly online. The PLC enables children to use technology to source, understand and communicate knowledge across various contexts, texts and media.

Inspection findings indicate that digital literacy was used effectively to support the learning, teaching and assessment of Irish in just a small number of schools. In such schools, there was a clear digital learning plan that specifically included Irish-language digital apps to guide classroom practice on a whole-school basis. In a few schools, digital technology was used effectively by teachers to track children's progress in Irish and to provide formative feedback.

Assessment

Effective pedagogical practice involves teachers sequencing and pacing children's learning to enact the curriculum for all learners. Good assessment approaches encourage children to reflect on their learning and help teachers determine whether the teaching approaches used meet the language and communication needs of each child and lead to progression in their learning.

Overall, there was limited evidence of planned assessment or assessment discussions targeting the progressive development of specific language-learning outcomes. In the minority of instances where effective practice was observed during incidental inspections, teachers used both intuitive and planned assessments. Teachers asked questions, provided corrective feedback and adapted lessons in response to children's various learning needs.

Incidental inspections highlighted the need for schools to implement both child-led and teacher-led approaches to assessment (including intuitive assessment, planned assessment and assessment discussions).¹⁹ In the main, schools needed to develop a whole-school approach that included self-assessment and peer-assessment, and teachers needed to place greater emphasis on meaningful assessments to enhance children's language learning.

Curriculum evaluation reports highlighted some examples of high-quality assessment practices in both Irish-medium and English-medium schools. In such schools, teachers used diverse methods, such as observation, questioning and standardised tests, to evaluate children's progress in Irish and to inform their lesson preparation. In a few schools, digital portfolios were used effectively to record children's progress and to share information with parents. There were also examples of children engaging in self-reflection in a way that enabled them to take ownership of their own learning.

Overall, the inspections point to a need for teachers to make greater use of the progression continuum in the PLC to build a holistic picture of each child's language learning progress, including the progress of children with additional learning needs. Using digital technologies appropriately is essential in this context.

¹⁹ National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2007). Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools. Available at: https://ncca.ie/en/resources/assessment_in_the_primary_school_curriculum_guidelines_for_schools/

In conclusion

The process of curriculum enactment is complex. It is influenced by school context, classroom environments, cultural and socio-economic factors, and available supports. The introduction of modern foreign languages in primary schools presents an opportunity to foster and extend teachers' understanding of the pedagogical principles and approaches of second (and additional) language learning, language transfer, language awareness and cultural awareness, and linguistic diversity in a multilingual context. To enact the PLC effectively, teachers need to design and deliver meaningful and effective language-learning experiences for children.

Findings from inspections highlight areas requiring improvement in schools' and teachers' practice to support the learning, teaching and assessment of Irish.

- Overall, the inspection findings indicate that the PLC is not yet enacted fully in primary classrooms. There are gaps between the vision and aims of the PLC and practice observed in many classrooms. There is evidence of inconsistent interpretation, understanding and application of the pedagogical principles and approaches of the PLC with regard to Irish. Many schools clearly needed a more coordinated approach to enacting the PLC, along with more consistent monitoring by school management.
- The variation in teachers' Irish-language proficiency is a matter of significant concern. The inspections indicate that overall standards of teachers' Irish-language fluency in English-medium schools are not what they should be to support the successful enactment of the PLC. This impacted on children's language learning.
- In many cases, lessons in Irish were overly focused on vocabulary acquisition in isolation, with insufficient opportunities provided to use the language in meaningful contexts. There is an overall need to strengthen the communicative approach as the central pedagogical strategy for Irish-language teaching in English-medium schools. Teachers need to use the target language (Irish), avoiding direct translation to English, in order to support children's language learning in Irish. The use of visual aids, hands-on materials and engaging activities is important in this regard.
- In some lessons, teachers relied too heavily on textbooks and commercial programmes. This limited the use of the communicative approach to language learning. Where textbooks are used, they should be integrated into the active learning pedagogical practices advocated in the curriculum.
- While inspection reports acknowledge the efforts of some English-medium schools to promote the extended use of Irish, only a small number of English-medium schools used the CLIL approach to teach other subjects through Irish. Given the potential of CLIL to impact positively on children's acquisition of Irish, there is a need to steadily expand its use.
- In some instances, children were encouraged to make connections between languages. However, despite these positive efforts, conversations with teachers and school leaders revealed uncertainty about how to use the Primary Language Toolkit²⁰ for the PLC effectively and how to apply English language skills to support the teaching of Irish.

20 Available at: <https://curriculumonline.ie/primary/curriculum-areas/primary-language/primary-language-toolkit-2/>

Recommendations to strengthen children's language learning in Irish

- There is a system-wide need to identify and implement new and innovative approaches to develop teachers' language proficiency in Irish. There is also an overall need for teachers to deepen their understanding of the pedagogical principles and approaches of the PLC as they apply to different language contexts. Teachers should access the high-quality teacher professional learning (TPL) supports provided by:
 - GaelAonad and language divisions of Oide
 - National Council for Special Education (NCSE)
 - An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG)
 - Education Support Centres
 - higher education institutions
 - other Irish-language agencies.
- There is a need to build on and extend the work of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) on aligning the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL) with the PLC to support children's language learning in Irish.
- School leaders in English-medium schools should ensure they are familiar with, and engage actively in, the enactment of the PLC as it relates to Irish. It is important that all schools are clear about the priority areas for improvement in the learning, teaching and assessment of Irish, as relevant to their particular language-learning context.
- School-planning processes to support the enactment of the PLC should include:
 - regular opportunities for teachers to discuss and reflect on the eleven pedagogical principles of the curriculum
 - monitoring and assessment of the impact of these principles on children's Irish-language learning in oral language, reading and writing in classrooms
 - strategies to support ongoing teacher professional learning to equip teachers with the necessary skills and understanding of the pedagogical principles and approaches of the curriculum
 - teachers taking ownership of their own professional learning to strengthen and maintain their language proficiency in Irish.
- English-medium schools that have not yet adopted Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), as advocated in the PLC, should begin to use this approach to extend children's language-learning experiences of learning Irish.



Chapter 6

Supporting continuity and progression in the learning of Mathematics in the transition from primary to post-primary education: insights from inspections



Introduction

Transitions between educational settings and stages can have a significant influence on continuity and progression in the educational experiences of children and young people. The Department of Education and Youth Inspectorate has a unique insight into these transitions, given its evaluative and advisory roles regarding educational provision in early learning and care settings and schools. The Inspectorate's cross-sectoral vantage point is being used with increasing frequency, as inspectors with specialist knowledge of different sectors of the education system work together more regularly in schools and settings.

When making policy decisions about curriculum, assessment and teacher professional learning, the department looks at a range of evidence. This includes considering student achievement data from national and international assessments along with what inspection reports tell us about teachers' practice and students' experiences. *The Department of Education Inspectorate Report (2021–2023) and Thematic Review*,¹ for example, considered how learner experiences in primary school might affect achievement patterns of post-primary students, as reported in the *Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022*² and the *Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2023*.³ TIMSS, in particular, invites a cross-sectoral perspective, as it assesses achievement in Mathematics of students in both primary and post-primary education.

This chapter focuses on the learning and teaching of Mathematics across the 'bridging' years of the transition from primary to post-primary education. Primary inspectors and post-primary inspectors of Mathematics worked together to take a closer look at the learning and teaching of Mathematics as children move from the senior classes in primary school to the junior cycle of post-primary education. These inspectors carried out a series of inspections with a focus on curriculum continuity in Mathematics in eleven post-primary schools and twenty of the primary schools from which those post-primary schools typically receive their students. Consideration of the findings of these thirty-one evaluations, together with the findings of curriculum evaluations of Mathematics in seventy-one primary schools and subject inspections of Mathematics in twenty-two post-primary schools, provide the basis for the reflections in this chapter.

Curriculum continuity and progression

Prior to the most recent cycle of curriculum redevelopment, the *Junior Cycle Mathematics Syllabus of 2013* included a bridging framework, which was developed to facilitate a smooth transition for children between primary school and junior cycle.⁴ The bridging framework was designed to support continuity and progression in the content of the syllabuses between primary and post primary and in the teaching approaches used.

1 Charting new directions: supporting the enactment of Ireland's Primary Mathematics Curriculum, in *Department of Education Inspectorate Report (2021–2023) and Thematic Review*. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/the-department-of-education-inspectorate-report-2021-2023-and-thematic-review-pdf-version/>

2 Available at: <https://www.erc.ie/>

3 Available at: <https://www.erc.ie/studies/timss/>

4 Department of Education and Skills (2013). Junior Certificate Mathematics Syllabus. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/collections/junior-certificate-syllabuses-and-prescribed-material/#mathematics>

Recent curriculum redevelopment has strengthened continuity and progression across the curriculum specifications for Mathematics at primary level and in junior cycle. The current junior cycle curriculum for Mathematics was introduced in 2018.⁵ *The Primary Mathematics Curriculum* was introduced in 2023.⁶

The curriculum specifications for Mathematics at primary level and in junior cycle have a shared aim of developing mathematical proficiency, which is recognised in both specifications as having five interconnected and interwoven components:

- conceptual understanding
- procedural fluency
- strategic competence
- adaptive reasoning
- productive disposition.

It is widely recognised, however, that alignment of specifications does not guarantee continuity and progression in learning. The most recent cycles of curriculum development are informed by an understanding of curriculum as something that is constructed through interactions between the published materials, teachers, students and others. Curriculum making is seen as a social process of shared sense making among those involved in enactment, as well as the learner experiences that emerge from that process.⁷

Redeveloped curriculum specifications in primary and post-primary education provide broad learning outcomes that allow for key decisions to be made, at the level of the school and classroom, about what to teach, when to teach it, and how to sequence and pace learning. This acknowledges the centrality of teacher agency to the process of curriculum making, and promotes an active role for teachers and school leaders in shaping the curriculum in response to the context in which they work.

Reflection on inspection findings suggests that students' experience of continuity and progression in Mathematics, in the transition from primary to post-primary education, is underpinned by two key factors. These are:

- teachers' knowledge of the students and their prior learning
- teachers' shared understanding of curriculum and pedagogy.

The remaining sections of this chapter discuss each of these areas in turn.

Teachers' knowledge of the students and their prior learning

Availability and use of information from primary schools on prior learning in Mathematics

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has developed an Education Passport and associated guidance materials to support the transfer of student information from primary to post-primary school.⁸ Schools are required to use the

5 Department of Education and Skills (2018). Junior Cycle Mathematics. Available at: https://curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/4f6cba68-ac41-485c-85a0-32ae6c3559a7/JCSEC18_Maths_Examination-in-2016.pdf

6 Department of Education (2023). Primary Mathematics Curriculum for Primary and Special Schools. Available at: https://curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/484d888b-21d4-424d-9a5c-3d849b0159a1/PrimaryMathematicsCurriculum_EN.pdf

7 Hayward, L., Spillane, J., Walsh, T. and Wyse, D. (2022). From Purpose to Practice – Primary Curriculum Developments in Ireland: Reflections from the Advisory Panel (Primary). Developed in collaboration with and funded by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. p. 17

8 Available at: <https://ncca.ie/en/primary/reporting-and-transfer/education-passport/>

Education Passport materials to support the reporting and transfer of student information at the end of sixth class. The first step in the information transfer process is a request from the post-primary school to the primary school after the child's enrolment in the post-primary school has been confirmed.

Inspectors found that practice with regard to the Education Passport varied considerably from one school to another. In a small number of instances, the post-primary schools had requested the Education Passports, and these had been provided promptly, and the relevant information had been factored into the preparation of learning experiences and programmes of work in Mathematics for first-year students. In most cases, however, information from the Education Passport did not inform teaching and learning of Mathematics in the post-primary school. Typically, this was because the relevant information had not been requested or had not been transferred within the required timeframe. In some cases, assessment information had been transferred effectively but was not taken into account in planning for teaching and learning in Mathematics for first-year students.

Even where the Education Passport is transferred, its capacity to support continuity and progression in learning in Mathematics is relatively limited at the present time. Currently, the assessment information for Mathematics is confined to an overall Standard Ten (STen) score. It does not include information about attainment in the various curriculum strands and process skills, although this information is available from standardised attainment tests conducted up to and including sixth class in the primary school. Therefore, in its current format, the Education Passport is of limited use to teachers of Mathematics who may wish to build on students' prior knowledge and address areas of relative weakness.

Classroom assessment practices

The relatively limited availability of information on students' prior learning on entry to post-primary school is concerning. Furthermore, the use of assessment to support learning in post-primary Mathematics has been identified as an area for development for some time. Classroom assessment practices provide an important way for teachers to gain knowledge



of the students and their prior learning. The recent inspection visits to primary and post-primary schools, with a focus on curriculum continuity in Mathematics, found that the quality of assessment was lower than the quality of practice in other areas of teaching. The proportion of primary schools in which the quality of assessment was good or better was significantly higher than the proportion of post-primary schools in which this was the case.

Where classroom assessment practices were effective in both primary and post-primary schools, they informed preparation for the next steps in teaching and learning and supported the progression of the whole class and individual students. Teachers demonstrated a good knowledge of where the students were in their progression towards the learning outcomes of the relevant curriculum strands and strand units. Textbooks were among the resources used to support the student on the learning path set out in the curriculum. In these classrooms, however, the teachers' knowledge of the learning path to be followed in their subject meant that they were not depending on the students' textbooks for the sequence and the pace of learning.

A key feature in all instances of effective assessment practice, across primary and post-primary levels, was that the teachers measured success in terms of evidence of progression in learning. Assessment information (a combination of the teacher's knowledge of the student and of the curriculum) informed the teacher's decision about the learner experience needed to support students on the next steps of their learning journey.

Where assessment practice was particularly good, feedback from the teacher was used to foster the students' capacity for self-assessment and the development of their ownership of, and responsibility for, their own learning. This inclusion of the student in the

assessment process supports the development of key competencies and skills in primary education, junior cycle and senior cycle. The need for more effective provision of feedback featured frequently in the recommendations by inspectors to both primary and post-primary schools during the inspections of Mathematics.

The recommendations made by inspectors to individual schools highlighted the need for teachers to improve practice with regard to the following key strategies of formative assessment identified by Professor Dylan William⁹:

- clarifying, sharing and understanding learning intentions and success criteria
- eliciting evidence of learning
- providing feedback that moves learning forward
- activating students as instructional resources for one another
- activating students as owners of their own learning.

As stated by William (2017), "*Formative assessment involves getting the best possible evidence about what students have learned and then using this information to decide what to do next*".¹⁰ The limitations of current arrangements in the Irish education system for the transfer of assessment information from primary to post-primary school mean that there is often very little evidence on which post-primary teachers of Mathematics can build a knowledge of the student and their prior learning. As a result, teacher decisions about 'what to do next' are not always as well informed as they should be. Evidence from inspection indicates that this can lead to the allocation of unnecessary time and resources to learner outcomes already achieved in primary school, and levels of challenge that do

9 William, D. (2017). Embedded formative assessment: strategies for classroom assessment that drives student engagement and learning. *Solution Tree*. 10.1007/978-981-10-3654-5_31

10 Ibid. p. 56

not take account of strengths and weaknesses in the prior learning of individual students or groups of students. This is a significant obstacle to students' experience of continuity and progression in the learning of Mathematics. Classroom assessment practices following the transition to post-primary education do not appear to make up for this deficit.

The inspections also found that an awareness of students' *future* curriculum needs was an important support for continuity and progression in the learning of Mathematics. In this regard, it was noted that there was very limited evidence of calculator use in the senior classes of the primary schools visited, even though calculators are a useful resource for teaching Mathematics in these classes, and have become essential in post-primary education.

In recent years, there has been an increased awareness of the need for teaching and learning to respond to the needs of more able students. *Ireland's Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024–2033*¹¹ includes actions aimed at providing appropriate challenge and support for more able students in Mathematics. The inspection findings show that the learning experiences and outcomes of these students were particularly affected by shortcomings in the transfer of knowledge about students' abilities and their prior learning, and deficiencies in classroom assessment practices in the post-primary schools. The inspections also found that an over-reliance on the students' textbooks, to support the pacing and sequencing of learning, affected these students disproportionately.

Overall, there is evidence from inspections that teachers' knowledge of the prior learning of first-year students is not sufficient to provide effective support for continuity and progression in students' learning in Mathematics. It would be beneficial to explore potential for greater sharing and use of the assessment information held by primary schools and for ongoing development of classroom assessment practices in the early years of post-primary education.

Teachers' shared understanding of curriculum and pedagogy

As well as teacher's knowledge of students and their prior learning, continuity and progression in Mathematics also depend upon a shared understanding of curriculum and pedagogy among teachers in both sectors. This shared understanding was evident to varying extents in relation to three components of mathematical proficiency, the development of which is the over-arching aim of the curriculum specifications for both primary and junior cycle education. These are productive disposition, adaptive reasoning and strategic competence.

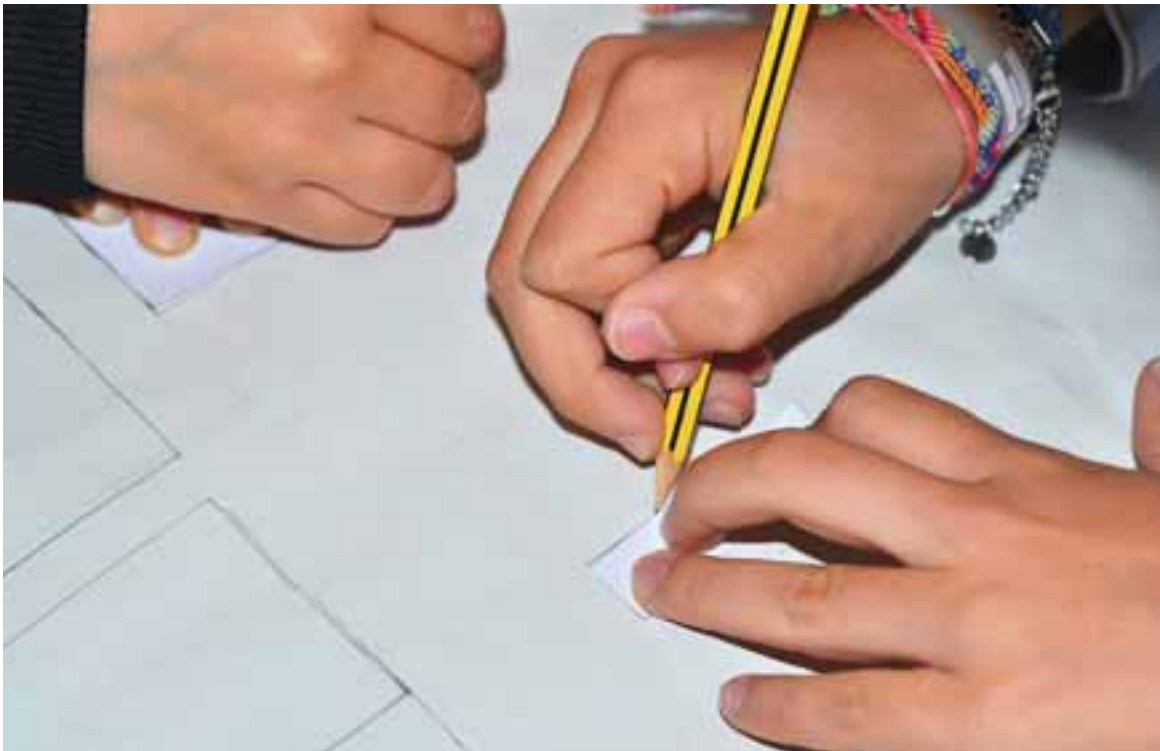
Productive disposition

The *Primary Mathematics Curriculum* defines productive disposition among students as "*the tendency to see Mathematics as practical, useful and worthwhile*".¹² This definition is extended in the junior cycle mathematics curriculum as the "*habitual inclination to see Mathematics as sensible, useful, and worthwhile, coupled with a belief in diligence, perseverance and one's own efficacy*".¹³

11 Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/literacy-numeracy-and-digital-literacy-strategy/>

12 Department of Education (2023). *Primary Mathematics Curriculum for Primary and Special Schools*. Available at: https://curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/484d888b-21d4-424d-9a5c-3d849b0159a1/PrimaryMathematicsCurriculum_EN.pdf p. 12

13 Department of Education and Skills (2018). *Junior Cycle Mathematics*. Available at: https://curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/4f6cba68-ac41-485c-85a0-32ae6c3559a7/JCSEC18_Maths_Examination-in-2016.pdf p. 5



A lack of “*belief in ... one’s own efficacy*” can be a significant obstacle to learning and progression in Mathematics. In focus groups conducted as part of inspections, students referred to their attitude to Mathematics being formed from the middle classes in primary school and to their perception that Mathematics became more difficult at that stage. In post-primary schools in which students were allocated to Mathematics classes by ability, students made frequent reference to class or grade level allocation, and there was evidence that it formed an important part of their identity as students of Mathematics. Research indicates that practices such as streaming and setting of students can have a negative impact on the development of attitudes, beliefs and expectations associated with the formation of a productive disposition.¹⁴ Furthermore, the limited information available on the prior learning of first-year students means that the evidence base for allocating students to classes by ability is questionable.

During several inspections, teachers and school leaders shared their perception that boys tend to have a greater belief in their own efficacy, even when their assessed mathematical ability might not support such a belief. They also observed that boys demonstrated a greater willingness to take risks and attempt answers even if they might be incorrect. Girls were perceived by teachers and school leaders to be more likely to double-check their work for accuracy before answering. In some cases, teachers surmised that a belief in the importance of neatness and structure prevented girls from experimenting or exploring alternative solutions.

These observations by teachers and school leaders are relevant to the findings of the two most recent large-scale international assessments in which Ireland participated. In PISA 2022, the difference in achievement between males and females in mathematical literacy in Ireland was greater than the OECD average. TIMSS 2023 showed that there were

¹⁴ Francis B., Taylor, B. and Tereshchenko, A. (2019). *Reassessing ‘Ability’ Grouping: Improving practice for equity and attainment*. Taylor and Francis



significant gaps in achievement between male and female students in Mathematics in second year of post-primary school, with males significantly outperforming female students. While there was no significant difference in overall achievement by gender in fourth class of primary school, more boys than girls reached the advanced benchmark in Mathematics. It is important, therefore, that we consider if learner experiences in primary and post-primary schools are contributing in any way to differences in achievement in these assessments by gender.

Concerns expressed by teachers and school leaders about the productive disposition of girls in Mathematics did not appear to result in any co-ordinated whole-school actions to address this. Overall, inspectors found that schools did not have a coherent approach to identifying and addressing gender-specific attitudes and outcomes in Mathematics and were unclear as to how to approach such issues.

The '*tendency to see Mathematics as practical, useful and worthwhile*'¹⁵ is supported by classroom environments that provide opportunities for inquiry-based learning. In classrooms where inquiry-based learning was used effectively, inspectors observed that students demonstrated a high level of independence in investigating questions set by the teacher. Furthermore, students also had opportunities to generate and explore their own questions. In discussing their practice with inspectors, some teachers in these classrooms observed that practical, learner-led, inquiry-based activities were more effective, in the development of overall mathematical proficiency, than textbook-based approaches.

In some post-primary classrooms, while hands-on practical activities took place, there was scope to link these more explicitly with the relevant learning intentions and success criteria. Some teachers noted that most post-

15 Department of Education (2023). Primary Mathematics Curriculum for Primary and Special Schools. Available at: https://curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/484d888b-21d4-424d-9a5c-3d849b0159a1/PrimaryMathematicsCurriculum_EN.pdf p. 12

primary students associated the use of manipulative resources in the learning of Mathematics with the early years of primary school and that this was an inhibiting factor.

Learning experiences that involve collaboration with other students can have a positive impact on productive disposition. However, there is evidence from inspection that opportunities for collaborative learning are much less frequent in post-primary than in primary education and occur with decreasing frequency between first year and third year. It was found that the seating arrangements and layout of the learning environment typically provided in primary classrooms allowed for more collaboration and students working in groups than those that were typically provided in post-primary classrooms.

Overall, there is scope for improvement in practice regarding the development of productive disposition in Mathematics. There is a need for greater awareness in both primary and post-primary schools of factors affecting the disposition of girls in relation to Mathematics. There is a need also for greater recognition of the impact of organisational and pedagogical practices on the development of productive disposition in post-primary schools.

Adaptive reasoning

The *Primary Mathematics Curriculum* defines adaptive reasoning as “the capacity to use logic to understand, explain and justify one’s thinking”.¹⁶ The junior cycle mathematics specification provides a similar definition.

The inspections highlight three particular areas in need of improvement in many of the schools inspected in order to support students’ adaptive reasoning: the development of mathematical communication; the use of questioning by teachers; and the use of digital technologies.

Inspections in both primary and post-primary schools often found a need for the development of students’ mathematical language in order to assist them in reflecting on and communicating their own learning and in reasoning, justifying and generalising their strategies.



¹⁶ Ibid

Some teachers in both primary and post-primary settings demonstrated highly effective questioning techniques. These teachers frequently asked well-considered, open-ended questions that encouraged higher-order thinking and required students to explain their reasoning and justify their solutions. These teachers typically encouraged students to take time to consider possibilities, and to share those possibilities with a peer before answering. They also encouraged students to identify the mathematical concepts and procedures that were relevant to the problem to be solved.

Where practices to support adaptive reasoning were less than effective, opportunities for dialogue with, and among, students were limited. In some instances, teachers missed opportunities to challenge students' thinking by not probing incorrect answers or asking follow-up questions. In others, questioning strategies were focused on procedural recall rather than conceptual understanding.

Digital technologies have significant potential to enable students to visualise and experiment with mathematical models at their own pace. The use of multimedia resources, interactive exercises and adaptive assessments provide great opportunities to enhance and reinforce learning. There was evidence that primary school students had regular opportunities to reinforce their learning in Mathematics using digital technologies. As students transitioned to post primary such opportunities became less frequent and were often confined to the use of organisational and reference tools. Inspectors found that there was scope in both sectors for more frequent opportunities for students to use digital technologies to support adaptive reasoning.



17 Department of Education and Skills (2018). Junior Cycle Mathematics. Available at: https://curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/4f6c6a68-ac41-485c-85a0-32ae6c3559a7/JCSEC18_Maths_Examination-in-2016.pdf p. 5

Strategic competence

The junior cycle mathematics specification defines strategic competence as the *“ability to formulate, represent, and solve mathematical problems in both familiar and unfamiliar contexts”*.¹⁷ The *Primary Mathematics Curriculum* has a similar definition.

One of the particularly positive findings of the inspections was that problem solving was a core focus in many primary and post-primary classrooms. In most instances, teachers’ practice was informed by a recognition that there can be multiple, equally effective approaches to solving a particular problem. Where practices to develop strategic competence were most effective, teachers supported students in using concrete materials, the problems were linked to real-life situations and there were opportunities for students to collaborate with one another. Concrete materials such as number lines, counting sticks and fraction manipulatives supported students in conceptualising mathematical ideas. Some teachers successfully linked mathematical problem solving to everyday situations, such as measuring distances in hallways, analysing shopping catalogues and engaging in construction-related tasks. The facilitation by teachers of peer discussion and group problem-solving required students to articulate and justify their reasoning and modify it, if necessary, having listened to the observations of peers.

In a small number of lessons, problem-solving activities placed an exclusive emphasis on procedural fluency and could have been used more effectively to enhance conceptual understanding.

Conclusion and considerations

Continuity and progression in the teaching and learning of Mathematics is underpinned by teachers’ knowledge of the students and their prior learning, and a shared understanding of curriculum and pedagogy. Inspection findings indicate that there are opportunities for improvement in both of these areas.

There is considerable scope to enhance teachers’ knowledge of the prior learning of first-year students in order to support more targeted allocation of teaching and learning resources and supports. This might be addressed effectively through system-level guidance on greater sharing of assessment information between primary and post-primary school, as well as the further development of classroom assessment practices in early post-primary education.

In relation to developing a shared understanding of curriculum and pedagogy among teachers in both primary and post-primary education, inspection findings indicate that there is scope for a more explicit focus on mathematical proficiency, the development of which is an over-arching aim of curriculum specifications in both primary and junior cycle education.

Considerations

Transfer of information on prior learning in Mathematics from primary to post-primary schools

Under the current Education Passport arrangements, an overall STen score in Mathematics for each student is shared by the student's primary school with the post-primary school in which they have enrolled, along with some teacher observations. Primary schools hold considerably more data on students' strengths and weaknesses across content strands and process skills. The department should consider steps at system level to facilitate and provide guidance on the sharing of more detailed information from standardised assessment tests and other sources to provide a more rounded picture of the student as a learner of Mathematics. As part of this work, the department should consider engaging with NCCA to explore possibilities for the development of the Education Passport.

Promoting cross-sectoral professional learning

With a view to supporting continuity and progression, consideration should be given to the development of cross-sectoral resources to support effective practices in teaching, learning and assessment for primary teachers and post-primary teachers of Mathematics, with an initial focus on the following:

- the development of the five components of mathematical proficiency, a shared aim of the primary and junior cycle curriculum specifications
- whole-school and classroom practices to address gender patterns in achievement in Mathematics
- implementation of NCCA guidance on assessment to support differentiation of teaching and learning
- supporting more able students in fulfilling their potential in Mathematics
- effective use of digital technologies to support learning in Mathematics.



Chapter 7

Perspectives on bullying behaviour (2024)



Introduction

Cineáltas

Ensuring that every child and young person feels recognised, valued and understood is at the heart of the Department of Education and Youth vision for schools. The department's *Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying* (2022)¹ is a whole-of-education strategy approach to preventing and addressing bullying behaviour in schools. It covers bullying in all its forms, whether online or offline, and includes bullying based on race, gender identity, sexual orientation and sexual harassment.

Cineáltas is rooted in the department's *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice*,² as well as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) guidance on whole-of-education responses to bullying.³ It reinforces the commitment to fostering inclusive school communities where every child and young person's rights are upheld.

Cineáltas is underpinned by four guiding principles: prioritising prevention; supporting school communities; strengthening oversight and awareness; and fostering a renewed sense of partnership and collective responsibility. These principles support schools in creating inclusive, caring environments where every child feels safe, valued and supported.

2024 developments

In June 2024, the department published new procedures for schools, the *Bí Cineálta Procedures to Prevent and Address Bullying Behaviour for Primary and Post-Primary Schools*.⁴ The new procedures are grounded in a child-rights-based and partnership approach. *Bí Cineálta* emphasises the importance of children and young people, staff, parents and boards of management collaborating to prevent and address bullying behaviour. The procedures address contemporary challenges, including cyberbullying, gender identity-based bullying and sexual harassment. In addition, they require schools to develop an individual *Bí Cineálta* policy in consultation with the whole-school community and to review that policy annually. The procedures came into effect from the commencement of the 2025/2026 school year.

The department also established an Implementation and Evaluation Group, chaired by the Secretary General, to oversee the delivery of all actions under *Cineáltas*.

In September 2024, a national *Cineáltas* showcase event for schools was held to recognise, celebrate and disseminate best practice among schools in preventing and addressing bullying behaviour. The department also distributed the *Cineáltas* flag to all schools, symbolising the shared values of kindness, respect, equality and inclusion that underpin the national approach.

1 Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/cine%c3%a1ltas-action-plan-on-bullying/>

2 Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/wellbeing-policy-statement-and-framework-for-practice-20182023.pdf>

3 UNESCO (2020). International Conference on School Bullying: recommendations by the Scientific Committee on preventing and addressing school bullying and cyberbullying. UNESCO Digital Library. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374794>

4 Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/bi-cinealta-procedures-to-prevent-and-address-bullying-behaviour-for-primary-and-post-.pdf>

Inspection – a focus on preventing and addressing bullying behaviour

*Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying (2022)*⁵ was followed by the department's *Cineáltas Implementation Plan 2023–2027*,⁶ which was published in April 2023. One of the actions in the implementation plan is that the Inspectorate will prepare an annual report, for five years, on the views of children, young people and parents on how their school prevents and addresses bullying behaviour. This report is the second of the five annual reports.

The first Inspectorate report, *Perspectives on Bullying Behaviour (2023)*⁷ was published in 2024. That report drew on survey responses from over 2,300 children and young people, 3,300 parents, 800 teachers and 64 principals across 106 schools. The report highlighted that, generally, parents, teachers and students viewed schools as positive places where bullying was not tolerated. Challenges were also identified – especially in post-primary education, where a significant number of students (almost one-third) indicated that they felt unwelcome. Many post-primary students surveyed for the 2023 report expressed concerns about the effectiveness of schools in managing bullying behaviour.

This second Inspectorate report, *Perspectives on Bullying Behaviour (2024)*, is informed by data that was gathered through an online survey that was conducted during Anti-Bullying Week 2024. Responses were gathered from 4,818 children and young people, 5,155 parents and 1,336 principals and teachers.⁸ The survey explored a range of perspectives on school-related bullying behaviour and the impact of whole-school, anti-bullying initiatives. It included multiple-

choice response options, rating scales and open-ended questions to gather both numerical data and descriptive responses. Closed questions were used to collect factual, quantitative data.

This report uses the survey data to explore the strategies used by schools during 2024 to prevent and address bullying behaviour. It presents the perspectives of children, young people, parents, teachers and principals on the impact of these efforts and highlights areas for further improvement. The report outlines approaches that have been proven to be effective in fostering a culture where every child feels valued, included and safe. It also includes a focus on cyberbullying.

This report, like the 2023 report, recognises that children and young people are profoundly shaped by the social context in which they live. They influence and are influenced by social relations and the broader culture.⁹ The *Cineáltas Implementation Plan* set out a range of ways in which teachers would have access to appropriate up-to-date training on measures to prevent and address bullying. Training to support school leaders to implement the *Bí Cineálta* procedures commenced in the latter months of 2024. It is essential that school leaders create regular opportunities for teachers to meet and discuss whole-school approaches to bullying behaviour. Teachers also have a professional responsibility to communicate any gaps they perceive in their training. With the support of school leadership, they should be enabled to access professional learning opportunities that are appropriately aligned to their current needs. Ultimately, teachers carry a professional responsibility to provide a safe, inclusive learning environment for the children and young people in their care.

5 Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/cinealtas-action-plan-on-bullying.pdf>

6 Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/cinealtas-implementation-plan-2023-2027.pdf>

7 Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/perspectives-on-bullying-behaviour-2023.pdf>

8 Note: Percentages are based on the valid responses to each individual question (1,039 primary/special pupils and 3,779 post-primary students). Minor variations in response numbers occurred across questions. No statistical significance testing was conducted

9 Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Like the 2023 report, the findings of this report are organised around the four key areas of the department's *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice*: culture and environment; curriculum (teaching and learning); policy and planning; and relationships and partnerships.

Limitations of this report

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings presented in this report. The report is based solely on the responses collected. As purposive sampling was used, findings are generalisable only to the sampled population, not the wider population. Some divergent views are present in the data and are discussed in relevant sections.

This report presents survey responses from a single point in time, relying on participants' personal accounts and interpretations of bullying behaviour, which may vary by context. No statistical comparisons have been made with the 2023 survey data, and differing response rates between years may introduce bias and affect generalisability. Consequently, the report does not establish direct correlations or causality. Nonetheless, similar and contrasting trends to those observed in 2023 are noted where relevant.

Table 1: Participating schools

Participating schools				
	Primary	Special	Post primary	Total
School type	28	8	29	65

Table 2: Categories of respondents for each school type

Categories of respondents for each school type				
	Primary	Special	Post primary	Total
Children and young people	1039		3779	4818
Parents	2099	55	3001	5155

Children and young people's experiences of bullying behaviour:

- 25% of primary/special school students perceived that they had experienced bullying behaviour (one in every four)
- 17% of post-primary students perceived that they had experienced bullying behaviour (one in every six)
- 29% of parents reported their child was involved in an incident of bullying behaviour.

Effectiveness of interventions:

- Primary schools: 70% of students who told an adult received support and for 45% of those students who told an adult the bullying stopped
- Post-primary schools: 67% of students who told an adult received support and for 43% of those students who told an adult the bullying stopped.

Reporting bullying behaviour to a trusted adult:

- 63% of primary students who perceived that they had experienced bullying behaviour told an adult
- 50% of affected post-primary students who perceived that they had experienced bullying behaviour told an adult.



Culture and environment

Creating a positive and welcoming school environment

According to the survey responses, almost all principals and teachers (92%) indicated that there was a positive atmosphere in their school and that their school welcomed all children and young people (97%). The *Children's School Lives* (CSL) national study report (2019–2023)¹⁰ provides comparable evidence that aligns with this.

“Our school is inclusive: we value all students equally and are consistent in our approach to handling bullying promptly and effectively.”

School principal

Most children and young people attending primary and special schools (88%) indicated that their school was a positive place to be, a figure in line with the 2023 findings. The majority of post-primary students (73%) agreed that their school was a positive place to be. However, older respondents in post-primary schools, particularly those in transition year and sixth year, were significantly less positive than those in first year. This may reflect the increased academic demands of sixth year, or the more complex social or peer-related challenges experienced by older children.

Almost all children and young people in primary and special schools (93%) and most young people in post-primary schools (82%) indicated that their school welcomed all students, irrespective of appearance, abilities, backgrounds, interests or lifestyle. Most (79%) indicated that words and images that encouraged respect were displayed around their school.

Most parents (87%) indicated that there was a positive atmosphere in their child's school. Furthermore, almost all parents (93%) indicated that their child's school was welcoming of all children and young people. Almost all principals and teachers indicated that the atmosphere in their school was positive (92%) and that all students were welcome in their school (97%).

Most children and young people in primary and special schools (74%) and most young people in post-primary schools (82%) confirmed that events were organised during the year to make their school a more welcoming place. Most children and young people in primary and special schools (83%) and most young people in post-primary schools (83%) indicated that they were supported and encouraged to take part in activities at lunchtime and after school.

Respondents were asked to share examples of activities that contributed to making their school a welcoming and positive environment. In their responses, children and young people highlighted a variety of initiatives, including inclusive events and celebrations, peer support programmes such as buddy systems and peer mentoring, extra-curricular activities and classroom practices such as group projects. They also referenced activities that encouraged student participation and leadership in school life, and school-wide initiatives such as anti-bullying campaigns.

“A buddy programme for junior infants and sixth class.”

Primary school student

“Lots of different sports and clubs to join.”

Post-primary school student

10 Available at: <https://cslstudy.wpenginpowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/CSL-Report-Number-6-v6.pdf>

Creating a respectful school community

Almost all children and young people in primary and special schools (90%) indicated that their school did not allow the use of disrespectful words and phrases. However, respondents in senior primary classes reported higher rates of disrespectful language. While 82% of students in third class confirmed that disrespectful language was not allowed, only 58% of students in sixth class indicated the same.

In post-primary schools, most students (76%) indicated that their school did not permit the use of disrespectful language. These findings are in line with the *CSL Report 6 (2023)*,¹¹ which documents that the vast majority of children in primary and special schools perceive their school environment as one where disrespectful language is not tolerated. However, similar to the findings of this report, the CSL study also finds that older children, particularly those in senior classes, report higher incidences of disrespectful language, indicating a potential decrease in perceived enforcement as children and young people progress through the school system.

Most principals and teachers (88%) and most parents (80%) indicated that standards of behaviour were generally good. The majority (68%) of children and young people in primary and special schools indicated that most students in their class or year group were well behaved. Young people in post-primary schools were less positive; 57% indicated that this was true in respect of students in their year group. Almost a third (31%) indicated that this was sometimes true with over a tenth (13%) indicating that this was rarely or never true in respect of students in their year groups.

Most children and young people in primary and special schools (77%) confirmed that students in their school were encouraged and rewarded for positive behaviour. However, 13% were unsure and 10% did not agree that this was established practice in their school. In

post-primary schools, more than half of the respondents (58%) indicated that such positive incentives were in place. Almost a fifth (19%) indicated that this did not happen and the remaining 23% were unsure.

Almost all children and young people in primary and special schools (94%) and most post-primary students (82%) indicated that they felt respected by their teachers. Most parents (85%) indicated that, in their experience, children and young people in their child's school were treated fairly and respectfully. Almost all principals and teachers (94%) indicated that this was true in respect of their school.

“Positive reinforcement is used daily within the school. ‘Nice One!’ awards focus on the treatment of others as opposed to anything to do with academics.”

School principal

Confidence in school rules

Almost all children and young people in primary and special schools (92%) indicated that there were clear rules in their school about not hurting other people. Most (80%) agreed that the rules in their school helped to prevent bullying. Over three-quarters (76%) indicated that most students in their school followed the school rules related to bullying.

Most post-primary students (83%) indicated that, in their school, there were clear rules about not hurting other people. Two-thirds of post-primary students (66%) expressed confidence in their school's rules. A concerning finding was that over one in every five post-primary students (21%) indicated that the students in their school did not follow the rules in relation to bullying.

11 Available at: <https://cslstudy.wpenginpowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/CSL-Report-Number-6-v6.pdf>

While most principals and teachers (77%) indicated that the code of behaviour was implemented consistently in their school, almost one in every eight principals (12%) disagreed.

“As a special school, it can be difficult to implement consistent rules for each student. Each child’s behaviours are dealt with accordingly within my classroom.”

School principal

A sense of belonging

Almost all principals and teachers (96%) indicated that an important goal for their school community was to support students to have a sense of belonging and connection. Most children and young people in primary and special schools (87%) indicated that they felt a sense of belonging to their school. Under a tenth (9%) indicated that this was sometimes true in their case. For the remaining 4% of respondents, it was either rarely (2.5%) or never (1.7%) true.

A tenth of post-primary students (10%) indicated that they rarely or never felt a sense of belonging to their school. Approximately a fifth (21%) indicated that they sometimes felt like they belonged. Most parents (84%) were confident that their child felt a sense of belonging and connection to school.

Most parents (85%) indicated that their child was included by their peers in classroom and school life, if they wished to be. Similarly, most children and young people (89%) indicated that they were included by their classmates in the classroom and during recreation times, if they wanted to be. Students in post-primary schools were less positive. While 78% indicated they were included by their

classmates, 15% indicated that this happened only sometimes. 7% indicated that this rarely or never occurred.

Feeling safe to be oneself

5% of children and young people in primary and special schools indicated that it was rarely or never safe to be themselves in school. Meanwhile, 8% felt it was sometimes safe. While the majority of young people in post-primary schools (71%) indicated that it was safe to be themselves in school, 18% indicated that this was sometimes true. The findings at post-primary level mirror the findings of the 2023 report. For the remaining 11% of the post-primary students, it was rarely or never safe to be themselves in school.

Research by Porter et al. (2021)¹² within the context of the United Kingdom underscores that feeling part of the school and feeling safe are deeply interconnected. Supportive relationships with teachers and peers help children and young people to feel both recognised and accepted. This is crucial to ensuring that children and young people feel safe to be themselves. Such a sense of psychological safety acts as a buffer against potential ridicule or threats to self-esteem and is associated with a range of positive outcomes, including improved mental health, self-esteem and academic success.

Feeling safe and cared for in school

Almost all children and young people in primary and special schools (93%) confirmed that their teachers supervised them during recreation periods. However, a significant proportion felt that their opinions were not considered regarding areas and times when additional supervision might be required. 71% of children and young people were either unsure or disagreed that they had been asked for their ideas. In post-primary schools, almost

12 Porter, T., McDermott, H., Daniels, H. and Ingram, J. (2021). Feeling part of the school and feeling safe: Further development of a tool for investigating school belonging. *Educational Studies*. p. 3

all students (91%) indicated that their teachers supervised them on the corridors and common areas during break times and lunchtimes. 70% were either unsure or disagreed that they had been asked for their views on the efficacy of whole-school supervision practices.

Most children and young people in primary and special schools (75%) were confident that their teacher watched out for signs of bullying behaviour. Almost a fifth (19%) were unsure. Notably, more than one in every two children and young people in post-primary schools (54%) confirmed that staff in their school watched out for signs of bullying behaviour. Over a tenth (14%) disagreed and approximately a third (32%) were unsure. This finding is interesting as it presents the perception of children and young people in terms of whether the adults were consciously looking out for them and scanning for signs of bullying behavior. The perception that an adult is looking out for them may directly help to contribute to the child or young person's sense of safety.

In their survey responses, most parents (89%) indicated that they felt their child was safe in school. Almost all principals and teachers (96%) confirmed that the creation of a safe environment for children and young people was a priority in their school. In their qualitative commentary, many principals highlighted the importance of ensuring that adequate supervision levels were in place:

“Prevention. Prevention. Prevention. My mantra is that the best way to prevent bullying in schools is supervision and vigilance.”

School principal

Responding to bullying behaviour

Almost all children and young people in primary and special schools (92%) indicated that bullying was not tolerated in their school. Similarly, in post-primary schools, most students (86%) confirmed that bullying was not accepted in their schools. Most parents (82%) were confident that bullying was not accepted in their child's school. Principals and teachers were more confident, with almost all (95%) indicating that bullying was not acceptable in their school.

Almost all children and young people in primary and special schools (94%) indicated that they were encouraged to report bullying concerns in their school. In post-primary schools, almost two-thirds of respondents (64%) indicated that the students in their school understood that they had a role to play in preventing bullying. However, almost a quarter (23%) were unsure and over a tenth (13%) disagreed. Similar responses were returned at post-primary level in respect of a survey item asking if the importance of reporting bullying was understood by students in the school. While 65% indicated that this was the case, 14% disagreed and the remaining 21% were unsure.

In their qualitative commentary, principals and teachers highlighted the importance of accessible reporting mechanisms, support and referral services.

“Students feel very comfortable talking about and reporting bullying. The tutor system offers students a ‘go-to’ person when they have an issue and year heads are very quick to deal with concerns.”

Post-primary teacher



A significant minority of all parents surveyed (29%) indicated that their child had been involved in a bullying incident in school. Of these parents, over half (56%) indicated that the way in which the school had handled this incident was effective while 29% disagreed. In addition, over half of these parents (53%) indicated that the school had adhered to the procedures outlined in its anti-bullying policy.

Curriculum: Teaching and learning

Learning experiences

Most children and young people in primary and special schools (89%) confirmed that their teachers gave them regular opportunities to collaborate with other students in pairs or in small groups. Most post-primary respondents (80%) indicated that their teachers facilitated them to engage in collaborative learning with their peers. Over a tenth of students (11%) disagreed.

In their survey responses, almost all (92%) respondents in primary and special schools indicated that they had learned how to interact in a friendly and kind way in their class. However, responses from post-primary students were less positive, with 76% indicating that they had received similar guidance.

In line with the 2023 report, most post-primary students (79%) confirmed that they had received opportunities to learn how to interact respectfully online. Over a tenth (12%) indicated that this had not happened in their schools. Similar findings were evident among students in primary and special schools; most (79%) confirmed that they had learned about respectful online interactions, while 10% disagreed.

Principals and teachers were confident that, in their school, children and young people were taught how to communicate and behave respectfully (91%). They were less confident about children and young people's learning about behaving respectfully in an online environment; 84% confirmed that students learned how to behave respectfully online in their school.

Learning to recognise and respond to bullying behaviour

In primary and special schools, most children and young people (87%) confirmed that their teachers helped them to learn about different types of bullying. They indicated that they had learned to recognise if someone was trying to bully them or someone else (85%) and that they had discussed what to do if they were being bullied (89%).

Most post-primary students also confirmed that they had learned about different types of bullying (83%), how to recognise bullying behaviour (74%) and the actions to take if they were being bullied (72%).

Survey responses from almost all principals and teachers indicated that, in their school, children and young people learned how to recognise bullying (91%), how to respond to bullying (90%) and about the different forms bullying could take (93%). Most parents agreed that their child's school provided them with opportunities to learn about bullying (84%), that their child had learned how to recognise if someone was trying to bully them or someone else (79%), and that their child had learned how to respond to bullying (68%). Most (75%) also agreed that their child had learned in school about different forms of bullying.

Many principals and teachers provided examples of how they had noticed improvements in children and young people's ability to recognise and respond to bullying behaviour.

"Students are a lot more comfortable coming forward when they are experiencing bullying."

School principal

The value of learning about bullying

Most children and young people in primary and special schools (81%) found their lessons on bullying to be helpful. In contrast, post-primary students were less positive, with almost two-thirds (63%) agreeing that their

classroom based learning about bullying was helpful. The remaining students either disagreed (18%) or were unsure (19%).

In their qualitative commentary, many teachers highlighted the value of the social personal and health (SPHE) curriculum, while a few commented on the challenges of ensuring that the curriculum remained relevant in a time of misinformation on social media and political shifts, particularly from extreme influences. Some also referenced the need to educate children and young people about the importance of positive bystander interventions in bullying incidents.

"What really influences what happens in school is what is happening out there in society. If homophobia rises in society, we see a rise in school."

School principal

Policy and planning

Involvement in policy development and review

Almost all parents (90%) confirmed that their child's school shared school policies with them. However, less than half (41%) could confirm that the school sought their input in the development of these policies. Around one-third of parents (34%) indicated that they had been asked for their views on the school's work to prevent and address bullying, 44% were unsure and approximately one-fifth (22%) disagreed. 22% of parents indicated that their child's school had made changes based on what parents said in relation to bullying, 65% indicated that they did not know and the remaining 12% disagreed.

While principals and teachers were confident that the anti-bullying policy was readily available to the school community (94%), they were less certain about parents' opportunities to contribute to its development and review (60%). Most (81%) indicated that teachers were given an opportunity to contribute to the development and review of this policy. While

78% of principals and teachers were confident that their school's anti-bullying policy was reviewed annually, almost a fifth (18%) indicated that they had no strong opinion on this survey item, suggesting that they may not have been involved meaningfully in this process.

Most primary and post-primary students (79% and 83% respectively) indicated that they were familiar with their school's anti-bullying policy. 61% of principals and teachers indicated that students were involved in the process of developing and reviewing the anti-bullying policy. However, less than half of post-primary students (49%) felt that their teachers had solicited their ideas on preventing and addressing bullying. Of the students who had been asked to share their ideas, 55% believed that their school had made changes based on these suggestions. In primary and special schools, 60% indicated that they had been asked for their ideas but less than half (44%) of these children and young people felt that these suggestions had led to any noticeable changes.

Less than half of post-primary students (49%) felt that their teachers had solicited their ideas on preventing and addressing bullying.

Perceptions of policy effectiveness

Most principals and teachers agreed that their anti-bullying policy fully informed their school's work to prevent and address bullying behaviour (89%), that the policy was consistently implemented (82%) and that it was effective in addressing bullying concerns (79%).

In primary and special schools, while most children and young people (71%) indicated that the students in their class understood that they had a role to play in preventing bullying, 8% disagreed and over one-fifth (21%) were unsure.

Most children and young people in primary and special schools (75%) confirmed that they had not experienced bullying behaviour in school, while 25% perceived that they had been bullied. In numerical terms, this means that 259 of the children surveyed indicated that they had experienced bullying.

250 children in primary and special schools responded to the survey item on whether or not they had told an adult in their school that they were being bullied. Of these children, most (63%) indicated that they had told an adult, but over a third (37%) indicated that they had not.

There were 158 responses from children in primary and special schools to the survey item about whether the school had responded once they had been informed about the bullying. 70% of those who responded to this question indicated that they were helped after telling an adult, and 45% said that the bullying stopped. However, 30% perceived that they were not helped, and 45% indicated that the bullying continued despite the respondent having reported it to the school. These figures underline the need for schools to build greater trust among students and ensure that support systems are responsive, visible and consistently effective in addressing bullying when it is reported.

Survey responses from children and young people in primary and special school in both years, 2023 and 2024, reveal enduring challenges in how bullying is addressed within schools. While many feel able to report bullying to adults and receive support, a significant minority remain reluctant to disclose their experiences or feel dissatisfied with how schools handle such situations. Persistent concerns include delays in school responses, perceptions of inadequate support and ongoing bullying despite intervention.

These patterns suggest that, although efforts have been made to support students, there is still a need for more effective, student-centred approaches, including involvement in policy making, to ensure all children and young people feel safe and supported in their schools.

One in every four children and young people in primary and special schools surveyed (25%) indicated that they had been involved in a bullying incident in school.

83% of post-primary students confirmed that they had not experienced bullying. 17%, or 650 students, perceived that they had experienced bullying.

599 post-primary students responded to the survey item on whether or not they had told an adult in their school that they were being bullied. Of these students, 50% indicated that they had told an adult in their school that they were being bullied. The remaining 50% indicated that they had not done so.

292 post-primary students completed the survey item on how the school had acted once they had learned about the bullying. Of these, 64% confirmed that the school had responded quickly while 36% indicated that the school had not dealt with the bullying in a timely manner. When asked if the school had helped them when they were being bullied, 67% of students indicated that they had been helped, while 33% perceived that they had not been supported. 43% confirmed that the bullying ceased because of the actions taken by the school whereas 57% perceived that the bullying had continued despite the school's involvement.

Survey responses from post-primary students indicate that one in every six reported being bullied. While it remains the case that only about half of those affected have felt able to tell an adult at school, it is positive that most of those who shared their experience felt the response from staff was timely and supportive. Nonetheless, a significant number of children and young people continue to feel that interventions do not always bring bullying to a close, highlighting an ongoing need for schools to build further on these gains so that all students feel confident and supported in seeking help.

In post-primary schools, approximately one in every six students surveyed (17%) perceived that they had been bullied.

Transition into post-primary school

The *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice*¹³ identifies transitions as a key factor in the wellbeing of children and young people. While most children and young people in primary and special schools (72%) indicated that their school supported sixth-class children as they transitioned from primary to post-primary school, over a quarter were either unsure (26%) or did not agree (2%) that this was the case in their school. Particularly high levels of uncertainty were evident amongst sixth-class children, with a third (33%) indicating uncertainty about the way in which they would be prepared for this transition. This is a significant finding for primary schools. It outlines the importance of preparing children for their transition to post-primary education, informing them in advance of the plans and activities that are in place to help make that transition as smooth as possible for them.

¹³ Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/wellbeing-policy-statement-and-framework-for-practice-20182023.pdf>

Effective transition systems between primary and post-primary schools are essential mechanisms for supporting children and young people's successful integration into their new school environments. Insights gathered regarding students' academic, social and emotional needs can prove invaluable in facilitating a smooth transition. Chapter 6 identifies limitations in current arrangements for the transfer of assessment information in relation to Mathematics from primary to post-primary schools. It outlines ways to improve the identification of areas of relative strength and weakness in the first-year cohort and more targeted allocation of teaching resources. Chapter 6 also identifies a need for greater engagement by schools with gender-specific attitudes, beliefs and expectations regarding Mathematics. In supporting children's academic needs, schools can also support the children's social and emotional transition to post-primary school by reducing academic based anxiety.

In contrast, in post-primary schools, students indicated high levels of positivity in respect of their school's management of the transition from primary to post primary. 87% of post-primary students indicated that incoming first-year students were supported at this key point in their educational journey.

In their qualitative responses, many post-primary students highlighted initiatives that they believed were playing a crucial role in fostering a supportive and inclusive environment for first-year students. In particular, they referenced activities for first-year students organised by students from older year groups.

Relationships and partnerships

Relationships within the school community

The presence of a trusted adult is considered to be a strong protective factor in a child or young person's wellbeing.¹⁴ Across all sectors, almost all principals and teachers (98%) indicated that the children and young people in their school could talk to an adult within the school community if they were worried or upset about friendships. Almost all (95%) agreed that there were good support systems in place for students in their school. Most parents (86%) indicated that they knew who to approach in the school if they were worried or upset about their child's friendships.

In primary and special schools, most children and young people (76%) indicated that they felt comfortable talking to their teacher if they were being bullied, with almost all (90%) indicating that their teacher was helpful and supportive. In post-primary schools, 60% of students indicated that they would feel comfortable talking to an adult in their school about bullying concerns, while 17% indicated that they would be comfortable sometimes. However, over a fifth of students in post-primary schools (22%) indicated that they would rarely or never feel comfortable approaching an adult in their school if they were worried about bullying. Most students (78%) agreed that staff in their school were helpful and that they would offer guidance and support in the event of a student approaching them with a bullying-related concern.

While most principals, teachers and parents were confident that children and young people can turn to a trusted adult in times of need and believed robust support systems were in place, the perspectives of students reveal a more nuanced reality. This contrast suggests that the existence of support structures does not always translate into students feeling able or ready to access them, particularly among older cohorts.

14 Reinke, W.M., Herman, K.C., Huang, F.L., Glenn-Perez, A.L., Raut, P., Aguayo, D., Venkat, S., Boddie, D., Harris, J.M. and Owens, S. (2024). Having a trusted adult in school: Concurrent and predictive relations with internalizing problems across development. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 27(3), pp 135–144. doi:10.1177/10983007241276534. (Original work published 2025)

Children and young people's participation

Almost all principals and teachers (98%) were confident that their school provided students with opportunities to participate and become involved in day-to-day school life.

More than half of the children and young people in primary and special schools (54%) indicated that there was a student council in their school. Approximately one-tenth of these respondents (11%) indicated that they were members of the student council. Of this group, most (87%) felt that their school principal and teachers listened to the ideas of the student council. Almost all (92%) indicated that their suggestions had contributed to making their school a better place. Less confidence was evident amongst members of student councils who were in the senior primary classes. Only 37% of these respondents believed that their suggestions had helped to improve school life.

In post-primary schools, almost all students (93%) indicated that there was a student council in their school. A small proportion of respondents (6.5%) indicated that they were members of a student council. Most of these students (79%) indicated that the suggestions from the student council had helped to make the school a better place. However, in response to a survey item on whether or not their school's leaders and teachers listened to the ideas of the student council, approximately a fifth indicated that this was sometimes (12%), rarely (5%) or never (3%) true in respect of their school.

Teacher professional learning

Approximately two-thirds of principals and teachers (66%) indicated that teachers in their school had received advice and training in relation to preventing and addressing bullying.

Almost a fifth (19%) indicated that they had no strong opinion on this issue, while the remaining 15% disagreed with this statement. As previously outlined, a comprehensive suite of professional learning opportunities and supports has been put in place under the *Cineáltas Implementation Plan*. Targeted training for school leaders and teachers began in late 2024, and mechanisms under *Bí Cineálta* are in place to ensure regular staff and school community discussion of whole-school approaches to preventing and addressing bullying behaviour. These measures aim to ensure that all staff are well equipped to create safe and inclusive learning environments, and reflect an ongoing commitment to capacity building in this critical area.

Addressing cyberbullying: Strategies for a safer future

The policy framework for *Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying*¹⁵ was shaped by the UNESCO *Whole-Education Approach to Prevent and Address Bullying*.¹⁶ This approach emphasises that bullying is a whole-education issue, rather than a challenge that individual schools can resolve on their own.¹⁷ Viewing bullying through this lens means that the focus shifts from the specifics of individual behaviour to the broader social environment, thereby highlighting how societal structures and norms can normalise, perpetuate and reinforce aggressive actions.

Digital and media tools are integral to the lives of children and young people. From an increasingly younger age, children are encountering technology that is becoming more complex, sophisticated and mobile. Owning a smartphone has become

¹⁵ Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/cine%C3%A1ltas-action-plan-on-bullying/>

¹⁶ Available at: UNESCO (2020). International Conference on School Bullying: recommendations by the Scientific Committee on preventing and addressing school bullying and cyberbullying – UNESCO Digital Library. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374794>

¹⁷ Ibid

commonplace and most teenagers have daily access to digital devices.¹⁸ This widespread use of mobile technology means that many children and young people can enter the digital world on an almost constant basis.¹⁹ The widespread use of this technology has been discussed in relation to increased levels of bullying behaviour within schools. However, the evidence remains mixed and although there is an increased overlap between bullying in school and online, most bullying still remains face-to-face and offline.²⁰

Characterised by the use of electronic devices to harass, threaten or humiliate individuals, cyberbullying is often carried out discreetly, making it very difficult for teachers to detect.²¹ Its unique traits include the anonymity of perpetrators, the potential to reach a wider audience and the significant difficulty targets face in escaping the harassment.²² Cyberbullying can also include disinhibition effects, such as hiding behind anonymity, facing no immediate consequences and feeling distanced and detached from the target.²³

Other features include the general absence of adequate adult or system controls to support those who are targeted. The pervasive nature of the online environment exacerbates this, making it virtually impossible for the target to remove themselves from the experience of being bullied. As with other forms of bullying, cyberbullying happens within a group of people who know each other; it is a relational phenomenon that occurs within a network of people.²⁴ It is important to note that most of those who are bullied online are also bullied offline and that cyberbullying rarely creates entirely new victims.²⁵

Researchers and educators have long recognised the importance of peer bystanders in bullying situations. However, DCU's Anti-Bullying Centre²⁶ has emphasised the need for more research specific to the Irish context, citing a general lack of literature on the role of bystanders in cyberbullying.²⁷ Discussing bullying behaviour with others, especially a trusted adult, has been shown to be the most effective way to address bullying and support

- 18 European Commission (2023). Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, *Well-being in the digital age*, Publications Office of the European Union <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/03746>
- 19 Livingstone, S. and Smith, P.K. (2014). Annual research review: Harms experienced by child users of online and mobile technologies -The nature, prevalence and management of sexual and aggressive risks in the digital age. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 55(6), pp 635–654. p.636. doi:10.1111/jcpp.12197
- 20 Available at: <https://www.esri.ie/news/new-esri-research-shows-the-crucial-role-of-the-school-completion-programme-in-supporting>
- 21 Smale, W.T., Hutcheson, R. and Russo, C.J. (2021). Cell phones, student rights, and school safety: Finding the right balance. *Canadian Journal of Education Administration and Policy*, 195, pp 49–64. p. 51. doi:10.7202/1075672ar
- 22 Baldry, A.C., Farrington, D.P. and Sorrentino, A. (2017). School bullying and cyberbullying among boys and girls: Roles and overlap. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 26(9), pp 937–951. p. 939. doi:10.1080/10926771.2017.1330973
- 23 European Parliament Briefing (2024). Cyberbullying among young people: Laws and policies in selected Member States
- 24 UNESCO (2020). International Conference on School Bullying: recommendations by the Scientific Committee on preventing and addressing school bullying and cyberbullying. p. 2
- 25 Wolke, D., Lee, K.S. and Guy, A. (2017). Cyberbullying: a storm in a teacup? *European Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 26, pp 899–908
- 26 DCU Anti-Bullying Centre (ABC) is a national university designated research centre within Dublin City University's Institute of Education. See <https://antibullyingcentre.ie/>
- 27 Sanmartín Feijóo, S., Sargioti, A., Sciacca, B. and McGarrigle, J. (2023). Bystander behaviour online among young people in Ireland. p.6. DCU Anti-Bullying Centre, Dublin City University; Beavon, E., Jenkins, L., Bradley, M. and Verma, K. (2024). Understanding adolescents' bystander intervention in cyberbullying. *Contemporary School Psychology*, 28(2), pp 270–281. p. 270
- 28 Bjereld, Y., Daneback, K. and Mishna, F. (2019). Adults' responses to bullying: the victimized youth's perspectives. *Research Papers in Education*, 36(3), pp 257–274. doi:10.1080/02671522.2019.1646793

the wellbeing of those involved.²⁸ Children and young people in Ireland tend not to tell anyone when they are targeted themselves or when they witness cyberbullying.²⁹

The concept of ‘hotspots’ – areas where the prevalence of bullying behaviour can be higher – has been studied extensively in the context of traditional school bullying.³⁰ However, research on cyberbullying in this context is limited. It has focused mainly on analysing the use of abusive language on social media,³¹ rather than on identifying the online spaces that may facilitate cyberbullying.³²

In March 2024, the World Health Organisation (WHO) Europe published the second volume of the *Health Behaviour in School-aged Children* study,³³ focusing on bullying patterns and peer violence across forty-four countries and regions. A key finding was that while overall trends in school bullying had remained relatively stable since 2018, the prevalence of cyberbullying had increased. This rise was linked to the growing digitalisation of young

people’s interactions, with potentially profound implications for their wellbeing. As with all forms of bullying, cyberbullying perpetration and victimisation are associated with various types of emotional, social and/or physical harm.³⁴ Although the prevalence of cyberbullying is estimated to be lower than other more traditional, offline forms of bullying, its psychosocial impact appears to be greater.³⁵ This underscores the need to develop effective prevention and intervention strategies.³⁶

Studies on smartphone ownership and usage among children emphasise the significance of contextual and environmental factors, such as the behaviour of family and friends, the home environment and beyond.³⁷ Most existing research focuses on the impact of smartphones on children, rather than the decision-making processes and timing of when children obtain a smartphone. These findings highlight the significance of the age or life stage at which a child gains access to smartphone technology and, by extension, to

- 29 Sanmartin Feijóo, S., Sargioti, A., Sciacca, B. and McGarrigle, J. (2023). Bystander behaviour online among young people in Ireland. p.6. DCU Anti-Bullying Centre, Dublin City University. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-culture-communications-and-sport/publications/national-advisory-council-for-online-safety-nacos/>. p. 136
- 30 Rapp-Paglicci, L., Dulmus, C.N., Sowers, K.M. and Theriot, M.T. (2004). “Hotspots” for bullying: exploring the role of environment in school violence. *Journal of Evidence Based Social Work*, 1(2–3), pp 131–141
- 31 Ho, S.M., Kao, D., Chiu-Huang, M.J., Li, W. and Lai, C.J. (2020.) Detecting cyberbullying “hotspots” on Twitter: A predictive analytics approach. *Forensic Science International: Digital Investigation*, 32, 300906
- 32 Sanmartin Feijóo, S., Sargioti, A., Sciacca, B. and McGarrigle, J. (2023). Bystander behaviour online among young people in Ireland. p. 6. DCU Anti-Bullying Centre, Dublin City University
- 33 World Health Organisation (2024). One in six school-aged children experiences cyberbullying, finds new WHO/Europe study. *World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe*, 27 March. Available at: <https://www.who.int/europe/news/item/27-03-2024-one-in-six-school-aged-children-experiences-cyberbullying—finds-new-who-europe-study>
- 34 UNESCO (2020). International Conference on School Bullying: recommendations by the Scientific Committee on preventing and addressing school bullying and cyberbullying. UNESCO Digital Library
- 35 Gaffney, H., Farrington, D.P., Espelage, D.L. and Ttofi, M.M. (2019). Are cyberbullying intervention and prevention programs effective? A systematic and meta-analytical and *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 45, pp 134–153. doi:10.1016/j.avb.2018.07.002
- 36 Sanmartin Feijóo, S., Sargioti, A., Sciacca, B. and McGarrigle, J. (2023). Bystander behaviour online among young people in Ireland. p. 5. DCU Anti-Bullying Centre, Dublin City University
- 37 Terras, M.M. and Ramsay, J. (2016). Family digital literacy practices and children’s mobile phone use. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7, 1957. pp 6–9. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01957; Perowne, R. and Gutman, L.M. (2023). Parents’ perspectives on smartphone acquisition amongst 9 to 12-year-old children in the UK – a behaviour change approach. *Journal of Family Studies*, 30(1), pp 63–81. p. 65. doi:10.1080/13229400.2023.2207563

the digital world. Access to smartphones can affect behaviour, such as cyberbullying, differently at different stages.³⁸

Research focuses on the impact of smartphones on children, rather than the decision-making processes and timing of when children obtain a smartphone.

Cineáltas is informed by international research indicating that successful cyberbullying programmes are best implemented through a whole-education approach. This approach ensures that local school initiatives acknowledge the importance of the interconnectedness of the school with the broader community.³⁹

In 2024, community-led bans of smartphones, both within and outside schools, gained significant momentum across Ireland. Many initiatives were coordinated by parents' associations seeking to replicate *It Takes a Village*, a voluntary community-led and school-based initiative established in 2023 by eight primary schools in Greystones and Delgany, County Wicklow. The *It Takes a Village* initiative asserts that community-led approaches to postpone the introduction of smartphones positively affect the wellbeing of children and young people. This and other similar initiatives aim to empower parents, children and their teachers with the knowledge, skills and language of social media use.

It Takes a Village and other similar parent-led initiatives relating to cyberbullying were

supported actively by the then Minister for Education during 2024. During that year, concerns grew regarding the impact of mobile phones, including their potential to distract students during class, facilitate access to inappropriate content and cyberbullying and reduce social interaction among peers. In response to these concerns, the then Minister issued a directive to schools mandating the implementation of a mobile phone ban during the school day. Schools were advised to consult with the wider school community, including parents, to ensure that those policies were implemented consistently.

In October 2024, Budget 2025 allocated €9 million to post-primary schools to support the implementation of this mobile phone ban. This ring-fenced funding was earmarked for the purchase of secure storage solutions for students' phones, helping schools to enforce the policy effectively. The aim of this initiative was to promote student wellbeing by fostering an environment where students could disconnect from devices, focus on learning and build friendships without the distraction of the online world. Subsequent research from DCU's Anti-Bullying Centre⁴⁰ raised concerns about the effectiveness of blanket smartphone bans, arguing that such measures may limit opportunities for children to develop responsible digital habits. The Ombudsman for Children's Office has drawn attention to the value of system-wide strategies that enable children and young people to engage with the digital world safely and assuredly, while also addressing the underlying factors that give rise to the difficulties they experience online.⁴¹

38 Cebollero-Salinas, A., Cano-Escoiraza, J. and Orejudo, S. (2022). Are emotional e-competencies a protective factor against habitual digital behaviors (media multitasking, cybergossip, phubbing) in Spanish students of secondary education? *Computers & Education*, 181, 104464. p. 10. doi:10.1016/j.compedu.2022.104464

39 UNESCO (2020). International Conference on School Bullying: recommendations by the Scientific Committee on preventing and addressing school bullying and cyberbullying. UNESCO Digital Library

40 Reynolds, M. and O'Higgins, N.J. (2025). Restriction or release? Smartphone bans in schools: A qualitative study of the experiences of students. pp 43–44. Anti-Bullying Centre, Dublin City University

41 Available at: [https://www.oco.ie/library/one-size-does-not-fit-all-youth-friendly-version/#:~:text=Ombudsman%20for%20Children-,One%20Size%20Does%20Not%20Fit%20All%2C%20a%20report%20on%20phone,the%20OCO%20Youth%20Advisory%20Panel&text=The%20Ombudsman%20for%20Children%27s%20Office,Youth%20Advisory%20Panel%20\(YAP\)](https://www.oco.ie/library/one-size-does-not-fit-all-youth-friendly-version/#:~:text=Ombudsman%20for%20Children-,One%20Size%20Does%20Not%20Fit%20All%2C%20a%20report%20on%20phone,the%20OCO%20Youth%20Advisory%20Panel&text=The%20Ombudsman%20for%20Children%27s%20Office,Youth%20Advisory%20Panel%20(YAP))

The department (through Oide) took significant steps during 2024 to support schools in tackling cyberbullying. Teaching staff were encouraged to complete two newly introduced online cyberbullying courses. These courses aimed to equip teachers with the necessary knowledge, resources and confidence to address cyberbullying as part of their wider bullying prevention programme, enabling them to manage incidents effectively. The courses also sought to outline a school's role in creating an anti-cyberbullying culture and promoting children and young people's wellbeing, including online wellbeing. As part of *Cineáltas*, efforts also continued to ensure that all schools had access to the *FUSE Anti-Bullying and Online Safety Programme*.⁴² FUSE aims to enhance the capacity of schools to address bullying and online safety issues. It seeks to empower children and young people to understand their own behaviour, to recognise bullying and online safety risks and to be confident in reporting and seeking support when needed.⁴³

In the 2023 *Perspectives on Bullying Report*, many principals and teachers highlighted their concerns about children and young people's safety online. Principals and teachers described how, although cyberbullying often occurred outside of the school environment, the fallout and consequences from this impacted negatively on children and young people's day-to-day experience of school. Similar concerns were evident in the data gathered to inform this second annual report. The quote below from a teacher highlights the pervasive and challenging nature of cyberbullying and its impact on children and

young people, their parents and school communities.

"Much of the bullying that takes place is done in a covert and insidious way outside of school hours but spilling into everyday school life."

Teacher

Addressing cyberbullying remains a significant challenge for schools and society more generally. Tackling this issue requires a multifaceted approach, incorporating social and emotional learning, parental involvement and effective intervention programmes. Teachers and parents should work together to foster bystander behaviour, educating children and young people to develop empathy and intervene as upstanders.⁴⁴ Ongoing research and collaboration among students, teachers, policymakers, media professionals and social media companies will remain essential to the creation of a safer digital environment for children and young people.

42 Available at: <https://antibullyingcentre.ie/fuse/>

43 O'Higgins, N.J., Viejo Otero, P., Canning, C., Kinehan, A., Heaney, D. and Sargioti, A. (2023). FUSE anti-bullying and online safety programme: measuring self-efficacy amongst post-primary students. *Irish Educational Studies*, 43(4), 865–882. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2023.2174573>

44 European Commission (2023). Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, What can schools do about bullying? Publications Office of the European Union, Available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/30a85458-e3e4-11ed-a05c-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

In conclusion

The findings from this report highlight considerable strengths within schools in fostering a positive, inclusive and welcoming environment. Most principals, teachers, parents and students report strong feelings of belonging and safety, with high levels of satisfaction in primary and special schools regarding respectful relationships, clear behavioural expectations, and support systems. Protective factors that were identified as effective in promoting wellbeing and preventing and addressing bullying behaviour included the presence of trusted adults within the school community, active student participation, staff awareness and training and the consistent implementation of anti-bullying policies.

Nonetheless, several areas for development persist and merit ongoing attention. The experience of older students, particularly at post-primary level, tends to be less positive, with concerns around perceptions of school as a welcoming space and levels of confidence in sustained respectful communication and behaviour standards. Concerns were also noted regarding the frequency and efficacy of responses to bullying, with a notable proportion of students indicating that bullying persisted, even when it was reported, or that school responses were delayed or inadequate. Furthermore, meaningful engagement with students and parents in policy development and review remains an area for development.

Overall, schools demonstrate commendable commitment to student wellbeing and anti-bullying measures. Nevertheless, there is an opportunity to further strengthen the consistency of positive experiences as children move through the education system and to deepen the engagement of students, parents and staff in shaping environments that are inclusive and responsive to all.

Given the growing impact of cyberbullying, a measured and proactive approach is essential across the whole-school community. Integrating cyberbullying into the curriculum can support a whole-school approach to addressing bullying, ensuring that all students and staff are aware of the issue and know how to respond. The *Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027*⁴⁵ places a strong emphasis on providing comprehensive professional learning opportunities and curricular supports to enable schools to develop effective policies and practices for the safe use of the internet, with a particular focus on addressing bullying, cyberbullying and harassment. The strategy also prioritises the enhancement of teacher confidence and competence in integrating digital technologies into classroom practice, ensuring that this integration is evidence-based and closely aligned with curricular aims, especially those relating to student wellbeing and the promotion of digital citizenship. Establishing clear rules for the use of technology, both at home and in school, should involve collaboration between students and parents. Parents, in turn, should be supported in understanding online risks and encouraged to promote positive digital safety habits at home.

Finally, schools should provide genuine opportunities for children and young people to lead anti-bullying initiatives, such as peer mentoring, student-led campaigns, or active participation in school decision-making. Empowering students in this way strengthens prevention, fosters a sense of ownership and promotes a more positive, respectful culture. Systematic and collaborative implementation of these actions will help to ensure all children and young people can thrive in safe, inclusive environments, both offline and online, where their wellbeing is prioritised and bullying behaviour is not tolerated.

45 Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/digital-strategy-for-schools-to-2027.pdf>

Chapter 8

Reflections on inclusion



Introduction

This chapter highlights several common themes arising from three inspection programmes conducted by the Inspectorate during 2024 that are relevant to the development of a high-quality, inclusive education system. The three inspection programmes were:

- a review of the admission policies of fifteen primary and fifteen post-primary special classes for autistic children and young people conducted between September and December 2024
 - the evaluation of summer programmes 2024, conducted in one-hundred and fifteen schools between June and August 2024, with follow-up visits conducted in thirty-four schools in October and November 2024
 - the evaluation of the use of assistive technology to promote engagement in learning, conducted in thirty-nine schools between September and December 2024.
- The outcomes of each of the inspection programmes were presented in three separate thematic reports.¹ Taken together, these outcomes highlight several important areas for development in the Irish education system so that all children and young people are better enabled to access an appropriate education in line with their strengths, interests and needs. These are:
- the importance of achieving a consensus among all stakeholders, including parents and children and young people, on the definition of inclusion and the characteristics of an inclusive, high-quality system
 - the need to consider carefully the function of a special class within an inclusive education system
 - the need for alignment and coherence between policies designed to support inclusive practices
 - the importance of promoting the agency of children and young people and the meaningful involvement of their parents in decisions about children's learning
 - the need to provide school leaders with the necessary supports to lead, develop and implement effective whole-school approaches to inclusive practices suited to their own contexts.



¹ Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/2.20250422_Supporting_all_children_and_young_people_to_access_an_appropriate_education.pdf;
https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/20250421_Confidence_and_connections_summer_programme_2024.pdf

Understanding of inclusion within education

As the *Inspectorate Report (2021–2023) and Thematic Review*² noted, inclusion in the context of education traditionally tended to be about ensuring that children with special educational needs could access education in mainstream schools alongside their peers. More recent understandings of educational inclusion take account of how education serves not only children and young people with special educational needs, but also those from a range of diverse ethnic, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds as well as other aspects of diversity such as membership of the Traveller and Roma communities, language, religion, gender and sexual orientation. Taking account of these understandings, a fundamental principle of an inclusive education system is that all children and young people should be enabled to access an education that is appropriate to their interests, strengths and needs. Critically, in an inclusive education system, **all** must mean all, and the education must be **appropriate** for the child or young person.

A further development of the understanding of inclusion is the argument that inclusion and high-quality provision are essentially intertwined concepts.³ This argument contends that responsiveness is a central feature of both high-quality and inclusive systems because a high-quality education system responds effectively to the needs of

the learner, their community and society more broadly. Similarly, an inclusive system is characterised by a commitment to responsive provision that acknowledges the diversity of learners' needs. Fundamentally, a key characteristic of a high-quality education system is its inclusive nature.

While this understanding of inclusion aligns with current international best practice,⁴ the Review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2024 highlights how, within the Irish system, *“the lack of clarity regarding what constitutes inclusion, and the limitation placed on the right to inclusion have been the source of much contention since 2004.”*⁵ The review further recommends that definitions of inclusive education should *“comply fully with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the core features of inclusive education which are set out in it.”*⁶ In the context of the development of a long-term strategic plan for education in Ireland, the department has commenced work on articulating a definition of inclusive and high-quality education that aligns with the UNCRPD. Engagement with all stakeholders, including parents and children and young people, on this definition will be an important step in fostering a shared understanding of inclusion and a consistent, cohesive approach to the development of an inclusive high-quality system.

2 Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/campaigns/the-department-of-education-inspectorate-report-2021-2023-and-thematic-review/>

3 Nilholm, C. (2020). Research about inclusive education in 2020 – How can we improve our theories in order to change practice? *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 36(3), pp 358–370. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2020.1754547> ; Navrátilová, J., Svojanovský, P., Obrovská, J., Kratochvílová, J., Lojdvová, K. and Plch, L. (2024). Who is in focus? A scoping review of themes and consistency in inclusive education for all. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 40(4), pp 654–671. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2024.2410570>

4 Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/set-guidelines-and-supporting-documentation-to-aid-schools-in-supporting-childrenyoung-people-with-special-education-needs/>

5 Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/2.20250422_Supporting_all_children_and_young_people_to_access_an_appropriate_education.pdf. p. 20

6 Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/Report_on_the_Review_of_Education_for_Persons_with_Special_Educational_Needs_EPSEN_Act.pdf. p. 92

Special class provision

A guiding principle of the *Special Education Teaching Guidelines*,⁷ issued by the department, is that those children and young people with the greatest level of need access the greatest level of support. This principle is equally applicable at system level. The review of admission policies, conducted by the Inspectorate in 2024,⁸ found that almost all of the thirty admission policies reviewed contained clauses that could, if implemented as written, prevent autistic children and young people⁹ with the greatest level of need from accessing a place in a special class where such placement was considered appropriate. The findings also highlighted the need for the Irish education system to consider the purpose of a special class and the profile of the children and young people who should be prioritised for places in a special class. This consideration requires careful balancing of several competing factors.

Previous Inspectorate reports¹⁰ highlighted the growth in special classes and provided insights into some of the reasons behind this growth. These include increased prevalence rates for autism and parents' perceptions of the benefits of special class placement for their child. In this regard, the Inspectorate findings echo research by the National Council for

Special Education (NCSE).^{11, 12} However, it is also the case that Ireland has ratified the UNCRPD and, as such, is committed to developing an education system where all children and young people are enabled to learn alongside their peers in an inclusive environment.¹³ The NCSE has also provided policy advice, which recommends *"the progressive realisation of the Irish inclusive education system where all local schools are enabled to educate all students in their community in line with students' strengths and abilities."*¹⁴

The system faces a significant, strategic challenge in reconciling the ongoing growth in specialist provision and strong parental preference for special class provision with developing inclusive learning environments where all children and young people learn with their peers. Currently, the department and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) address this challenge by providing a continuum of educational provision ranging from education in mainstream classes, with additional supports as necessary, to full-time education in special schools.

Current policy advice is that the placement of a child or young person along this continuum should also be informed by the principle that children and young people should be educated

7 Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/set-guidelines-and-supporting-documentation-to-aid-schools-in-supporting-childrenyoung-people-with-special-education-needs/>

8 Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/2.20250422_Supporting_all_children_and_young_people_to_access_an_appropriate_education.pdf

9 The Inspectorate acknowledges that there are different perspectives in relation to terminology when describing autism. Some use person-first language (child with autism), as this recognises that the presentation of autism can vary from person to person. Others refer to autistic children, as this embraces the neurological difference of the person. The Inspectorate uses the neuroaffirmative language of autistic children and young people in this report

10 See, for example, Early Intervention Classes for Children with Autism: Towards a coherent, inclusive system Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/early-intervention-classes-for-children-with-autism.pdf>

11 Available at: https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/An_Inclusive_Education_for_an_Inclusive_Society_NCSE_Policy_Advice_Paper_7.pdf. p. 115

12 The NCSE has commissioned further research on the factors behind the growth in demand for special school and special class places. At the time of publication, this research is being undertaken by Hibernia College

13 Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/general-comment-no-4-article-24-right-inclusive>

14 Available at: https://ncse.ie/content/uploads/2024/05/An_Inclusive_Education_for_an_Inclusive_Society_NCSE_Policy_Advice_Paper_7.pdf. p. 115

in the most inclusive environment possible.¹⁵ NCSE guidance states that placement in a special class is for those children and young people who are unable to access the curriculum in a mainstream class, even with support, for most or all the school day.¹⁶ The review of admission policies conducted by the Inspectorate in 2024 highlighted the need for the department, in consultation with the NCSE, to ensure that there is a common understanding of the purpose of special classes along this continuum of provision and, most importantly, that only children and young people who require a placement in a special class are enrolled in a special class.

Policy coherence and alignment

The assistive technology focused inspections highlighted the need for alignment and coherence between department schemes designed to support inclusive practices in schools.

The policy and practice of the department is moving from the medical model, which required a child or young person to have a diagnosis of disability before they could access support, to an educational needs-based approach. This needs-based approach informs the continuum of support¹⁷ and recognises that children and young people require different levels of support depending on their identified needs. It also recognises that a child or young person's educational needs may change over time. The guidelines provided by the department to inform how schools deploy the additional teaching resources for special

education teaching is also based on this approach. These guidelines¹⁸ require teachers, in collaboration with parents, the child or young person themselves and relevant professionals, to carefully identify learning needs and relevant strengths and to plan for evidence-informed interventions to meet these needs. Importantly, they do not require a diagnosis of disability before a child can access support.

As the education system develops, it is important that all schemes to support inclusive teaching and learning practices are based on the process of identification of strengths, interests and needs, the implementation of evidence-informed interventions and the monitoring of the response to the intervention. Schemes to support inclusive teaching and learning should also reflect the continuum of support process and utilise the associated student support file. The effectiveness of this approach is contingent on teachers' use of effective assessment approaches and their use of the student support file to track a student's educational pathway and to record the student's progress over time.

A 2024 report by the Inspectorate¹⁹ on provision for children and young people with special educational needs highlighted teachers' use of assessment to plan for teaching and learning as an area that required improvement. Chapter 10 of this report also highlights that, while some progress has been made in embedding the use of the student support file in schools, further work is required.

15 National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (2014). Delivery for Students with Special Education Needs: A better and more equitable way. Available at: https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Allocating_resources_1_5_14_Web_accessible_version_FINAL.pdf; NCSE (2024). An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society, NCSE (2024). Available at: <https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Inclusive-Education-for-an-Inclusive-Society.pdf>

16 Available at: <https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/NCSE-Guidelines-for-Setting-Up-and-Organising-Special-Classes-2024-ENG.pdf>

17 Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/Special-Educational-Needs-a-Continuum-of-Support.pdf>

18 Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/set-guidelines-and-supporting-documentation-to-aid-schools-in-supporting-children-young-people-with-special-education-needs/>

19 Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/58f54-inspectorate-publications/#special-educational-needs>

Research²⁰ highlights how educational reforms often occur in a “dislocated and siloed manner” that fail to adequately consider impacts of change across the provision landscape. It is important, therefore, that progressing greater alignment between the assistive technology scheme and the overall needs-based approach to supporting inclusive practices in schools should be part of a whole-of-system approach to building teachers’ assessment capacity and to improving the use of the student support file in all schools.

Agency of children and young people

Chapter 12 of this report notes that the Inspectorate’s work with children and young people is informed by the Lundy Model (2007).²¹ The Lundy Model adopts a rights-respecting approach that acknowledges the right of children and young people to be part of every decision that affects them. The inspections of summer programmes in 2024 highlighted practical examples of how schools put this model into practice through involving children and young people in decisions about their learning.

During their visits to summer programmes,²² inspectors found that some programmes had very good systems in place to capture children and young people’s insights into their learning. For example, some programme organisers held focus groups with the children and young people to discuss their preferred activities and some organisers surveyed children and young people at the end of the first week of the programme. They did this to find out what was working well and what could be improved. In

other programmes, where practice was excellent, children and young people were enabled to set goals for their own learning and to make choices about the types of activities that would support them to achieve these goals.

Inspectors also reported on some very good examples of teachers talking to children and young people about their learning and providing them with worthwhile opportunities to reflect on the successes and challenges they experienced in learning. Summer programmes facilitated this in different ways. Some used templates, others used notebooks, digital journals or art displays. In some programmes, the children and young people shared their reflections with their parents. Some programmes organised assemblies where the children and young people presented to the wider group and described what skills they developed and how they developed them.

Talking to children and young people about their learning and facilitating them to reflect on their success as learners is a very effective strategy. It develops the agency of children and young people, helps them to take responsibility for their learning and to develop an awareness of themselves as learners.

The inspection findings about assistive technology²³ also highlighted some schools where children and young people were involved meaningfully in decisions about how best to use assistive technology. The inspection findings acknowledged the very good practice of some teachers who sought the views of children and young people

20 Gleeson, J. (2010). Curriculum in Context: Partnership, Power and Praxis in Ireland. Switzerland: Peter Lang; Banks, J., Frawley, D. and McCoy, S. (2015) in N. Kenny, S. McCoy and G. Mihut (2020): Special education reforms in Ireland: changing systems, changing schools. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, DOI: 10.1080/13603116.2020.1821447, p. 7

21 Lundy, L. (2007). ‘Voice is not enough’: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child for education. *British Education Research Journal*, December 2007, vol. 33(6), pp 927–942

22 The department provides all schools with resources to offer a two-week summer programme. Schools are asked to prioritise children and young people with special educational needs and those at risk of educational disadvantage for places on the summer programme

23 Department of Education and Youth (2025). Using Assistive Technology to Promote Inclusion, Access and Participation in Learning. Report forthcoming.



regularly on their experiences of using technology and amended their teaching based on the feedback. This practice led to very effective inclusive teaching and learning approaches. However, this was not a consistent feature of practice across the thirty-nine schools inspected. In many schools, the children and young people were not involved meaningfully in decisions about how and when they should use assistive technology. In a small number of schools, children received very little feedback on work they completed using assistive technology or on the development of their technology skills. One of the main recommendations from inspections was that teachers and school leaders should consult regularly with children and young people about their experiences of using technology and any adaptations that may be required to support their learning.

These findings and recommendations are supported by research published by the Economic and Social Research Institute,²⁴ which both emphasised the importance of student involvement in the decision-making processes and highlighted it as an important issue for schools to address.

Collaboration with parents

Effective collaboration between parents and teachers can lead to improved outcomes for children and young people across a range of areas including attendance at school and engagement in learning.²⁵ The assistive-technology-focused inspections found that there were some schools where there was very good collaboration between parents and teachers to support the use of assistive technology. However, in over three-quarters of the thirty-nine schools inspected, there were limited structures in place to support parents.

In these schools, parents reported being challenged in supporting their child's learning at home. For example, some parents reported that they felt 'lost' when their child asked for help at home and others reported a sense of frustration at having to 'figure it out themselves'. Consequently, another of the main recommendations of the assistive-technology-focused inspections was that parents should be involved integrally at all stages of a revised assistive technology scheme, thus enabling them to support their child's learning more effectively.

24 Available at: Carroll, E., McCoy, S., and Ye, K. (2024). 'Embracing diversity in all its forms': The voluntary secondary sector in Irish education, *ESRI Research Series* 182, Dublin: ESRI. <https://doi.org/10.26504/rs182>

25 Kantova, K. (2024). Parental involvement and education outcomes of their children. *Applied Economics*, 56(48), 5683–5698. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00036846.2024.2314569>

During their visits to summer programmes, inspectors found that most summer programme organisers consulted with parents on the strengths, interests and needs of their children. This was done mainly through one-to-one meetings, using templates from the programme guidelines and digital surveys. The process provided worthwhile opportunities for parents to share important insights about their children with teachers. Importantly, these insights informed the activities of the summer programme. Collaboration with parents was further strengthened in the programmes where parents were invited to attend assemblies where their children shared their learning. Positive collaborative practices were also evident where parents assisted teachers in delivering learning activities in areas such as art, craft, drama and music. As schools work to strengthen the involvement of parents in their children's learning, they may find the positive strategies described above helpful.

Whole-school approaches

Findings from inspections²⁶ regularly highlight the importance of schools devising, adopting and consistently implementing whole-school approaches. When this is done effectively, it facilitates teachers and other staff to reflect on and discuss their practice. Whole-school approaches that are implemented consistently provide a coherent learning experience for children and young people across all learning settings and provide all members of the school community with clarity about appropriate expectations for teaching, learning and assessment practices.

Effective whole-school approaches were evident in just under one-fifth of schools (18%) inspected as part of the assistive-technology-focused inspections. Staff in this small number of schools collaborated to devise and implement collective approaches and the young people experienced a consistency of expectation and support from all teachers in relation to their use of assistive technology. Most importantly, this whole-school approach led to the effective integration of assistive technology within the school's overall approach to learning and assessment for all. However, the inspections also found that, for most schools, there was a need for staff, parents and the children and young people to work together to devise and implement a whole-school approach to the use of assistive technology. The main impact of the lack of clear common approaches to assistive technology was inconsistency in practice among teachers in how they used assistive technology to support learning and assessment in their lessons.

The finding that learning experiences for children and young people in schools where agreed whole-school approaches are implemented consistently are better than learning experiences in schools where whole-school approaches are not agreed or consistently implemented is not surprising. However, the challenge that school leaders face in facilitating their school communities to collectively devise whole-school approaches across the breadth of the curriculum must also be acknowledged. These challenges relate chiefly to strengthening the culture of collaboration among teachers and to making sufficient time available for meaningful teacher collaboration, without eroding teaching time. A key challenge for the Irish education system is to provide all school leaders with the necessary resources to facilitate the development and implementation of effective whole-school approaches to inclusive and high-quality teaching, learning and assessment practices.

²⁶ Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/inspectorate-publications/> ; <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/improving-outcomes-and-experiences-for-children-and-young-people-evaluation-of-home-sc.pdf>

In conclusion

Under article 24 of the UNCPRD, Ireland is committed to ensuring that all children access education in an inclusive environment, without discrimination. Fundamentally, an inclusive education system is one that *‘accommodates all students whatever their abilities or requirements, and at all levels – pre-school, primary, secondary, tertiary, and life-long learning.’*²⁷ This chapter has highlighted several important actions required to ensure this vision is realised in Ireland. These are:

- engagement with all stakeholders, including parents and children and young people, will be an important step in achieving a system-wide consensus on the definition of inclusion and the characteristics of an inclusive high-quality system
- there is a need for key parties, including the department’s special education section, NCSE, the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), representatives of parents, children and young people and teachers, to work together to ensure that there is a common understanding of the purpose of special classes within the system and that only children and young people who require a placement in a special class are enrolled in a special class
- policy makers need to ensure that there is alignment and coherence between all schemes to support inclusive teaching and learning practices in settings and schools. This should be achieved as part of a whole-of-system approach to building teachers’ assessment capacity and to improving the use of the student support file in all schools
- school leaders and teachers should ensure that children and young people are involved meaningfully and appropriately in decisions about the nature and type of additional support they receive
- schools should strengthen the involvement of parents in their children’s learning
- educational stakeholders should consider how best to provide all school leaders with the necessary resources to facilitate the development and implementation of effective whole-school approaches to inclusive and high-quality teaching, learning and assessment practices. The opportunities to develop effective whole-school approaches should not result in the reduction of class-contact time.

Walsh (2023)²⁸ notes that policy development and implementation in the Irish system is devolved to a wide range of actors, which can lead to *“insufficient awareness of how various policies relate to and cohere with one another.”* He highlights the need for alignment and coherence between vision, content, pedagogy and assessment practices within the system. This chapter calls for actions across five important areas to further advance the development of a high-quality and inclusive education system. Securing alignment and coherence between actions will be critical to ensuring success in these five areas.

27 Available at: https://www.unicef.org/eca/sites/unicef.org/eca/files/IE_summary_accessible_220917_0.pdf

28 Walsh, T. (2023). Alignment and Coherence in the Context of Policy and Curriculum Development in Ireland: Tensions, Debates, and Future Direction. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-82976-6_10-1, p. 1

Looking forward

Annual report on admission policies in primary and post-primary schools with special classes for autistic children and young people

Following the publication of the Inspectorate report on admission policies for special classes,²⁹ the Minister for Education and Youth requested the Inspectorate to provide an annual written report on the implementation of admission policies in primary and post-primary schools with special classes for autistic children and young people. The Inspectorate is engaging currently with the NCSE and the department's special education section on this review and will publish the first of these annual reports in 2026.

Provision for children and young people from the Traveller and Roma communities

The Traveller and Roma Education Strategy (TRES) aspires to an education system that is open to and welcoming of all, irrespective of background or ability, and that engages learners of all ages meaningfully in a positive learning environment where equality is upheld, and diversity respected.³⁰

The Inspectorate has been involved in advising and supporting the development of the TRES and has commenced a series of inspections that focus on the learning experiences and outcomes of children and young people from the Traveller and Roma communities. These inspections will conclude in the second half of 2025 and the *Inspectorate Report (2025) and Thematic Review* will include a report on the inspection outcomes.

Supporting schools to improve provision for all children and young people

During the 2023/24 school year, the OECD reviewed the department's approach to resourcing schools in addressing educational disadvantage. The final report published in July 2024 highlighted a key challenge for schools as follows: *"Some schools face challenges in formulating SMART targets that are both meaningful and realistic within their specific contexts. The challenges persist due to uncertainties in regard to the use and analysis of data, and the monitoring and evaluation of the targets set."*³¹

This OECD finding reflects findings in previous Inspectorate reports on planning for improvements in schools in the DEIS programme³². Interestingly, the findings also reflect Inspectorate findings across a range of education provision contexts, including provision for children and young people with special educational needs.³³

Supporting schools to address this challenge and to improve their provision is a key priority for the Inspectorate. To achieve this, the Inspectorate, during 2024, refined its approaches to evaluating aspects of provision in schools in the DEIS programme and for children and young people with special educational needs. The revised approaches place a clear focus on the quality of students' learning and on the school's capacity to plan for improvements. These approaches will be implemented from November 2025 onwards and the *Inspectorate Report (2025) and Thematic Review* will include a consideration of and reflection on the inspection outcomes.

29 Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/2.20250422_Supporting_all_children_and_young_people_to_access_an_appropriate_education.pdf

30 Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/consultations/traveller-and-roma-education-strategy/>

31 OECD (2024). OECD Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland, Reviews of National Policies for Education. OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/3433784c-en>. p. 297

32 Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/improving-outcomes-and-experiences-for-children-and-young-people-evaluation-of-home-sc.pdf>

33 Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/inspectorate-publications/#special-educational-needs>

Chapter 9

Provision of the Junior Cycle Level Two Learning Programme in post-primary and special schools: findings from inspections



Introduction

The Level Two Learning Programme (L2LP) was introduced as part of the Framework for Junior Cycle, which was phased into all schools from 2014.¹ This new framework featured revised subjects and short courses, a focus on literacy, numeracy and key skills and new approaches to assessment and reporting. Within this framework, the L2LP was intended to provide an appropriate curriculum for young people with General Learning Disabilities.² Traditionally, young people with General Learning Disabilities were enrolled in special schools but are now enrolled increasingly in special classes in post-primary schools or in mainstream classes with additional support provided through the school's special education teaching allocation. Consequently, the L2LP is offered in special schools and in many post-primary schools.

The Inspectorate regularly evaluates and reports on the implementation of the Junior Cycle in schools. A composite Inspectorate report, *What Subject Inspections tell us about Junior Cycle implementation*,³ was published in December 2023. This report found many aspects of effective practice in the subjects evaluated. For example, the quality of teaching and learning was very good or good in almost all of the lessons observed and, in most lessons, students had an opportunity to develop the key skills of Junior Cycle. The report also found areas for improvement, particularly that formative assessment could be used more during teaching and learning and that teachers could help students to take more responsibility for their own learning.

In 2024, the Inspectorate evaluated provision for the Junior Cycle Level Two Learning Programme (L2LP) in thirty schools: twenty-seven post-primary schools and three special schools.⁴ Schools were given one day's notice of the inspection. Each inspection was conducted by one inspector and completed in a day. During the inspection, the inspector:

- met with relevant members of the school leadership team and the school's special education needs team
- evaluated teaching and learning
- reviewed student support files
- reviewed relevant documents, assessment data, the school's timetable and individual young people's timetables
- provided feedback to members of the school leadership team and relevant teachers.

This chapter presents findings from these inspections. The first section explains the structure and unique features of the L2LP and reports on the numbers of young people following the programme in the schools visited. The second section reports on the learning experiences of the young people, with a particular focus on individualised planning, assessment practices, teaching and learning practices and professional collaboration. The final section presents conclusions and recommendations arising from the inspections.

1 Most Junior Cycle subjects and short courses align with Level 3 of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). The L2LP was designed to align with Level 2 of the NFQ

2 A General Learning Disability can range from borderline mild, mild, moderate, to severe/profound. Children with General Learning Disabilities find it more difficult to learn, understand and do things than other children of the same age

3 Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/what-subject-inspections-tell-us-about-junior-cycle-implementation-december-2023.pdf>

4 All three special schools were designated as schools for children with Mild or Moderate General Learning Disabilities

The Junior Cycle Level Two Learning Programme

The structures and features of the L2LP

The L2LP is underpinned by the eight key skills of the Framework for Junior Cycle. It focuses on development and learning in literacy, numeracy, language and communication, leisure skills, motor coordination, social and personal development and wellbeing.

The L2LP provides schools with the autonomy to design an individual programme of learning for the young person, based on their identified interests, strengths and needs, as part of the Continuum of Support framework. Learning can take place in a variety of settings, mainstream subject classrooms, special classes, other support settings, the wider school, the local community and at home. Some young people who follow the L2LP also engage with some subjects at Level 3,⁵ when it is considered appropriate to their individual strengths and interests.

The L2LP contains five Priority Learning Units (PLUs): *Communicating and Literacy*, *Numeracy*, *Personal Care*, *Living in a Community* and *Preparing for Work*. Young people engaging with the L2LP complete all five PLUs as well as two short courses. The short courses can be at either Level 2 or Level 3, designed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) or by the school.

Assessment of L2LP learning is an ongoing process that involves a range of classroom-based formative and summative practices. Over the three years in junior cycle, young people assemble evidence of their learning in a portfolio, in line with the approach to assessment that was originally envisaged in Junior Cycle reform. Students submit this portfolio to their teachers and the students' work is assessed and reported on. The Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA) documents the achievement of the student in PLUs, as reported by the school. The assessment approaches for the L2LP do not include a final examination.



⁵ Level 3 Junior Cycle offers 21 subjects that are broadly aligned with Level 3 of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Students following Level 3 Junior Cycle have an option of subjects only, or a combination of subjects and short courses



In 2022, the Minister for Education requested the NCCA to develop follow-on options for young people engaging with the L2LP. This work took place as part of the redevelopment of senior cycle. The Senior Cycle Learning Programmes: Level 1 and Level 2 Programme Statement⁶ was developed and published in 2024 as follow on programmes for students who are progressing from Level 1 and Level 2 learning programmes at Junior Cycle. The introduction of Senior Cycle L2 modules in schools began in autumn 2024.

Number of young people following the L2LP

In order to gather information on the uptake of the programme and placement on the programme, inspectors looked at the numbers of children and young people accessing the L2LP in each of the schools visited.

Special schools

There were 134 young people following the L2LP in the three special schools visited. This constituted almost all the young people following the Junior Cycle in these schools.⁷

Mainstream schools

There were 9,039 young people following the Junior Cycle programme in the twenty-seven post-primary schools visited. Of these, 132 (1.5%) were following the L2LP. This is broadly in line with expectations of the number of young people who should be engaging with the L2LP.⁸

⁶ Available at: <https://curriculumonline.ie/senior-cycle/level-1-and-level-2-learning-programmes/>

⁷ The other young people in the special schools followed the Level One Learning Programme

⁸ The National Council for Special Education's *Information Booklet for Parents of Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs* (2019) states that "[o]nly 2% of people would be expected to have an IQ score of less than 70. On standardised tests of intelligence, categories of general learning disability are defined as: Mild GLD: IQ score of between 50 and 70 on a standardised intelligence test. Moderate GLD: IQ score of between 35 and 49 on a standardised intelligence test." (pp 7–8)

Of the 132 young people following the L2LP in the post-primary schools, seventy-three (55.3%) were enrolled in a special class and fifty-nine (44.7%) were enrolled in the mainstream classes. Across all schools, there were smaller numbers following the L2LP in first year, with a gradual increase in numbers in second year and again in third year:

- First Year 32
- Second Year 48
- Third Year 52

The higher numbers in second year and in third year reflect practice whereby the decision to place a young person on the L2LP is typically made at a point during first or second year, taking account of the young person's experience of Level 3 subjects. This reflects a considered approach to placing young people on the L2LP and is in line with good practice.

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment

In considering the quality of teaching, learning and assessment practices, inspectors evaluated the quality of:

- individualised planning to support the L2LP
- learning experiences of young people following the L2LP
- assessment and monitoring of progress of young people following the L2LP
- professional collaboration to support the L2LP.

Individualised planning

Individualised planning for young people following the L2LP was very good in 30% of post-primary schools, good in 37%, and required improvement in 33% of the schools. Planning was very good in one-third of the special schools, good in a third and required improvement in the remaining third.

All thirty schools were engaged in some individualised planning. Planning was inconsistent in two-thirds of the thirty schools (67%). Typically, planning was very good in some respects but required improvement in others. For example, one school had developed a very good system to ensure all learning outcomes of the PLUs would be addressed but planning was not sufficiently driven by the strengths, needs and interests of the young person. Outcomes within lessons were limited as a result. In another school, planning was very good for those enrolled in the special class but required improvement for those enrolled in mainstream classes.

Overall, the quality of individualised planning was better for young people enrolled in special classes than it was for young people enrolled in mainstream classes only. In many schools, the special class teacher took central responsibility for coordinating the plans, matching planned learning with individual targets, interests and strengths. For some young people enrolled in mainstream only, there was insufficient clarity as to whose responsibility it was to ensure appropriate planning was in place. There was a need to assign responsibility for coordinating individualised planning for each young person following the L2LP to a specific teacher.

In the nine schools where practice was most effective, individualised planning was aligned with the individual targets, interests and strengths of the young people. In these schools, planning also included input from young people and their parents. These planning approaches allowed teachers to provide meaningful learning activities to the young people and assessment records demonstrated that the young people were making incremental progress in key skills.

In the ten schools where planning required improvement, targets were vague and driven insufficiently by consideration of young peoples' interests, strengths and needs. For example, in one school, young people only accessed PLUs in support lessons or in the special class and there was no planned integration of learning outcomes into mainstream lessons. In a small number of schools, the learning outcomes of the PLUs were simply used as checklists for marking off areas to be covered in their lessons. In these schools, there was a need for teachers to plan more carefully so that learning activities are meaningful to the young person, and they experience success in their learning in both mainstream and support settings.

Learning experiences

Subject lessons in post-primary schools

Subject lessons in post-primary schools refer to lessons in a specific subject provided by the subject teacher to a specific class, for example a second-year geography lesson. Learning experiences for young people following the L2LP in subject lessons were very good in 35% of lessons and good in 35% of lessons. Learning experiences in the remaining 30% of lessons required improvement.

In the very good lessons, young people were included meaningfully with their peers and their teachers planned the learning tasks and activities carefully. In an example of very good practice:

... young people following L2LP were fully included in lessons, as equal members of the class group and were purposefully engaged in well-planned activities that were aligned with the learning outcomes of the Level 2 PLUs and with the learning outcomes of the Level 3 subject.

Other features of very good practice included young people collaborating successfully with their peers, talking about the learning, working things out together and learning from each other.

Some teachers made very good use of samples of students' work to promote discussion about different approaches and ideas. They also used the work to show the students how they could improve and succeed in their learning. Some teachers also used digital technologies very effectively to support learning, mostly by providing helpful visual representations and to allow the young person to access and monitor a record of their overall progress across PLUs. These teaching approaches were very effective.

In some schools, well-organised team teaching led to successful learning outcomes. For example, in one lesson, team teaching was used to provide very effective support to young people preparing for a classroom-based assessment (CBA) presentation. It provided the students following L2LP with good opportunities to collaborate and learn from the progress of their peers and allowed time and space for students to make individual progress with their own tasks.

Learning experiences in the nine schools where improvement was required often involved the young people working alone on a different set of tasks and activities from the other students for most of their time. In these classes, teachers sometimes prepared a separate lesson for the young person following the L2LP and had not considered how their learning could be included with that of their peers. This meant that the students following the L2LP were in the same class but not included in the class group.

In other lessons requiring improvement, additional supports, such as appropriate scaffolding and concrete resources that the young people required to engage successfully with the learning activities, were not provided. There were also lessons where the learning activities were not aligned with any PLU outcomes or targets and there were missed opportunities to focus on and develop key skills, or to capture learning in key skills, as a result.

Support lessons and special classes in post-primary schools

Support lessons in a post-primary school are lessons provided by a teacher timetabled to provide special education teaching. These lessons are provided to young people in a one-to-one, small group format or in a special class setting.

Learning experiences were very good in 60% of the support lessons in post-primary schools. They were good in 30% of lessons. They required improvement in 10% of lessons.

In almost all of the support lessons, teachers aligned the learning activities to the learning outcomes of the PLUs or short courses effectively. Where practice was particularly successful, the teacher ensured that the planned work specifically addressed the student's individual learning targets. This careful planning gave rise to focused work that promoted incremental learning and allowed the young person to experience success.

Interactions in support lessons were very positive and affirming. Highly effective approaches included purposeful and meaningful use of concrete materials, strong connections with familiar, real-life situations and helpful links with local facilities.

In support lessons, many young people expressed a strong sense of pride in their work. It was evident that the L2LP was a positive curricular option, and teachers were using the programme to provide meaningful learning experiences and a sense of ownership of learning.

Inspectors observed some very effective use of digital technologies by teachers and young people in support lessons. For example, in one lesson students used virtual representations of their locality to observe and comment on local services and land use in their town. They used their observations and discussions to arrive at an understanding of the differences between their town and a nearby city. In another lesson, video recordings of the young people carrying out tasks were used to promote discussion, reflection, further learning and affirmation of what had been achieved.

In the lessons that required improvement, there was a need for a greater focus on skill development and alignment with learning outcomes of the PLUs. At times, teachers' expectations were low and students experienced insufficient challenge. In some lessons, more use of concrete materials was needed, or clearer instructions and, at times, there were missed opportunities for teachers and young people to use digital technologies to support learning.



Opportunities for young people to learn with their peers

In forty-three (73%) of the fifty-nine post-primary schools, young people who were enrolled in mainstream classes accessed most of their L2LP in mainstream lessons, learning alongside their peers. These young people accessed the remainder of the programme in support settings, either in small groups or one-to-one.

Of the seventy-three young people enrolled in special classes:

- thirty-six (49%) spent at least half of their time in mainstream classes, learning alongside their peers
- twenty-four (33%) spent up to half of their time in mainstream lessons
- thirteen (18%) spent no time in mainstream lessons.

Overall, these are positive findings, indicating that schools have sought to provide opportunities for young people following the L2LP to experience their learning alongside their same-aged peers.

In all of the post-primary schools, the timetabling for delivery of the L2LP for young people enrolled in special classes was largely in response to the needs of the individual young person rather than the need to timetable for a group. This individual timetabling, based on the strengths, needs and interests of the individual, is good inclusive practice.

Special schools

The quality of the lessons observed in special schools varied widely, with practice ranging from excellent to requiring improvement.

In one example of excellent practice in a special school, the young people worked in small groups to construct a large clock; they discussed where the different parts should go and what their placement would mean. They went on to use their clock to display certain times that were meaningful to them in their daily lives. They talked, helped each other and used the language of time as they worked. Very careful planning and targeted questioning also gave rise to visible progress on individually set targets, which had been identified by the teacher and related to students' individual strengths and needs. Once they completed the activity, the young people were keen to take on an optional challenge and some went on to interpret parts of a weekly timetable successfully, identifying the times of some of their lessons for the following week.

Where learning experiences in special schools required improvement, there was an over-reliance on the use of worksheets and written tasks and there was a need for the provision of more meaningful learning activities for young people. These lessons required more purposeful and active learning activities, related to real-life experiences. There was also a need for teachers to focus more on addressing individual targets within lessons and to provide greater opportunities for young people to work together and use the language of the subject.

Assessment and monitoring of progress

The Junior Cycle emphasises the importance of valuing, acknowledging and affirming the full range of young people's learning experiences and progress during the three years of the programme. Assessment at Junior Cycle is intended to be an integral part of planning, teaching and learning. This requires a varied approach involving the use of a range of formative and summative approaches that reflect the strengths, interests and needs of the young person, capture their progress and focus on the next steps for further learning. In this way, assessment outcomes should inform all individualised planning.

An important finding of the inspections was the inconsistency in the assessment and monitoring of progress within schools. There were some good assessment practices in most schools, but this was not always consistent across all PLUs, subjects or lessons. A further weakness was that assessment was mainly conducted by the special education teacher and did not involve assessments carried out by the mainstream teachers. Overall, assessment and monitoring were more effective for young people enrolled in the special class and was less effective within mainstream lessons.

In all schools, there was some recorded evidence of young people's learning on the L2LP. This evidence included written, visual, photographic or video materials. In almost all schools, there were portfolios containing students' work aligned with the learning outcomes of the PLUs. Some teachers annotated young people's work with clear feedback on how they could improve their learning. Where practice was very good, all teachers working with the young person had a clearly defined role in gathering and sharing evidence of learning in records that demonstrated incremental progress and provided information that could inform next steps in learning.

In an example of very good practice, specific teachers had responsibility for certain outcomes and tracked progress using a colour-coded system, with different colours indicating progress towards mastery. In another example, a young person had a weekly meeting with the special education teacher during which they reviewed work, discussed progress and planned for areas that needed more work.

In eight of the schools (26%), there were very good systems in place to support assessment and monitoring across all lessons. In one highly effective example, where each teacher completed a section in the young person's portfolio, the system involved the use of a moderation slip that was completed by both the teacher and the young person. The slip gave all details of the PLU and the learning outcome, a description of the success criteria and what the piece showed, specifics of the prompt levels required, the feedback given and the agreed next steps.

In 44% of the post-primary schools, there was insufficient recorded evidence of learning or monitoring of students' progress. For example, in some schools, teachers simply ticked the learning outcomes that had been addressed in their lessons but there was no meaningful assessment of progress. In other schools, evidence in portfolios included mostly worksheets, providing little opportunity for meaningful assessment of progress or reflection on achievement.

Professional collaboration

Collaboration about placement on the L2LP

Collaborative decision making about young people's learning programmes involves all teachers concerned with the young person's learning, relevant educational professionals such as educational psychologists, the parents and the young person themselves.

Collaborative decision making is important as it ensures decisions that about placement on the L2LP are informed by a broad range of perspectives on the young person's interests, strengths and needs.

In twenty-three of the twenty-seven post-primary schools (85%), there was written evidence that the decision to provide a young person with the L2LP was made collaboratively, involving at least two parties (teachers/parents/management/outside professionals) and the young people themselves. In the remaining four schools (15%), there was no evidence of collaborative decision making.

In the three special schools, it was reported that decisions regarding the learning programme were made by at least two parties, including school management, students, parents, teachers and other professionals, but there was no recorded documented evidence of collaborative decision making.

Informed parental consent about placement

As placement on the L2LP has implications for progression pathways after Junior Cycle, it is good practice for schools to receive written parental consent before finalising a young person's placement on the L2LP. In nineteen of the twenty-seven post-primary schools (70%), there was written evidence of parental consent for their child to engage in the L2LP. In one example of very good practice, parents had been given detailed written information about the L2LP, how it operates and on the progression pathways beyond Junior Cycle for the young person. All schools should provide

this important information to all parents of young people considering engagement with the L2LP.

Collaboration between teachers to support teaching and learning

The quality of collaboration between teachers was very good in 19% of post-primary schools, good in 37% and required improvement in 44%. Practice in special schools ranged from very good in one school to requiring improvement in another, with one school at a good standard.

Ten schools had specific systems in place for special education teachers or coordinators to support subject teachers to implement the L2LP programme. Very good practice included special education teachers presenting at staff meetings, holding drop-in clinics or *Question and Answer* sessions, holding regular targeted meetings with subject teachers and regularly supporting teachers through providing templates, resources and suggested strategies. In discussions, the senior management team in one school commented that *'the special education team are trying to make it as accessible as possible for teachers ... Every teacher needed support in getting to the point we are at now'*. Three post-primary schools described the challenges of getting buy-in from subject teachers. Two of these reported gradual improvements to engagement and one school reported ongoing resistance.

In schools where practice was very good, the school leaders had assigned clearly defined roles and responsibilities to individual teachers or to a small team for planning and monitoring the implementation of L2LP. For example, in one school, the teacher with responsibility for the coordination of special education provision held short monthly meetings with teachers delivering the L2LP. At these meetings, each young person's progress was reviewed and areas needing more focus were identified and agreed. Digital platforms were used frequently to support effective collaborative planning, the sharing of resources and the ongoing gathering of evidence of learning.

Inconsistent practice in teacher collaboration within schools was common. Pockets of effective collaboration were evident in the majority of schools. Typically, very good collaboration was noted where teachers were working together to develop student support plans, to team-teach lessons or to assess young people's learning. However, in most schools, this was not consistent across all subjects.

In schools where collaboration between teachers required improvement, teacher collaboration was informal and lacked structure, and learning experiences and outcomes were not informed sufficiently by collaboration between teachers of the young people following the L2LP. In these schools, there was a need to implement agreed whole-school systems to support teacher collaboration and to prioritise student-centred planning.

Collaboration with parents to support learning

All schools reported meeting with parents at least once a year. For young people enrolled in special classes in post-primary schools, communication with parents was more routine and regular than it was for young people enrolled in mainstream only. Typically, teachers used phone calls, emails and text messages to communicate with parents and the communication centred generally on matters relating to attendance and levels of wellbeing.

There were some very effective structures in place to support collaboration with parents. In schools where collaboration with parents was particularly effective, parents were fully involved in multi-disciplinary meetings, which aimed to support the young person's participation and learning. Other examples of effective practice included the use of the journal as a two-way communication tool, informing home and school about progress in learning, and young people and the teacher completing a daily reflection sheet and sharing it with the home, alongside a digital record of learning activities.

In a small number of schools, photos of young people engaging in learning activities were shared with home regularly to facilitate further discussion, affirmation and reinforcement of the learning. In another particularly effective example, regular contact with the home brought about routine practising of money-management skills both during school time and in the community with family members. Another example of very effective collaboration with home involved parents in a celebration of the young person's work. A young person following L2LP had made a short video on an area of high interest and, following that, a small group had planned a screening of the video and invited parents to a ceremony where the video was shown.

In two post-primary schools, there was a need for improvement in the quality of engagement with parents. In these schools, there was limited evidence of communications with home, limited reporting on progress in learning, or no evidence of attempts to collaborate with parents on any aspect of learning.



Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

Provision of the L2LP is still evolving, with systems for whole-school support, learner experiences and planning, assessment and monitoring developing from year to year. There were aspects of very good practice across some areas, most particularly in facilitating young people following the L2LP to engage in challenging learning activities alongside their peers. The inspections also identified areas that required improvement to ensure meaningful inclusion and high-quality learning experiences and outcomes for young people following the L2LP.

Whole-school support

Most schools had some good processes and practices in place to support the provision of L2LP. A particularly positive finding was that the provision of the L2LP was not limited to special classes; while fifty-five percent of the young people following the L2LP were enrolled in special classes, the remaining forty-five percent were enrolled in mainstream classes. It was also encouraging that many of the young people following the L2LP were given an opportunity to engage fully with Level 3 subjects when they started in first year. Most schools had also timetabled their provision for the L2LP based on the strengths, needs and interests of the young people following the programme, rather than the need to timetable for a group of young people. This individual timetabling is very good practice.

Collaborative decision making about placement on the programme and ensuring that parents are informed regarding their child's placement are important areas for development. There is a need to ensure that all parents of young people following the L2LP are fully aware of their child's participation on the programme and the progression routes available to them following the programme.



Learning experiences

In post-primary schools, young people's learning experiences were good or better in two-thirds of mainstream lessons and very good in the majority of support lessons. The most effective practice involved young people who were following the L2LP being fully included as equal members of the class group, collaborating with peers, talking about the learning, working things out together and learning from each other. The most effective teaching involved teachers using the individual interests, strengths and needs of the young people to design activities aligned with the learning outcomes of the PLUs. Where this happened, the young people were engaged purposefully in appropriately challenging learning activities that enabled them to experience success in their learning.

However, in some lessons young people worked alone, or they worked only with special needs assistants (SNAs), and they were effectively not included in the class group. In other lessons, the teacher's planning had not taken account of the learning outcomes of the PLUs or of the young person's interests, strengths or needs, and there were missed opportunities to focus on and develop key skills.

The quality of learning in the three special schools ranged from excellent to requiring improvement to achieve a good standard. Highly effective practice included lessons that provided active, meaningful learning experiences that were relevant to the lives of the young people and provided appropriate challenge. In lessons that required improvement, there was an over-reliance on written tasks and worksheets and a need for more purposeful and collaborative learning that took account of the young people's strengths, interests and individual needs.

Planning, assessment and monitoring

Individual planning was effective in two-thirds of schools. Highly effective practice was seen where planning to achieve the learning outcomes was informed by consideration of individual targets, interests and strengths of the young person and included input from young people and their parents. In a third of schools, where planning required improvement, there was limited planned integration of the learning outcomes of the PLUs into mainstream lessons, or planning did not take sufficient account of the young person's interests, strengths and needs.

The quality of individualised planning was better for young people enrolled in special classes than it was for young people enrolled in mainstream classes only. This was because the special class teacher assumed responsibility for coordinating plans for young people enrolled in the special class. It was not always clear which teacher was responsible for planning for young people enrolled in mainstream classes.

Inconsistency within and between schools was a common feature of assessment and monitoring practices. In some schools, there were effective systems in place that facilitated teachers and young people to collaborate in gathering evidence of learning and monitoring progress. In other schools, there were pockets of collaboration but practice was not consistent across all staff working with the young person.

In twelve of the post-primary schools (44%), there was insufficient gathering of evidence of learning, no portfolios of work collated, or little monitoring of progress by teachers. In some schools, subject teachers simply ticked the learning outcomes they had worked on but there was no meaningful assessment of progress or skills development.

Many schools described ongoing work or recent improvements to their systems of planning, communication and collaboration. In a minority of schools, school leaders had established whole-school approaches and clarity about roles and responsibilities. There was a need for further development of these practices in the majority of schools.

Recommendations

- School leaders should ensure that decisions about the placement of a young person on the L2LP are made collaboratively. Parents, the young person, teachers and professionals involved in the young person's education should all be involved, and the decision-making process should include consideration of the most appropriate progression routes for the young person.
- Responsibility for coordinating the individualised planning for a young person following the L2LP should be assigned to a specific teacher. The assigned teacher should have a very good knowledge of the young person and a thorough understanding of the structure and potential of the L2LP programme.
- Teachers delivering the L2LP in mainstream schools should prioritise inclusive learning experiences with well-planned opportunities for young people to learn with and from their peers. Learning experiences in mainstream lessons that involve young people working in isolation should be avoided.
- Teachers delivering the L2LP in special schools should prioritise the provision of active meaningful and collaborative learning experiences. Where possible, these activities should be aligned to real-life experiences.
- Assessment approaches for young people following the L2LP should acknowledge and affirm the full range of their learning experiences and progress during lessons and throughout the three years of the programme. Assessment outcomes should be used to monitor progress and to plan for the next stage in the young person's learning.



Chapter 10

The use of the student support file to promote continuity and progression in learning at the beginning of the school year: findings from incidental inspections



Introduction

In September 2024, the Inspectorate published a composite report on the quality of provision for children and young people with special educational needs in primary and post-primary schools.¹ That report was based on twenty-nine inspections conducted in seventeen primary schools and twelve post-primary schools. One of its main recommendations was that schools should use student support files more effectively for planning and delivering learning programmes for children and young people with special educational needs.

In September and October 2024, the Inspectorate conducted a programme of incidental inspections in primary and post-primary schools with a particular focus on the extent to which schools were using student support files to facilitate continuity and progression in students' learning at the beginning of the school year.

The incidental inspections were conducted in ninety-six schools: fifty-two primary schools and forty-four post-primary schools. The schools, located across twenty-five counties, included twenty-four in the DEIS² programme and nine Irish-medium schools. All inspections were unannounced and were conducted by one inspector over one day.

The following were examined during the inspections:

- whether schools had a student support file for the children and young people on the continuum of support
- whether the student support files contained priority learning needs for the new school year
- whether student support plans contained meaningful and individualised targets.

This chapter presents the inspection findings.

Support for children and young people at the beginning of a school year

Transitions

Children and young people experience numerous transitions during their educational journey. These include major transitions between sectors, such as from early learning and care settings to primary school, or from primary to post-primary. They also include transitions between classes or year groups. In addition, children and young people navigate daily transitions as they arrive at and leave school, shift between learning activities and move between instructional and recreational periods.

Transitions often involve changes to routines, environments and personnel, which can heighten stress and anxiety for children and young people, particularly those with special educational needs. Therefore, it is essential that teachers manage transitions effectively to ensure continuity, coherence and consistency across learning environments and throughout the school.

1 Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/towards-high-quality-learning-experiences-for-all-provision-for-children-and-young-peo.pdf>

2 The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme provides additional resources to schools with the highest levels of disadvantage, to reduce barriers and to enable children and young people to reach their potential

To ensure effective transitions, schools should have systems in place to gather information about the interests, strengths and needs of children and young people with special educational needs. In gathering this information, schools engage with parents/guardians, support staff, other relevant professionals and the child or young person themselves. Schools should also ensure that all teachers involved in a young person's learning have access to this information. The sharing of this information with all relevant teachers helps to ensure that transitions are a positive experience for the child or young person. In the primary context, this means the class teacher and special education teachers having access to such information and, in the post-primary context, the subject teacher and special education teachers having access to the information. The sharing of information in this way supports teachers in developing learning activities tailored to the interests, strengths and needs of children and young people.

The continuum of support

The continuum of support³ is a framework to support all children and young people to progress in their learning. There are three stages on the continuum: classroom support (*support for all*); school support (*support for some*); and school support plus (*support for a few*). The three stages enable teachers to provide supports that are incremental, moving from whole-school and classroom-based interventions provided by the class or subject teacher to more individualised supports at the level of *support for some*. The final stage, *support for a few*, responds to children and young people with the most significant needs.

Schools are advised to implement the continuum of support to ensure continuity in provision for young people with special educational needs. Effective implementation of the continuum of support also ensures that the monitoring and review of children and young people's progress is continuous throughout the year.

The student support file, which includes a student support plan, is a key document to support teachers to implement the continuum of support.

The student support file

A student support file⁴ is the recommended means for schools to plan for, and record, the progress of young people who receive additional support, either within the mainstream class or in special education settings. It is designed to allow schools to track a young person's educational pathway and to record their progress and needs over time. The student support file serves as a comprehensive record of all support provided to the young person. It includes plans, interventions, consultations and the outcomes of reviews. When properly maintained, the student support file ensures continuity of support for the young person, especially during transitions between classes, between schools and from primary to post-primary education. An effective student support file also facilitates parental and professional involvement in the young person's learning.

3 Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/Special Education Needs A Continuum of Support.pdf>

4 Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/Student support file guidelines.pdf>

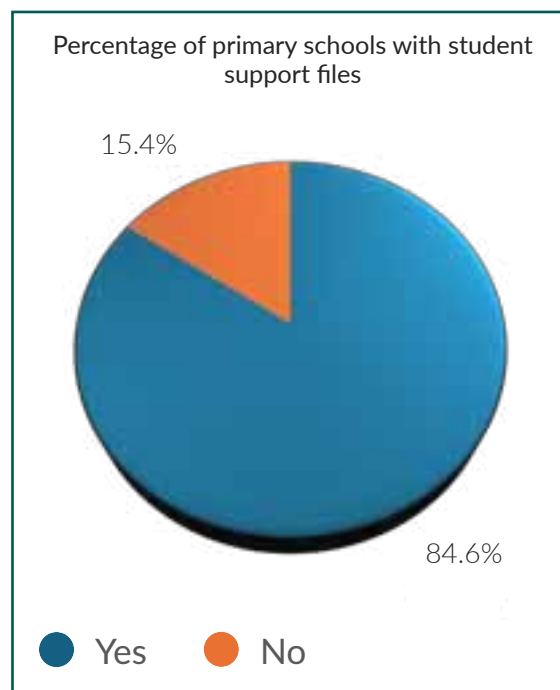
A critical document in each student support file is the student support plan. This is an individualised learning plan that documents the young person's strengths, interests and needs, as well as the priority learning needs that have been agreed as the basis for targets and interventions. Targets in the student support plan should be devised by teachers using a range of assessment data. The targets should reflect priority needs and can include socio-emotional targets, behavioural targets, language targets as well as learning targets. Relevant teachers, parents and the young person should be involved in the target-setting process. The progress young people make in reaching their learning targets should be monitored and reviewed regularly, with all developments documented in the student support plan.

Inspection findings

Whether schools had student support files

At the beginning of the inspection visit, the inspector requested the list of children and young people on the school's continuum of support. Inspectors selected four children and young people on the continuum and requested to see the relevant student support files. The selected four comprised two children or young people at the support for a few stage and two at the *support for some* stage.

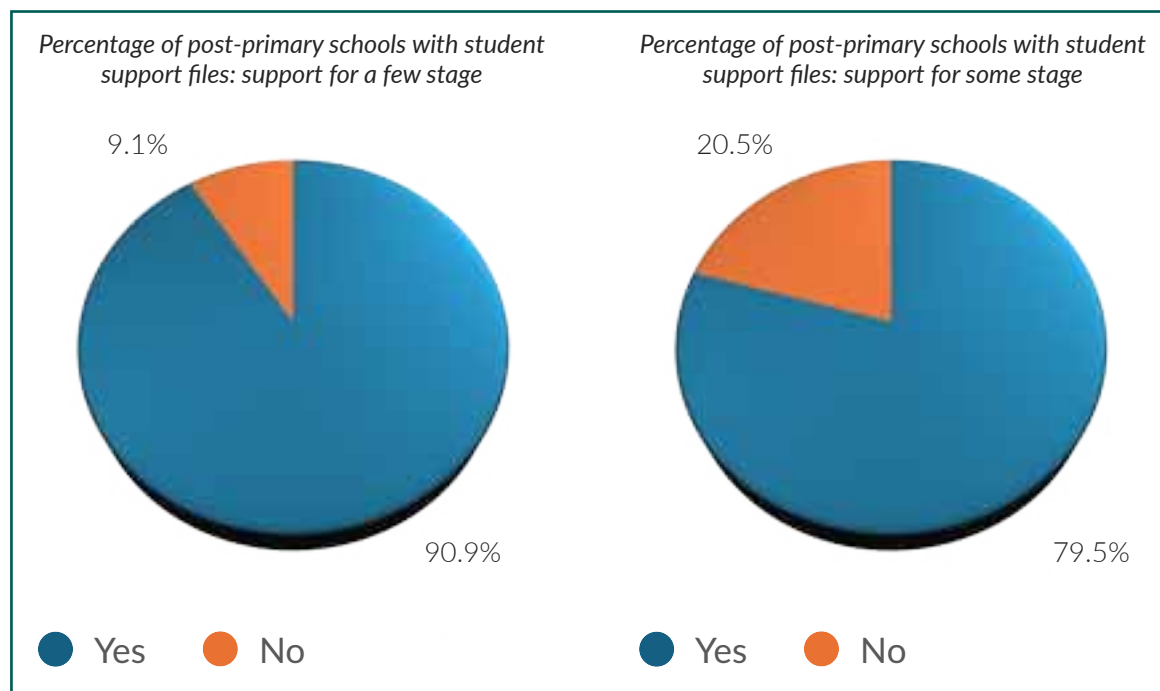
Figure 1: Percentage of primary schools with student support files in place for children on the continuum of support



- Forty-four primary schools (84.6%) had student support files in place for children at the support for some and the *support for all* stages of the continuum of support.
- There were no student support files in place for the children in eight primary schools (15.4%).



Figure 2: Percentage of post-primary schools with student support files



- Forty post-primary schools (90.9%) had student support files in place for young people at the *support for a few* stage of the continuum, while thirty-five of the post-primary schools (79.5%) had the files in place for those at the *support for some* stage.
- There were no student support files in place in four of the post-primary schools (9.1%).

Key findings

- Most schools inspected had student support files for the children and young people at the *support for a few* and at the *support for some* stages of the continuum of support.
- There are still a small number of schools that do not use student support files to plan for and record the progress of young people who receive additional support.

Further considerations

- It is important that all schools have a student support file for all students on the continuum of support. The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), Oide and the Inspectorate each have a distinct and interrelated role in ensuring that schools fulfil this obligation.

Table 1: Whether student support files contained priority learning needs for the new school year

Did the sample of student support files contain priority learning needs for the new school year?					
	N	Yes	%	N	No
Primary	27	51.9		25	48.1
Post-Primary	28	63.6		16	36.4
Total	55	57.3		41	42.7

Priority learning needs for the new school year in student support files

- In fifty-five (57.3%) of the ninety-six schools, the student support files contained priority learning needs for the new school year. Twenty-seven of those schools were primary schools and twenty-eight were post-primary schools.
- In forty-one schools (42.7%), the student support files reviewed did not include priority learning needs for the new school year. However, in thirty-four of these schools (82.9%), the files contained priority learning needs for the previous school year.
- In seven of the ninety-six schools (17.1%), the student support files did not contain priority learning needs for either the new school year or the previous school year. All seven of these schools were post primary.

Key findings

- In the majority of schools, student support files contained priority learning needs for the new school year.
- In most of the schools where priority learning needs were not identified for the new school year, the student support files did include such needs for the previous year.
- In seven schools (17%), the student support files contained no priority learning needs for either the current school year or the previous school year.

Further considerations

- Teachers should identify the priority learning needs of students for the beginning of a new school year in order to ensure that the transitions period is a positive experience for them.



Table 2: Whether targets in student support plans were meaningful and individualised

Whether targets in student support plans were meaningful and individualised						
	To a large extent		To some extent		To no extent	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Primary	13	25.0	32	61.5	7	13.5
Post Primary	13	29.6	21	47.7	10	22.7
Total	26	27.1	53	55.2	17	17.7

Meaningful and individualised targets in student support plans

- In twenty-six schools (27.1%), the learning targets in the student support plans were meaningful and individualised. This comprises 25% of the fifty-two primary schools and almost 30% of the forty-four post-primary schools.
- Learning targets were meaningful and individualised 'to some extent' in fifty-three schools (55.2%). This comprises 61.5% of the primary schools and 47.7% of the post-primary schools.
- Seventeen of the schools (17.7%) had not established meaningful and individualised learning targets in the student support plans. This comprises seven primary schools (13.5%) and ten post-primary schools (22.7%).

Key findings

- Just under 30% of the schools had developed individualised and meaningful targets for the current school year.
- In the majority of schools, there was a need to improve the learning targets established for children and young people.

Further considerations

- Oide, the NCSE and other relevant stakeholders should work together to support schools in setting individualised and meaningful learning targets for children and young people on the continuum of support.



In conclusion

The department advises schools to use the continuum of support as the guiding framework when planning support for children and young people with special educational needs.⁵ The student support file is integral to this framework. Used correctly, the student support file ensures continuity of support for young people across classes and between schools.

The findings from ninety-six incidental inspections, conducted between September and December 2024, highlight some positive aspects in the use of student support files. Areas for improvement were also identified in how schools develop and use student support files to ensure continuity of provision for children and young people with special educational needs.

Student support files for all children and young people on the continuum of support

The student support file was used in more than 80% of schools. The file provides a single, whole-of-system approach to recording the interests, strengths and needs of young people with special educational needs.

However, not all schools used the student support file. It is concerning that eight of the fifty-two primary schools (15%) inspected and four of the forty-four post-primary schools inspected (9%) did not have student support files in place for children with the highest level of need. School leaders in every school should ensure that student support files are developed for all young people on the continuum of support.



5 Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/set-guidelines-and-supporting-documentation-to-aid-schools-in-supporting-childrenyoung-people-with-special-education-needs/>

Identification of priority learning needs to support young people at the beginning of the school year

While student support files were in place in most schools, the use of these files to inform teaching and learning at the beginning of the school year required improvement. In just over 40% of schools, priority learning needs for young people were not recorded in the files at the beginning of the school year. While almost all of these schools had identified priority learning needs in the previous school year, it was particularly concerning that 17% of schools had no priority learning needs identified for either the new school year or the previous school year.

The identification of priority learning needs at the beginning of the school year is important. It helps teachers to plan for students' learning and to provide continuity and progression in their learning. It informs better selection and timing of strategies to support young people to manage the important transition to a new class, year group or new school. Special education teachers, in collaboration with class teachers (primary) or subject teachers (post primary), should ensure that each student support plan contains identified priority learning needs that can be used to inform the support provided for students at the beginning of each school year.

Individualised targets

Priority learning needs provide the basis for learning targets. In essence, a learning target is an agreed statement of what skill the child or young person will develop or what knowledge or dispositions they will acquire in response to an intervention.⁶

The inspections show that there is a need for significant improvement in most schools regarding the setting of individualised targets that are meaningful to the young person and aligned with their interests, strengths and needs. Only twenty-six of schools (27%) had individualised and meaningful learning targets in their student support plans. While teachers in over half of the schools (55%) demonstrated efforts to develop individualised and meaningful targets, seventeen schools (18%) had not engaged in effective individualised target setting for children and young people on the continuum of support.

The findings in relation to teachers' capacity to set meaningful targets are not confined to special education. Recent reports from the OECD⁷ and the Inspectorate⁸ highlight the challenge that schools face in setting targets to support their interventions under the DEIS programme. A comprehensive system-wide approach is essential to support, monitor and enhance teachers' ability to set individualised and meaningful learning targets for young people.

6 Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/Guidelines-for-post-primary-schools.pdf> p.49; <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/Guidelines-for-primary-schools.pdf> p.45

7 Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/oecd-review-of-resourcing-schools-to-address-educational-disadvantage-in-ireland-and-supporting-documents/>

8 Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/improving-outcomes-and-experiences-for-children-and-young-people-evaluation-of-home-sc.pdf>

Priorities and recommendations

This chapter identifies three priorities to improve continuity and progression for young people at the beginning of each school year:

- **a priority for teachers** is to ensure that students' priority learning needs are identified in student support plans to support the students as they make the transition to a new school year
 - **a priority for schools** is to ensure that every young person on the continuum of support has a student support file
 - **a priority for the system** is to adopt a whole-of-system approach to supporting, monitoring and enhancing teachers' capacity to set individualised and meaningful targets for young people on the continuum of support.
- Three recommendations are identified:
- At the end of each school year, special education teachers in collaboration with class/subject teachers should ensure that all student support files contain identified learning needs to be used to inform the support provided to the young person at the beginning of the next school year.
 - School leaders should ensure that there is a student support file in place for every young person on the school's continuum of support.
 - Relevant stakeholders should collaborate in a review of existing supports provided to schools to assist with target setting and plan strategically for developing teachers' capacity in this area. Those stakeholders include NEPS, NCSE, the department's Special Education Section, Oide, Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers and the Inspectorate.



Chapter 11

Inspection for improvement: findings from follow-through inspections of provision for English as an additional language (EAL), September – December 2024



Introduction

In September and October 2023, the Inspectorate conducted eighty-three incidental inspections, in forty-seven primary schools and thirty-six post-primary schools. These inspections focused on provision for English as an additional language (EAL). The report arising from the inspections, *Meeting Additional Language Needs: Whole-school and Classroom Approaches for Inclusive Language Learning*,¹ was published in February 2024 and is discussed in Chapter 10 of the *Inspectorate Report (2021–2023) and Thematic Review*.²

Inspectors conducted follow-through inspections in a sample of nine of the eighty-three schools: seven primary schools and two post-primary schools. These follow-through

inspections were carried out between September and December 2024. A follow-through inspection evaluates the progress that a school has made in implementing recommendations made in an earlier inspection. During a follow-through inspection, inspectors also examine the process used by the school to implement the recommendations.

Recommendations and implementation progress

There were thirty-one recommendations in the original inspections across the nine schools. The recommendations fell under five main themes, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Five themes in recommendations for the nine schools

Themes	Number of recommendations
Assessment and target-setting	10
Whole-school structures to support EAL	8
The quality of teaching and learning in mainstream settings	4
The quality of teaching and learning in support settings	4
School engagement with the support services and other agencies ³ to support teaching and learning	3
Maintenance of and support for home languages	2

Evaluating progress made in implementing recommendations

The Inspectorate uses a quality continuum to indicate the progress in implementing recommendations. It ranges from no progress to very good progress, as outlined in Table 2.

1 Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/meeting-additional-language-needs-whole-school-and-classroom-approaches-for-inclusive-.pdf>

2 Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/campaigns/the-department-of-education-inspectorate-report-2021-2023-and-thematic-review/>

3 Agencies include Oide, National Council for Special Education and National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

Table 2: Quality continuum used during follow-through inspections

Term	Meaning
Very good progress	Appropriate action has been taken to address the recommendation. The action has fully achieved or will achieve the required outcome.
Good progress	Appropriate action has been taken to address the recommendation. Substantial improvement has occurred, although further progress is necessary.
Partial progress	Some appropriate action has been taken to address the recommendation. Some improvement has occurred, but considerable further progress is necessary.
No progress	No action has been taken. The original recommendation remains to be addressed.

Findings

The findings of the follow-through inspection programme were very positive. Of the thirty-one recommendations made in the initial inspections, schools made very good progress in implementing fifteen (48%), good progress in implementing thirteen (42%) and partial progress in three (10%).

Assessment and target setting

Recommendations relating to assessment and target setting were made in all nine schools and focused on two main aspects of provision:

- the need for teachers to use assessment data to establish clear, specific targets for language acquisition for each child or young person
- the need for teachers to monitor the progress that the children and young people made in language learning and to amend targets for language acquisition accordingly.

In some schools, inspectors also advised on the need to ensure that special education teachers, EAL teachers and mainstream class teachers (primary) or subject teachers (post primary) worked more closely together on assessment and target-setting. Inspectors advised teachers to consider the strengths and interests of children and young people as part of the assessment process, to use appropriate assessment tools aligned to the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR),⁴ and to conduct assessments within a reasonable time frame of the child or young person's arrival to school.

Five schools made very good progress, and four schools made good progress, in implementing recommendations relating to assessment and target setting.

In the five schools that made very good progress, a special education teacher or coordinator had taken responsibility for assessment and target setting and they supported collaboration among all teachers.



⁴ Assessments aligned with the CEFR place children and young people on a scale ranging from A1 (most basic) to C3 (native speaker fluency) across the skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Additional information available at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions>

All five schools also ensured that children and young people's language skills were assessed within reasonable timeframes and that the information gathered was shared with relevant teachers. This information informed the targets in student support plans. Student support files were in place in these schools and contained targets and interventions to improve language skills. Importantly, structures were in place also to review progress in meeting targets. Four of the five schools that made very good progress were primary schools and all four schools were making use of the *Primary School Assessment Kit (PSAK)*.⁵

The four schools where good progress was made had improved the specificity of language targets, were ensuring that student support files were in place for all children and young people in receipt of support and had broadened the assessment approaches they used. To further improve their practice, these schools were advised by inspectors in the follow-through inspections to continue improving the clarity and specificity of their targets and to use the targets to inform teaching and learning. They were also advised to gather assessment information on a more regular basis during the year.

Whole-school structures to support EAL

Recommendations related to whole-school structures to support EAL were made in seven of the nine schools during the original inspections. The main advice for schools was to develop and implement whole-school approaches to EAL teaching and learning. A related recommendation was about the need for greater collaboration between special education/EAL teachers and mainstream class teachers (primary) and between special education/EAL teachers and subject teachers (post primary). Inspectors also recommended that all staff work together to create an environment where children and young people learning EAL experience a sense of belonging and feel welcome.

Six schools made very good progress and one school made good progress in implementing these recommendations. The seven schools were making children and young people's cultural and linguistic identity visible in the school and had organised specific events to celebrate diversity. Some of the schools had devised and implemented a whole-school approach to the use of dual language texts and digital technologies to support language learning.

Two schools reviewed their provision of EAL support to ensure age-appropriate placement of children and young people. These schools also provided greater guidance to teachers on appropriate teaching and learning activities. In addition, structures to support greater collaboration between EAL teachers and mainstream teachers had been put in place in these schools. During one of the follow-through inspections, the EAL teacher pre-taught relevant vocabulary, which had been agreed in advance with the mainstream teachers. Such practice enhances the ability of the children and young people to engage in learning with their peers in the mainstream class.

The quality of teaching and learning in mainstream settings

During the original inspections, the quality of teaching and learning in mainstream settings required improvement in four of the nine schools. In these four schools, teachers were advised to use teaching approaches designed specifically to assist children and young people to develop their ability to communicate in English and to acquire the subject-specific language of the curriculum. A second, related recommendation was that teachers should ensure that children and young people learning EAL were provided with engaging and appropriately challenging learning activities.

5 Available at: <https://ncca.ie/en/resources/primary-school-assessment-kit/>

One school made very good progress, and three schools made good progress, in implementing these recommendations. In these schools, teachers modelled and recast language and used the students' home languages to progress understanding and linguistic awareness. In one school, teachers implemented a language 'buddy system' in their classes. This provided a worthwhile opportunity for children and young people learning EAL to engage with peers fluent in English and to enhance their basic communicative language and content-based language learning. In another school, teachers made very effective use of the resources of the *Primary Language Curriculum*⁶ to inform teaching and learning.

The schools that made good progress had all taken actions to improve teaching and learning in mainstream classes. Inspectors found that, in some of these schools, there was a further need for appropriately challenging learning activities to be provided for children and young people learning EAL. In such schools, teachers were advised during the follow-through inspections to make greater use of digital technologies to support teaching and learning.

The quality of teaching and learning in support settings

Recommendations regarding the quality of teaching and learning in support settings were made in four of the nine schools during the original inspections. These recommendations focused on the need to group children and young people appropriately for support lessons and to align learning activities in support lessons with activities in mainstream classes (primary) or subject classes (post primary). In some schools, teachers were advised, during the original inspections, to make greater use of digital technologies to support learning.

Very good progress was made by one school and good progress was made by three schools. The strategies implemented by teachers in these schools included greater use of in-class support and the reduction of withdrawal support for children learning EAL. In one primary school, the EAL teachers were making greater use of the *Primary Language Curriculum* to inform their planning, preparation and, most importantly, their teaching. Three of these schools also introduced formal systems to facilitate discussion of EAL provision and the sharing of expertise by teachers at staff meetings. Teachers in these schools reported that this action increased their own understanding of relevant pedagogies and their capacity to use them.

A common recommendation in the follow-through inspections was for EAL teachers to collaborate more with mainstream teachers. Such collaboration is necessary for learning in support settings to complement learning in the mainstream class.

School engagement with the support services

In the original inspections, two schools were advised to engage with the support services for teachers. One of the schools was identified by the inspector as needing support in assessment. Subsequently, the principal accessed support from Oide in relation to assessment for EAL and dedicated a staff meeting to reviewing assessment practices and linking assessment with approaches to teaching and learning.

In the other school, a recommendation was made to enhance access to *support for all* teachers in relation to the provision of EAL. The school made good progress in implementing this recommendation with whole-school training provided to teachers by Oide. In the original inspection, this school had been advised to seek support also in relation

⁶ Available at: <https://curriculumonline.ie/primary/curriculum-areas/primary-language/>

to aligning its assessment approaches with the CEFR. Partial progress had been made in implementing this recommendation. The school had a plan in place to address this recommendation and had organised training for EAL teachers in assessment for later in the school year. At the time of the inspection, the plan was not implemented consistently by teachers and further work was required to develop the school's assessment practices.

Maintenance of and support for home languages

Recommendations in relation to the maintenance of, and support for, home languages were made in two schools during the original inspections. These schools were advised of the importance of children and young people's home languages to their learning experiences. The schools were also advised to agree a whole-school approach to the inclusion of home languages and to the development of cultural and linguistic awareness.

One school had made very good progress in implementing this recommendation. It had devised a home languages policy and, importantly, teachers were implementing the agreed approaches in their classroom practice. The school also made significant progress in strengthening links with parents. For example, information sheets written in the home languages of the children were shared with parents, and the principal had begun consultation with parents about how to support their children's learning in subjects such as Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Mathematics. Teachers in this school also facilitated parent-teacher meetings in the accommodation centres for families from Ukraine.

The second school had made partial progress in implementing the recommendation. This partial progress included the incidental use of translation by children to support each other, a language buddy system for children in senior classes and the availability of reading materials

reflecting a range of cultures. However, during the lessons observed, there were few references to, or use of, children's home languages. There were limited displays or signage of a multi-cultural nature in the classrooms visited or on school corridors. The school was advised to further support children to use their home language to assist them in learning English and Irish as additional languages.

Process of implementing the recommendations

During the follow-through inspection, inspectors enquired into the processes the nine schools used to implement the recommendations arising from the original inspections. There were four common elements:

- clearly-defined leadership responsibilities
- a whole-school review of current provision
- a whole-school approach to improvement
- opportunities for teachers to work together and to engage in professional learning.

In all nine schools, a specific teacher had a leadership role in relation to implementing the recommendations. In five schools, the principal fulfilled this role; in other schools, the deputy principal, a special education teacher or an EAL teacher had this role. In almost all schools, the teacher leading the implementation of the inspection recommendations had initiated a review of the whole-school provision for EAL, rather than focussing exclusively on implementing each specific recommendation. Principals reported that, in addition to impacting positively on the implementation of the recommendations, the whole-school review led to a much greater understanding of language-based teaching approaches and relevant assessment strategies across the school.



Five schools reported that increased opportunities for professional dialogue and sharing of expertise at staff meetings supported them in both implementing the recommendations and in improving overall provision for EAL. An important aspect of this teacher professional dialogue was the range of opportunities it provided for increased collaboration between mainstream and special education teachers. Six of the nine schools participated in relevant professional learning with the support services and all six reported that this engagement led to improvements in their practices. One school described its participation in an EAL-based Léargas project⁷ positively as it provided opportunities for professional collaboration among teachers and innovative learning experiences for the children.

All schools reported that the implementation of whole-school approaches to EAL provision resulted in all teachers assuming some responsibility for EAL teaching and learning. EAL provision was no longer regarded as the preserve of one or two teachers; it was now understood as a whole-school responsibility. There was greater understanding across all teachers of the significance of home languages to the life of a child. Principals reported that their staff now appreciated how universally fostering cultural and linguistic awareness supported improved learning outcomes and experiences and a plurilingual and inclusive school culture.

⁷ This was an e-Twinning Arts-based project exploring EAL themes, such as migration and communication, through art, drama and music

In conclusion

School self-evaluation (SSE) is an internal process in which a school actively outlines and evaluates its own performance.⁸ In Ireland, SSE is designed as a process of collaborative, internal school review that is focused on school improvement.⁹ External evaluation in Ireland is also fundamentally about bringing about improvement in the quality of education provision for children and young people.¹⁰ As the *Inspectorate Report (2021–2023) and Thematic Review*¹¹ notes, a quality assurance system that combines both SSE and external evaluation can be a powerful agent of improvement. Combined with this is the role of the teacher support services; Oide and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) are key dimensions of the architecture of oversight and support for quality education in Ireland.

This chapter highlights, in a practical way, how the external perspective of evaluation combined with the collective work of the school community can bring about improvements in the quality of provision for children and young people. All nine schools that were inspected as part of the follow-through inspection programme engaged with

the recommendations made during the initial inspections. Importantly, all nine schools made progress in implementing the recommendations and six of the schools (66.6%) made either good or very good progress in implementing all of the recommendations.

The findings of this follow-through inspection programme also highlight the processes used by the schools to improve their provision. These processes involved clearly defined leadership roles, a review of existing provision and a whole-school approach to improvement. They also included opportunities for professional collaboration and teacher professional learning (TPL), supported by Oide.

The Inspectorate shares a common objective with school leaders, teachers and all education stakeholders: to improve the learning and life experiences of all children and young people. The findings from the follow-through inspection programme of provision for EAL demonstrate that the collective work of key elements of the quality assurance system—schools, the Inspectorate and teacher support services—can lead to real improvements in teaching practices and in the outcomes attained by children and young people.



8 Fadder, J., Vanhoof, J. and De Maeyer, S. (2018). School self-evaluation: self-perception or self-deception? The impact of motivation and socially desirable responding on self-evaluation results. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 29(4), 660–678

9 Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/circulars/school-self-evaluation-next-steps-september-2022-june-2026/>. p. 3

10 Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/inspectorate-strategic-plan-2021-2024/>

11 Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/campaigns/the-department-of-education-inspectorate-report-2021-2023-and-thematic-review/>

Chapter 12

Student participation during inspection
in primary and post-primary schools:
a rights-respecting approach



Introduction

The right of children and young people to participate in decisions on all matters affecting them is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989).¹ Article 12 specifically relates to the child's right to express their views freely and to have their views given due weight. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) advises that schools, as well as bodies providing services for children, establish permanent ways of consulting with children in all decisions concerning their functioning.² The department's Inspectorate is one such body. As inspection affects children, it is, therefore, a matter about which they are entitled to have their views sought, listened to and taken into account. Research shows that children have views about inspection and want to express them.³

A key principle of the *Code of Practice for the Inspectorate* (2024)⁴ is that inspectors will seek and give due weight to the views and opinions of learners, according to their age and maturity. This commitment borrows directly from article 12. The Inspectorate considers children as agentive and competent social actors. It recognises their unique and valuable contribution to the inspection process in offering unique and honest views on school and classroom practice.

Article 12

"Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child."

UNCRC, 1989

This chapter highlights the benefits of student participation, provides detail of approaches taken to encourage student participation in inspection and some resultant findings, and outlines some related projects underway in the Inspectorate and the wider department.

The benefits of student participation

The benefits of student participation are widely acknowledged. They include the creation of a stronger sense of agency where students realise that they can have impact on things that matter,⁵ the enhancement of status through recognition of their capacity as insightful commentators⁶ and honing their

1 Convention on the rights of the child (1989). Treaty no. 27531. United Nations Treaty Series, 1577

2 Committee on the Rights of the Child (2001). The aims of education (General Comments) CRC/C/GC/2001/1, 17 April 2001

3 Conneely, S. (2015). Children's right to be heard during whole-school evaluation in Irish primary schools: student's and teachers' perspectives. Doctoral Thesis, Queens University Belfast. Available at: <https://pure.qub.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/childrens-right-to-be-heard-during-whole-school-evaluation-in-iris>

4 Department of Education (2024). Code of Practice for the Inspectorate Dublin: Inspectorate. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/inspection-guidelines/#code-of-practice-for-the-inspectorate>

5 Rudduck, J. and Fielding, M. (2006). Student voice and the perils of popularity. *Educational Review*, vol. 58 (2), pp 219–231

6 Frost, D. and MacBeath, J. (2010). Learning to lead: an evaluation. University of Cambridge Faculty of Education

thought processes by enabling them to think critically about their experiences.⁷ According to Lansdown (2011),⁸ a 'virtuous circle' is created; the more children participate, the more effective their contributions and the greater the impact on their development.

Educational stakeholders also highlight considerable benefits from student participation, such as improvements in service provision and decision-making.⁹ In addition to these advantages, teachers, inspectors and policymakers gain access to the specialist and largely untapped knowledge that students have about their schools.¹⁰ Furthermore, as students have a unique perspective on what happens in school and classrooms,¹¹ many student voice projects can act as a catalyst for change in schools, including improvements in teaching and curriculum.¹²

Consultation with students enriches the inspection process. The UNCRC emphasises that children and young people are expert in their own lives with much to tell and share to help decision-makers to make decisions about matters that affect them. As part of the inspection process, students' views are sought, listened to, given due weight and acted upon. From inspection, we know that students can offer important insights into areas such as learning, facilities, activities, safety, atmosphere and homework. This information forms part of the evidence base for inspection. The Inspectorate works to ensure that the elicitation of children and young people's views does not occur mainly to serve

institutional ends. We work to ensure that involvement is beneficial for them, as well as for schools and the Inspectorate.

We believe that we have an important role in advocating for students' rights generally. The core objectives of child advocacy include elevating the status of children, enhancing their self-determination and ensuring that institutions are responsive and accountable to their needs.¹³

Student participation in inspection

Involving children and young people in inspection is not new. As part of the inspection process, the Inspectorate has elicited their views formally through use of surveys and focus groups for many years.

More recently, the Inspectorate considered whether the purpose and method of our engagement sufficiently emphasised children's agency or did justice to the principle enshrined in article 12. We wanted to do more than treat children's views as a data source. We wanted to facilitate them to express their views freely during inspection and to have their views given due weight as part of an empowering process.

- 7 Roberts, J. and Nash, A. (2009). Enabling students to participate in school improvement through students as researchers programme. *Improving Schools*, 2009, vol. 12(2), pp 174–187
- 8 Lansdown, G. (2011). Every Child's Right to be Heard. *Save the Children UK*, p.6. Available at: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/every-childs-right-be-heard-resource-guide-un-committee-rights-child-general-comment-no-12>
- 9 Shier, H. (2008). Pathways to participation revisited Nicaragua perspective. *New Zealand Association for Intermediate and Middle Schooling*, Issue Two Dialogue and Debate. November
- 10 Czerniawski, G. (2012). Student voice-by-numbers. *Research in Secondary Teacher Education*, April 2012, vol.2 (1), pp 14–18
- 11 Cook-Sather, A. (2020). Student voice across contexts: Fostering student agency in today's schools. *Theory Into Practice*, 59.2: 182–191
- 12 Fielding, M. (2004). Transformative approaches to student voice: theoretical underpinnings, recalcitrant realities. *British Educational Research Journal*, 30(2), 295–311. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0141192042000195236>
- 13 Smith, Anne. (2007). Children's Rights and Early Childhood Education: Links to Theory and Advocacy. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*. 32. 1–8. 10.1177/183693910703200302

The Inspectorate has taken an incremental approach to enhancing student participation in the inspection process. We designed a child-centred, rights-respecting methodology that explicitly includes the voice of children in the work of the Inspectorate. A rights-respecting approach acknowledges students' fundamental right to be part of every decision that affects them as a matter of principle.¹⁴ It takes children's views seriously, bearing in mind their age and maturity, and recognises the unique and invaluable contribution that they can make to the inspection process.

Over the period 2020–2024, the Inspectorate worked with advisory groups of children and young people in developing materials and approaches for inspection. The approach and methods we use emphasise children's agency – in this way, they are strengths-based. We implement targeted strategies to support children in forming their views on important issues when necessary. We also work to create the right conditions that allow children, regardless of their age, to express their opinions. This approach leads to multiple benefits for inspections and schools, including better decision-making and improved outcomes.

This methodology was influenced by research undertaken within the Inspectorate and support from the Department of Children, Disability and Equality,¹⁵ schools and early learning and care settings. The *National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making*¹⁶ and the

Lundy Model (2007)¹⁷ were influential in progressing this work. Lundy conceptualised article 12 as encompassing space (opportunity to express a view), voice (facilitation to express a view), audience (to be listened to) and influence (views to be acted upon, as appropriate). The goal for the Inspectorate was to enhance opportunities for children's participation at all three stages of inspection: before, during and after.

A three-stage approach

The Inspectorate is continually seeking to improve how it seeks, listens and takes on board the views of children and young people. Currently, we are taking a three-stage approach to increasing the involvement of children before, during and after inspection.

Before inspection

In 2024, the OECD emphasised the importance of providing children with information to empower them effectively.¹⁸ Adults have a key role in supporting and enabling children's right to a voice in decision-making.¹⁹ The Inspectorate supports the principle, informed by article 5 of the UNCRC and advocated by Lundy and McEvoy (2012),²⁰ that children have the right to information and adult guidance while their views are in formation. This helps them in determining and expressing a developed and informed view.

14 Lansdown, G. (2011). Every Child's Right to be Heard. Save the Children UK. Available at: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/every-childs-right-be-heard-resource-guide-un-committee-rights-child-general-comment-no-12>

15 Previously the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

16 Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2015). National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making, 2015 – 2020. Dublin: Government Publications. Available at: www.dcyia.ie

17 Lundy, L. (2007). 'Voice is not enough': conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child for education. *British Education Research Journal*, December 2007, vol. 33(6), pp 927–942

18 OECD (2024). What Does Child Empowerment Mean Today? Implications for Education and Well-being. *Educational Research and Innovation*, OECD Publishing, Paris. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1787/8f80ce38-en>

19 Convention on the rights of the child (1989). Treaty no. 27531. Article 5

20 Lundy, L. and McEvoy, L. (2012). Children's rights and research processes: Assisting children to (in) formed views. *Childhood*, 19(1), pp 129–144



There is a need to be clear with children and young people about the purpose of inspection, the role of the inspector and how their engagement with the inspection process will transact. Children have told us that advance information about the purpose of inspection and the role of the inspector would help to alleviate fears, ensure consistent messaging and enhance their readiness to participate. They gave advice on the information that would be relevant and the most effective ways to share such information. Consequently, a suite of resources, including information leaflets and animated videos for children in early years, primary and post primary, including an e-book for the early years, was developed in consultation with them. These are available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/campaigns/inspectorate-department-of-education/>.

During inspection

The Inspectorate is continually looking at ways to improve our engagement with children and young people during inspection. The Inspectorate has extended the use of focus groups to almost all inspection types where schools get advance notice of an inspection. Our work in focus groups is underpinned by certain principles, reflecting those recommended by the CRC: to be transparent, informative, voluntary, respectful, relevant, children friendly, inclusive (non-discriminatory), safe and sensitive to risk. We use best practice regarding consent, assent and child safeguarding.

Children provided advice about what would best help them to decide whether to participate in focus groups. Consequently, we developed informational videos about how focus groups operate during inspection. In 2024, we also launched a webinar for teachers about the Inspectorate's approach to strengthening student participation in inspection. All resources are available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/campaigns/inspectorate-department-of-education/>.

After inspection

Inspectors undertake post-evaluation meetings with the leadership and teaching staff of schools to discuss the findings and recommendations following an inspection. Afterwards, a report issues to the school leaders for response. The report is uploaded subsequently to the department's website for public access.

Until 2024, inspectors wrote these reports solely with an adult readership in mind. Children and young people recommended that we extend our reporting practice to include them. In September 2024, the Inspectorate introduced a student-friendly page within all curriculum evaluation reports in primary schools and subject inspection reports in post-primary schools.

Children and young people have been very positive about the page, particularly about what it meant in terms of acknowledging their right to information and their participation within schools and the education system.

The page was developed through consultation with school leaders, teachers and students. They made other recommendations about how to further enhance information sharing with students following an inspection, including post-evaluation meetings. We aim to explore the feasibility of implementing these ideas in the future through further research.

Findings from student surveys during inspection

During whole-school evaluation (WSE), surveys are administered to students to elicit views on their experience of school and learning. In 2024, the Inspectorate administered 6,121 surveys in primary schools and 7,350 in post-primary schools. The surveys indicate that a high proportion of children and young people feel that their opinions are listened to at school.

In primary schools, a little over 50% agreed that their opinions were listened to in their school all of the time, while 38% agreed that this happened most of the time. 10% indicated that this happened sometimes, with just over 1% of the view that it never happened.

The survey in post-primary schools asked students whether they thought that teachers listened to them. Almost 69% agreed that this happened all of the time, with almost 21% agreeing that it happened most of the time. Almost 10% of post-primary respondents indicated that teachers listened sometimes. Under 1% were of the view that teachers never listened to them.



Much of the research literature tells us that there is a very positive disposition toward children's voice generally.²¹ However, others would argue that children's voice is not universally embraced as an integral part of school life.²² There is untapped potential in hearing students' views about teaching approaches, curriculum implementation and assessment strategies.^{23, 24}

The national *Participation Framework*²⁵ and the *Action Plan 2024–2028*²⁶ aim to empower children to play a more active and meaningful role in the decision-making processes within their schools. While findings from 2024 inspection surveys indicate that most children and young people felt that their teachers listened to them and that their opinions were heard, school staff and leadership should assess how well they empower children to influence their own learning and participate in decision making. Hub na nÓg,²⁷ the national centre of excellence and coordination in children and young people's participation in decision making, offers essential tools to assist schools in planning, implementing and assessing participation initiatives. In addition, the newly established student participation unit within the department, discussed later in this chapter, intends to provide further guidance to schools.

What focus groups with students during inspection told us

Inspection reports from 2024 tell of children's willingness to be involved in focus groups and their ready and positive engagement in discussion about their learning. Inspection reports are available to read at www.gov.ie/DEInspectorate.

During focus groups, students spoke of various issues relevant to their school context. For example, in some post-primary schools, students commended the teachers' sharing of the learning intentions and success criteria as useful elements in lessons. They spoke about positive experiences of classroom-based assessments (CBAs), where they could research and share their passion about particular subjects of interest to them. In other post-primary schools, they spoke about the high levels of individualised support available from their teachers if they had any difficulties.

- 21 Martinez Sainz, G., Devine, D., Sloan, S., Symonds, J., Moore, B., Barrow, N. and Ioannidou, O. (2024). A rights-based exploration of children's pedagogic voice in the classroom. *Education 3-13*, 52(6), 874–890. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2024.2331953>
- 22 Brown, M., McNamara, G., Cinkir, S., Fadar, J., Figueiredo, M., Vanhoof, J., Skerrit, C., O'Brien, S., Kurum, G., O'Hara, J. and Rocha, J. (2020). Parent and student voice in evaluation and planning in schools. *Improving Schools*, 32(1), pp 85–102
- 23 Martinez Sainz et al. (2024). A rights-based exploration of children's pedagogic voice in the classroom. *Education 3-13*, 52(6), 874–890. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2024.2331953>
- 24 Fleming, D. P. (2013). Student voice in Irish post-primary schools: a drama of voices. PhD Thesis, University College Cork
- 25 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth (DECDIY) (2019). *Participation Framework National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making*. Available at: <https://hubnanog.ie/participation-framework/>
- 26 DCEDIY (2024). *Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-making: Action Plan 2024–2028*. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-children-disability-and-equality/publications/participation-of-children-and-young-people-in-decision-making-action-plan-2024-2028/>
- 27 Hub na nÓg is a DCDE initiative: <https://hubnanog.ie/>

For example:

“They ... spoke about the range of support materials made available to them online. These included in-class presentations, study notes, online clips and worked examples provided by the teachers. The lunchtime maths club was also mentioned where students could get additional support.”

Post-primary report

Primary and post-primary students spoke positively of resources used at school-level to support their learning. For example:

“They mentioned that the use of videos and analogies supported their understanding of difficult concepts, while online quizzes and the use of the school’s digital platform to share notes and other support material also reinforced their learning.”

Post-primary report

“Aspects of provision which pupils found particularly beneficial were the increased use of mathematical games, information and communications technology in lessons and the integration of Mathematics with other areas of the curriculum. They also enjoyed using mathematics applications and enthusiastically described Zoom calls with experts in Science Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) as particularly engaging.”

Primary report

Students also identified what would further support their learning. For example:

“Additional practices they identified that would further support their learning were lunchtime book borrowing opportunities; more choice and inclusion in the poems and texts studied; and more visual and audio supports for learning.”

Post-primary report

“... they noted that they were better able to understand concepts through discussion and practical work. They highlighted some previous beneficial learning experiences, such as when they went outside to explore area and perimeter, by measuring the pitch, goal posts and bench, and to find shapes in the environment.”

Primary report

Recent developments in the Inspectorate and department

Enhancing opportunities for younger primary-school children

The UNCRC does not impose a lower age limit on the right to participate and the CRC discourages the introduction of age limits, either in law or in practice, that restrict the child's right to participation in decision-making. Article 12 acknowledges that children, like adults, have different levels of competence at different stages of their lives. The CRC advises that we start with the presumption that the child has the capacity to form their own views and the right to express them; it is not up to the child to first prove capacity (CRC/C/GC/12, 2009). Research confirms that young children can provide valuable insights into how they perceive their education experiences.²⁸ Children's capacity for consultation varies more according to their experience than their age.²⁹

In 2023–2024, the Inspectorate undertook research in a number of junior primary schools, of which there are ninety across Ireland.

To this point, the Inspectorate had not used focus group or surveys to elicit children's views in junior primary schools. The research team considered appropriate approaches and tools to enable younger children to express their views fully, safely, freely and in appropriate ways, including the use of talking props and icebreakers. From September 2025, focus groups for curriculum evaluations will be introduced in junior primary schools.

Student Participation Unit

Professor Laura Lundy has described Ireland as an international leader in its efforts to engage children meaningfully in policy and public decision-making.³⁰ As outlined in the *Chief Inspector's Report 2016–2020*,³¹ Ireland was the first country in Europe, in 2015, to develop a national strategy on children's participation in decision-making.³² That strategy was succeeded by *Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People*³³ (2023–2028) and the *Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-Making: Action Plan (2024–2028)*³⁴.

28 Ring, E. and O' Sullivan, L. (2018). Play as learning – implications for educators and parents from findings of a national evaluation of school readiness in Ireland. Available at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328330480>

29 Alderson, P. (1995). *Listening to Children: Children, Ethics and Social Research*. Barnados, Illford

30 Lundy, L. (2024). Introduction to Background Report of the Expert Group on Student Participation. Department of Education, Ireland, p. 8. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/student-participation-in-education/#report-of-expert-group-on-student-participation>

31 Department of Education (2022). *Chief Inspector's Report 2016–2020*. Dublin: The Stationery Office. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/inspectorate-publications/#chief-inspector-reports>

32 Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) (2015). *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015–2020*. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-children-disability-and-equality/publications/national-strategy-on-children-and-young-peoples-participation-in-decision-making/>

33 Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-children-disability-and-equality/campaigns/young-ireland/>

34 Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-children-disability-and-equality/publications/participation-of-children-and-young-people-in-decision-making-action-plan-2024-2028/>

Both the framework and action plan are underpinned by the UNCRC and commit to the voices of children and young people being heard and listened to in matters affecting them.³⁵

In April 2023, the department published *Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying 2023–2027*.³⁶ The plan contained a key action to establish a dedicated unit to promote the voice of children in the department, including in curriculum development, policy development processes and inspection, and to ensure they had a meaningful input into the development of department policy. The department established the student participation unit in April 2023.

An expert group led by Professor Laura Lundy, and which included the Inspectorate, advised on the establishment of the student participation unit. The expert group's work was guided by input from 174 children. Reports from the expert group, namely the *Report of the Expert Group on Student*

Participation,³⁷ the *Background Report of the Expert Group on Student Participation*³⁸ and the *Report on Consultations with Children and Young People*,³⁹ inform the work of the unit. The *Department's Student Participation Implementation Plan* was published in October 2024.⁴⁰

The implementation plan contains fifty actions to support the department to further embed a culture of participation of children and young people into policy development from autumn 2024 to end 2026. Amongst these is a commitment to raising awareness of the importance and benefits of children's participation in decision-making among students, parents, teachers, school leaders, school staff and boards of management. At the end of the period, the department will publish an implementation report, which will be heavily informed by the views of children.



35 Department of Education (2024). Background Report of the Expert Group on Student Participation, p. 15. Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/background-report-of-the-expert-group-on-student-participation.pdf>

36 Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/cine%C3%A1ltas-action-plan-on-bullying/>

37 Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/report-of-the-expert-group-on-student-participation.pdf>

38 Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/background-report-of-the-expert-group-on-student-participation.pdf>

39 Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/final-report-on-the-public-consultation-on-a-new-policy-framework-for-children-and-you.pdf>

40 Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/student-participation-in-education/>

Inspectorate actions in the department's implementation plan

In the implementation plan, the Inspectorate committed to three specific actions:

1. publish an annual newsletter for children and young people about the work of the Inspectorate and to publish other student-friendly reports based on the outcomes of the Inspectorate's work and research in schools
2. publish a video series that highlights good practice in children and young people's participation, leadership and policy development, as observed by the Inspectorate in primary and post-primary schools
3. include a student-friendly summary page in inspection reports on curriculum evaluations in primary schools and in inspection reports on subject inspections in post-primary schools.

Considering each of the three in turn:

Action 1: In 2023, and again in 2024, the Chief Inspector published a newsletter for children and young people informing them about the work of the Inspectorate and the inspection programme for that year.⁴¹ In its 2023/2024 webinar for teachers, the Inspectorate also outlined why and how it elicits children's views during inspection. In addition, in 2024, two videos were published in which children and young people interviewed the Chief Inspector about their right to be heard during an inspection.

Action 2: In 2023–2024, the Inspectorate worked closely with primary and post-primary schools in sharing examples of student participation and leadership. We published four videos, recorded in schools, where school leaders, teachers and students talk about their student participation experience. The videos, available on www.gov.ie/DEInspectorateInformation for children and young people about inspection, showcase what is happening in the schools, as a means to encourage other schools to enhance student participation and leadership. A fifth video is due to be published in 2025–2026. Over time, further videos will be added to the series.

Action 3: As noted earlier, the student-friendly summary page in inspection reports was introduced.

Update on the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill, 2019

The Charter Bill has been passed by the Seanad and, at the time of the publication of this report, is awaiting a date for committee stage in the Dáil. The aim of the Charter Bill is to improve the school community's level of engagement by inviting feedback, comment and observations from children and parents, and by further developing a listening culture in schools.⁴² The Charter Bill reflects the department's commitment to promoting schools' engagement with children, parents and the whole-school community. This legislation will provide greater clarity for children and their parents on what they can expect from schools, and will help to ensure that schools, children and parents continue to work effectively in partnership together.

⁴¹ Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/information-for-children-and-young-people-about-inspection/>

⁴² Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/student-and-parent-charter/>

Once the Bill is passed, and following consultation with education stakeholders, the Minister for Education and Youth will publish charter guidelines to inform how schools will consult with, seek feedback from and respond to children and their parents. The charter legislation and guidelines have potential to support student and parental engagement in school self-evaluation (SSE) and will continue to inform the Inspectorate's developmental work in enhancing its engagement with students and parents in inspection processes.

In conclusion

The Inspectorate actively promotes the participation of children and young people in its inspections, publications and various presentations to stakeholders. Our published inspection guides, for example, advocate that all children should be given a voice, recognising them as key stakeholders. School inspection provides students with an

opportunity to express their views about the quality of provision they experience. Enabling their participation plays a role in advocating for children's rights in schools/settings generally.

We believe that student participation in inspection can provide considerable benefits for the Inspectorate, children, young people and schools. The Inspectorate is continually seeking to improve how we seek, listen to and take on board children and young people's views. We have opted to take a Do-and-then-Do-More approach. In so doing, we commit to revisiting our approach for each of the three stages of inspection and, through consultative processes, to do more each time. We are committed to equity and excellence in how we work with children and young people.

Ensuring purposeful participation for children and young people is a learning journey for the Inspectorate, as for schools. More needs to be done; student participation will continue to be part of our core mission as an Inspectorate.



Chapter 13

The complementarity of internal and external evaluation 2024: developments and next steps



Introduction

In 2023–2024, the Inspectorate established a team to look at how the complementarity of internal and external evaluation could be enhanced. This chapter shares the key themes arising from stakeholder meetings held in 2024 and early 2025.¹ It outlines stakeholders' views in relation to the challenges of school self-evaluation (SSE) and their insights about enhancing the complementarity of internal and external evaluation. It also describes current development work, including the introduction of *Feabhsú*, a new approach to aspects of school improvement.

SSE is a process where schools reflect on their own quality and practice, gather evidence and plan for improvement. Research tells us that when teachers examine their own individual and collective practice in a constructive and structured way, they can bring about significant improvement in the learning of students.² Over the years, stakeholders have highlighted a need to enhance the 'self' in self-evaluation and to give schools greater autonomy to identify priorities and actions for improvement.³ It is recognised, too, that not all schools have progressed at a similar pace on their school self-evaluation journey, and some schools will require more advisory support.⁴

Mc Namara et al. (2022)⁵ argue that a debate about the direction of SSE in Ireland is needed in light of the inconsistent ways in which schools have engaged in the process.

With the third cycle of SSE nearing completion in 2026, the Inspectorate has taken the opportunity to engage with stakeholders, gather diverse perspectives, ensure alignment with national educational priorities and co-create a shared vision for the next phase of SSE development.

SSE stakeholder consultation process

In 2024, the Inspectorate facilitated several focus group discussions with key partners and stakeholders to further explore the SSE process.⁶ These sessions included representatives from patron and management bodies, school principals, leadership team members, support services and colleagues from the three main teacher unions at primary and post-primary level. The insights shared by participants helped in sharpening and strengthening the development of a reimagined SSE process. Students and parents will be included in the next stage of consultations.

- 1 Chapter 11, *Reflections on a paradigm for school improvement: the potential complementarity of internal and external evaluation* in Inspectorate Report (2021–2023) and Thematic Review provides further background. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/the-department-of-education-inspectorate-report-2021-2023-and-thematic-review-pdf-version>
- 2 Hislop, H. (2017). A co-professional approach to inspection for accountability and improvement: progress and prospects in the Irish context. *The Irish Journal of Education / Iris Eireannach an Oideachais*, 42, 3–27. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26607238>; 43; Coolahan, J., Drudy, S., Hogan, P., Hyland, A. and McGuinness, S. (2017). *Towards a Better Future: A Review of the Irish School System*. Cork: Irish Primary Principals' Network and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals. p. 141
- 3 Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/reflections-on-a-paradigm-for-school-improvement-the-potential-complementarity-of-internal-and-external-evaluation/#complementarity-of-internal-and-external-evaluation>
- 4 Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/services/school-self-evaluation-sse/>
- 5 McNamara, G., Skerrett, C., O'Hara, J., O'Brien, S. and Brown, M. (2021). For improvement, accountability, or the economy? Reflecting on the purpose(s) of school self-evaluation in Ireland. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 54(2), pp 158–173. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2021.1985439>
- 6 In 2022, the Inspectorate undertook a survey of school principals and teachers about SSE. The findings, largely positive, are available at https://youtu.be/_161rB-SC1c

Five key themes emerged from the consultation process:

- the mandatory implementation of SSE and the fostering of a collaborative culture
- the six-step process as a means of engaging with self-evaluation
- the familiarity of schools in the DEIS programme with the SSE process
- the alignment between the SSE process and enhanced school autonomy
- the advisory role of the Inspectorate and other supports.

The mandatory implementation of SSE and the fostering of a collaborative culture

Participants acknowledged that the SSE process has contributed significantly to fostering a culture of reflective practice and a capacity to self-evaluate and work

collaboratively. As a whole-school initiative, SSE promotes inclusivity by engaging all members of the school community and empowering staff to lead pedagogical innovation and change. School leaders noted a marked increase in teachers' willingness to share effective teaching and learning strategies with colleagues. They also welcomed the practical application of agreed initiatives into classroom practice and the cross-curricular focus of SSE.

Overall, participants expressed the view that the formal requirement to engage in SSE has played a pivotal role in embedding the process within school culture. The core principles of self-evaluation in the context of school improvement are now widely understood and accepted. This perspective aligns with the Inspectorate's position that internal and external evaluations are not only complementary but, when integrated effectively, can drive more sustainable and long-term school improvement.





The six-step process as a means of engaging with self-evaluation

Participants considered that the six-step SSE process was becoming more established across schools. They highlighted its inclusive nature, noting that it can foster collegiality, strategic planning and a shared sense of purpose among school staff. The process provides a structured framework for schools to reflect on progress in the priority areas that they have identified themselves. It also enables schools to celebrate effective practices, strengthen teamwork and focus on what matters most within their unique school context.

The familiarity of schools in the DEIS programme with the SSE process

During the consultations, school leaders indicated that DEIS schools were particularly well positioned to engage with the SSE process, given their longstanding involvement in action planning for improvement since 2008. They noted that, while a small number of schools still faced challenges in aligning staff understanding – specifically in recognising the DEIS plan as the school’s SSE or school improvement plan (SIP) – the overall integration of SSE within the DEIS framework appeared to work effectively.

Alignment between the SSE process and enhanced school autonomy

SSE was seen as supporting autonomy within the staff team to respond, as needed, to emerging school trends and feedback from stakeholders. There was broad agreement among stakeholders that schools liked the autonomy of deciding their own priorities and would welcome even more autonomy. A few participants stated that direction from the department about national SSE priorities had constrained school autonomy, while others welcomed the direction provided.

Participants mentioned that SSE is more likely to be successful if the unique context of each school is taken into consideration when gathering evidence, identifying priorities and setting targets. Opportunities to develop teacher leadership, agency and autonomy had been created when teachers led initiatives and provided updates on progress at staff meetings. SSE was seen as supporting realistic autonomy within the staff team to respond, as needed, to emerging school trends and feedback from stakeholders.

The advisory role of the Inspectorate and other supports

There was broad agreement about the importance of external support for SSE. Oide⁷ advisory visits were recognised as important in helping schools to identify priorities and design meaningful improvement plans, and advisory visits from the Inspectorate were seen also as an important resource for schools. Participants viewed the support provided by Oide and the Inspectorate as complementary and advised that advisory visits should continue.

The partners expressed the view that there are a large number of new school principals in the system and they may need support in building further competence in the SSE process. The development of communities of practice and sharing of school improvement and SSE practices, through initiatives such as the *Learning Schools Project*,⁸ were seen as supportive opportunities. Participants expressed a strong desire for more opportunities to engage in these types of peer-sharing and learning events.

School leaders expressed confidence in the quality of published guidance and support documentation provided by the department, describing it as effective in supporting school improvement. The documentation and guidance, such as *Looking at Our School*, help staff to turn ambitious goals into practical and meaningful strategies that have potential to enhance teaching and learning in the classroom. School leaders also recognised a strong alignment between national policy documents and the SSE process, particularly in how *Looking at Our School* defines and

distinguishes effective and highly effective teaching, learning, leadership and management practices.

Challenges in implementing SSE in schools currently

School leaders identified several challenges in implementing SSE effectively in their school communities.⁹ Notably, some of the successes mentioned above were connected to specific challenges. The five main challenges were:

- recognising the added value of SSE
- time to engage with the SSE process
- managing data, gathering evidence, target setting and paperwork
- competing priorities
- involving the school community.

Recognising the added value of SSE

School principals found it challenging to convince a significant minority of teachers about the rationale for engaging with the SSE process. They felt that some teachers viewed SSE as a formulaic task – something that had to be done – making it feel more like a compliance exercise than a meaningful tool for enhancing teaching and learning in the classroom. They noted a sense of initiative overload and staff fatigue, which translated into a lack of buy-in. While they believed that a school leader could drive SSE within a school, getting staff engagement was critical for success.

⁷ See Home – Oide Available at: <https://oide.ie/>

⁸ The Learning School Project, funded by Teacher Education Section of the department, was an action research project undertaken by education support centres in Cork, West Cork, Kerry, Limerick and Clare, with the goal to:

- develop an increased awareness of what constitutes a learning school;
- support school-based activities promoting the on-going development of the learning school;
- enhance the capacity of individual teachers to contribute to the learning school; and
- nurture teacher leadership in schools.

⁹ Similar challenges were identified in the 2022 survey of principals and teachers about their experience of SSE. See https://youtu.be/_161rB-SC1c

Time to engage with the SSE process

There was consensus that time for collaborative work was important in fostering staff ownership of SSE. In discussions, school context emerged as a critical factor. Several senior and middle school leaders reported limited opportunities to meet regularly. Some reported that SSE-related meetings often occur during lunch breaks or teachers' personal time.

Participants also noted that the reallocation of Croke Park hours towards individual CPD¹⁰ has reduced time significantly for collective SSE planning—a shift regarded as a substantial loss, given the value of SSE as a shared professional endeavour.

Managing data, gathering evidence, target setting and paperwork

Almost all participants noted a significant improvement over time in the type of evidence gathered as part of the SSE process. Many remembered a time when an excessive amount of data was gathered, which became difficult to manage and may not have been particularly useful for quality improvement purposes. In relation to surveys and focus groups, participants agreed that there is a need for more support and advice on how to frame questions and how to record, analyse and report on the data gathered.

School leaders highlighted challenges in analysing data and in formulating specific, measurable, realistic and timebound (SMART) targets that are both meaningful and realistic within their specific contexts. They acknowledged that not every target can be quantified and that more training is required to support schools in setting effective targets.

They thought it was necessary to build the capacity of school leaders and teachers to identify evidence, gather and analyse data, set targets, and to monitor and report on progress.

Some participants felt that school leadership needed to be more realistic about the amount of work that can be completed in an SSE cycle and to plan for more appropriate timeframes to embed practices. It is essential to maintain focus on school improvement initiatives that extend beyond the completion of the SSE cycle and allow sufficient time for these strategic actions to become fully embedded. For example, one principal observed that *“the three-year cycle is restrictive. Some targets may need five years to embed whereas others may need a shorter period.”*

Competing priorities

Principals noted the difficulties of increasing workloads and the concurrent responsibilities of promoting SSE and supporting achievement of other school priorities. They suggested that more support is required to enable schools to see the connections between SSE and teaching and learning, and to demonstrate how SSE can be used meaningfully to enable the implementation of curricular reform in the primary and post-primary sectors.

Challenges relating to the delegation of responsibilities, staff turnover and changes to SSE leadership roles were also mentioned. At primary level and in smaller schools, principals often felt full responsibility for the leadership of SSE. In post-primary schools, participants felt that there was a need to empower subject co-ordinators to lead their subject departments. Participants considered that SSE was a particular challenge for recently established or developing schools, because the process needed to be established anew and could appear overwhelming.

¹⁰ Review of Usage of Croke Park Hours – Amendment to Circular 0008/2011 Available at: <https://circulars.gov.ie/pdf/circular/education/2014/43.pdf>; Public Service Stability Agreement 2013–2016 (Haddington Road Agreement) – Teachers – Review of Usage of Croke Park Hours – Amendment to Circular 0025/2011 Available at: <https://circulars.gov.ie/pdf/circular/education/2014/43.pdf>

Involving the school community

Despite the value school leaders placed on involving the school community, many primary and post-primary leaders reported significant challenges in engaging parents and students meaningfully in the SSE process. Achieving a high response rate from parents during surveys proved difficult. Additionally, some participants inquired about effective ways to include parents in the process and how best to share progress reports with the wider school community.

In discussing the role of the board of management in relation to SSE, some participants noted that agendas for board meetings were often extensive, making it difficult to allocate sufficient time for meaningful discussion about SSE and planning for school improvement. Additionally, some highlighted that the timing of school improvement plan (SIP) reporting—typically scheduled for the June board meeting—poses challenges, as it often coincides with the summer holiday period, leading to reduced focus and engagement levels.

Enhancing the complementarity of internal and external evaluation

A key element of the stakeholder engagement was to consider how internal and external evaluation could be enhanced. The stakeholder group considered how the Inspectorate might promote a sustainable school-improvement model that is collaborative and evidence-based and that connects internal and external evaluation more closely. Consultation participants advised that there was a need to:

- create a high-trust model and provide more autonomy for schools to determine their own improvement priorities
- keep the school-improvement model simple with a greater focus on teaching, learning and assessment
- provide advisory support for schools
- share best practice and facilitate collaboration with other schools
- promote whole-school collaboration and a sense of shared responsibility.



Feabhsú

The Inspectorate is developing its thinking and practice around how, in practical terms, high-quality education provision and education improvement can be supported. ‘Feabhsú’ is the term we are giving to how this is conceptualised. *Feabhsú* acknowledges that the education a school provides can be improved through meaningful, reciprocal engagement on issues of quality between those involved in external evaluation (the Inspectorate) and internal evaluation (schools).

Essentially, *Feabhsú* strives to combine internal and external evaluation processes and outcomes more efficiently and more effectively. It seeks to promote a sustainable school-improvement model that is collaborative and evidence based. The approach will take account of the factors identified by stakeholders. It will also be informed by international practice¹¹ and feedback from school communities where it is being trialled.

During a school evaluation, inspectors provide oral feedback to the school or setting highlighting strengths in educational provision and, where applicable, areas requiring improvement, and they provide a written a report based on their findings. The *Feabhsú* process enables school leadership to reflect on the inspection report and to prioritise relevant areas for improvement, rooted in the unique context of each school. *Feabhsú* aims to promote school agency and to strengthen the professional capacity of teachers to engage in meaningful, impactful school improvement initiatives with advisory support from the Inspectorate.

As part of the process, the inspector will undertake an advisory visit, or visits, to the school. During a visit, the inspector, school leaders and teachers discuss the actions and other areas for improvement identified by the school since the last inspection. The school's target setting and monitoring of progress will be discussed, as well as how the outcomes for learners and the impact of interventions are monitored at school level. Consideration of further actions by the school or supports needed will form part of the discussion.



11 The team engaged with inspectorate partners across Europe and beyond to see how they combined internal and external evaluation. The outcomes will be reported in the *Inspectorate Report (2025) and Thematic Review*



Feabhsú can enhance the relevance of external inspection findings by aligning them more closely with the school community's development needs. It aims to promote greater responsibility among all members of staff and recognition of the value of bringing an external perspective through the use of external evaluations. Nevo (2001) reminds us that both systems of evaluation (internal and external) benefit from each other.¹²

Feabhsú was trialled in thirteen schools (eight primary schools and five post-primary schools) in the first half of 2025. Each of the schools had a recent subject inspection or curriculum evaluation leading to a published report. The trial phase was viewed by participants as a very collaborative process, offering opportunities for school leaders, teachers, support staff and inspectors to work together.

Participants indicated that they experienced *Feabhsú* as empowering and developmental. School leaders and teachers saw it as a worthwhile opportunity to learn more about school improvement from the experience of inspectors. School leaders noted that the involvement of both the leadership team and other teachers, in the *Feabhsú* visit, worked well and this helped to foster shared ownership for improvement. The visit offered an opportunity to reflect on whole-school practices, particularly practices in relation to learning and teaching. They also noted that it gave them confidence in moving forward with their plans for school improvement.

12 Nevo, D. (2001). 'School evaluation: internal or external?' *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 27, pp 95–106. [http://ist-iiep.iiep-unesco.org/cgi-bin/wwwi32.exe/\[in=epidoc1.in\]/?t2000=016690/\(100\).27.10.1016/S0191-491X\(01\)00016-5](http://ist-iiep.iiep-unesco.org/cgi-bin/wwwi32.exe/[in=epidoc1.in]/?t2000=016690/(100).27.10.1016/S0191-491X(01)00016-5)

In conclusion: a future paradigm for school improvement

In its work to strengthen the complementarity of internal and external evaluation in supporting school improvement, the Inspectorate will consider carefully the feedback received during consultations and build upon the positive partnerships established with schools and settings.

As *Feabhsú* evolves, it will aim to motivate, challenge and support schools as they implement sustainable school improvement processes based on their own identified needs and the recommendations of external evaluation. It will:

- provide targeted feedback on school improvement processes
- assist schools in interpreting and acting upon their evidence and data
- facilitate professional learning communities, at school level or across clusters of schools with similar needs.

With *Feabhsú*, schools are trusted to set their own priorities, while still using information from external inspection reports and internal self-evaluation to guide them. *Feabhsú* offers an opportunity to address both system-wide education requirements and areas for improvement identified by the schools themselves. In this way, the initiative strives to bring internal and external priorities closer together in order to bring tangible benefits for children and young people in their learning experiences and outcomes. Further trials of *Feabhsú* are planned for 2025–2026.



Chapter 14

In conclusion



The Department of Education and Youth Inspectorate Report (2024) and Thematic Review is designed to give an overview of the work of the Inspectorate across early learning and care settings, primary schools, special schools, post-primary schools, centres for education and other education settings. It offers insights into the quality of education provision in Ireland for children and young people from their earliest years up to the end of their post-primary schooling.

The insights, reflections and findings in this report and thematic review are not intended to provide a full evaluation of the entire education system, but rather to offer evidence-based analysis of aspects of education provision, focusing on the period January 2024 to December 2024.

Overall findings

The overall findings from the 2024 inspection programme are positive. High standards in education provision were evident, reflecting national and international assessments which indicate that, from an educational attainment perspective, Ireland is faring well. The work of early years educators and school communities in making this possible cannot be underestimated. This is a time of ongoing change and development in social, educational and curriculum contexts. School and setting leaders, boards of management, teachers, early years educators, principals and special needs assistants continue to demonstrate huge professional commitment to delivering high-quality learning experiences for children and young people.

Notwithstanding the strengths evident in our education system, there are aspects of provision that we must keep to the fore and strive to improve.

The journey towards inclusion

Chapter 8 of this report and thematic review notes Ireland's commitment to the development of a high-quality education system where all children and young people can access an education appropriate to their interests, strengths and needs in an inclusive environment. The work of the Inspectorate over the course of 2024 has highlighted achievements in realising this goal. The work of many settings and schools to promote the agency of children and young people, the increasing involvement of parents in their children's learning and the further embedding of the student support file to support progression in learning are all positive developments in this regard. However, while we see increasing commitment to inclusive practices, there remain challenges in realising those values.

In primary and post-primary schools, planning and delivering meaningful learning activities for the diverse learning needs of children and young people are inconsistent. Effective inclusive teaching practices require teachers to adapt the curriculum in ways that preserve curriculum integrity, while allowing for flexibility, responsiveness to student need and access by all to enriching and meaningful learning experiences. It also means recognising that inclusion is not a bolt-on; it is central to how learning is made meaningful for all children and young people.

Engagement with all stakeholders, including parents, children and young people, about a shared understanding of inclusion will be an important next step in the further development of an inclusive, high-quality education system.

Thematic reports published by the Inspectorate in 2024 highlighted that schools do not always deploy the additional teaching resources they receive correctly. For example, the Inspectorate report on provision for children and young people with special educational needs in mainstream schools¹

1 Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/towards-high-quality-learning-experiences-for-all-provision-for-children-and-young-peo.pdf>, p. 10

found that special education teachers were deployed incorrectly to teach Mathematics or English to mainstream classes in almost a third of the primary schools inspected in 2024. Post-primary school leaders deployed teachers inappropriately in three-quarters of the schools inspected. The main issue in these schools was the misuse of special education teaching hours to form smaller subject classes for all students, or to create additional subject options. The incorrect deployment of teaching resources is not confined to special education teaching; similar issues were highlighted in the thematic report on provision for children and young people with additional language needs.²

As the Department advances the development of a high-quality, inclusive system, there is a need for policy makers to consider how the current processes for allocating teachers to schools and for deploying teachers within schools can be strengthened to ensure that these resources are put to best use within schools and achieve their intended policy objectives.

Curriculum enactment

Curriculum redevelopment and enactment continue to advance. National strategies in literacy, numeracy, inclusion and digital learning are reaching implementation stage. Early years, primary and post-primary curriculum reform offers a wonderful opportunity to renew the professional conversation about what education is for and how we serve learners best in a changing world.

It is easy, in the context of reform, to focus on structures, frameworks and strategies. But ultimately, the success of any curriculum, whether in early learning and care, in the *Primary Curriculum Framework*, or in senior cycle redevelopment, depends on the quality

of the decisions teachers make and the experiences they provide to children and young people.

Realising a vision for curriculum enactment depends on the successful interplay of multiple actors: schools, *Oide* and other support services, curriculum and assessment bodies, initial teacher education providers, the Inspectorate, Education Support Centres, families and communities, as well as the purposeful involvement of children and young people.

A particular focus of this report is the enactment of the *Primary Language Curriculum*, as it relates to Irish. Inspection findings highlight an urgent need to support school leaders and teachers in improving their language proficiency in Irish. Proficiency in Irish is essential to enact the principles and pedagogical practices of the *Primary Language Curriculum* successfully. A concerted effort is needed to encourage and inspire teachers to take ownership of their own professional learning to strengthen and maintain their language proficiency in Irish, as relevant to their classroom and school contexts.

Using the school self-evaluation (SSE) process to support curriculum enactment

As scholars like Mark Priestley and Gert Biesta remind us, the curriculum is not a product to be delivered.³ It is a process; one that reflects our values, invites professional judgment and must be enacted in context. The idea of curriculum making, while not always part of our everyday language, offers a useful way to think about how learning is facilitated through appropriate content and tasks, stimulating environments and child-centred teaching

2 Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/meeting-additional-language-needs-whole-school-and-classroom-approaches-for-inclusive-.pdf> p. 27

3 Biesta, G., Priestley, M. and Robinson, S. (2017). Talking about education: exploring the significance of teachers' talk for teacher agency. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 49, pp 38–54; Biesta, G., Priestley, M. and Robinson, S. (2015). The role of beliefs in teacher agency. *Teachers and Teaching*, 21(6), pp 624–640; Priestley, M., Alvunger, D., Philippou, S. and Soini, T. (2021). Introduction. In: *Curriculum making in Europe: policy and practice within and across diverse contexts*. Bingley: Emerald, pp 1–28

processes and learning experiences that take account of home, school and community contexts.

Curriculum making frames teachers as active agents in shaping what curriculum becomes in practice. In our inspections, we continue to see powerful examples of internal collaboration and curriculum making. We see teachers working together across class levels or subjects, leaders enabling shared planning time and schools effectively using the SSE processes to collaborate and reflect on new specifications, inclusion, progression and wellbeing.

Notwithstanding these strengths, there are aspects of provision that should remain a priority to ensure the quality of the learner experience is shaped not only by curriculum content but by how it is enacted. SSE and curriculum making are not one-time events, but ongoing, iterative processes of adaptation and improvement based on feedback and evolving needs. For SSE to be successful and not seen as a competing priority, a strong connection between SSE and teaching, learning and assessment is essential.

Wellbeing and anti-bullying

Several of the inspection findings in the Chapter 7, *Perspectives on Bullying Behaviour* (2024), affirm the significant work of schools in fostering safe, inclusive and welcoming learning environments. The Department of Education and Youth *Bí Cineálta* procedures are central to this work, providing a structured framework of supports that help schools to both prevent and address bullying behaviour. By strengthening protective factors such as trusted adults, student voice, staff training, and the consistent application of anti-bullying policies, *Bí Cineálta* helps schools to further develop and cultivate respectful relationships and reinforce student wellbeing.

The ongoing challenge of cyberbullying is also recognised. *The Digital Strategy for Schools* provides important supports in this regard, prioritising professional learning, digital safety

and collaborative engagement with parents and students in shaping responsible online behaviour.

Digital transformation

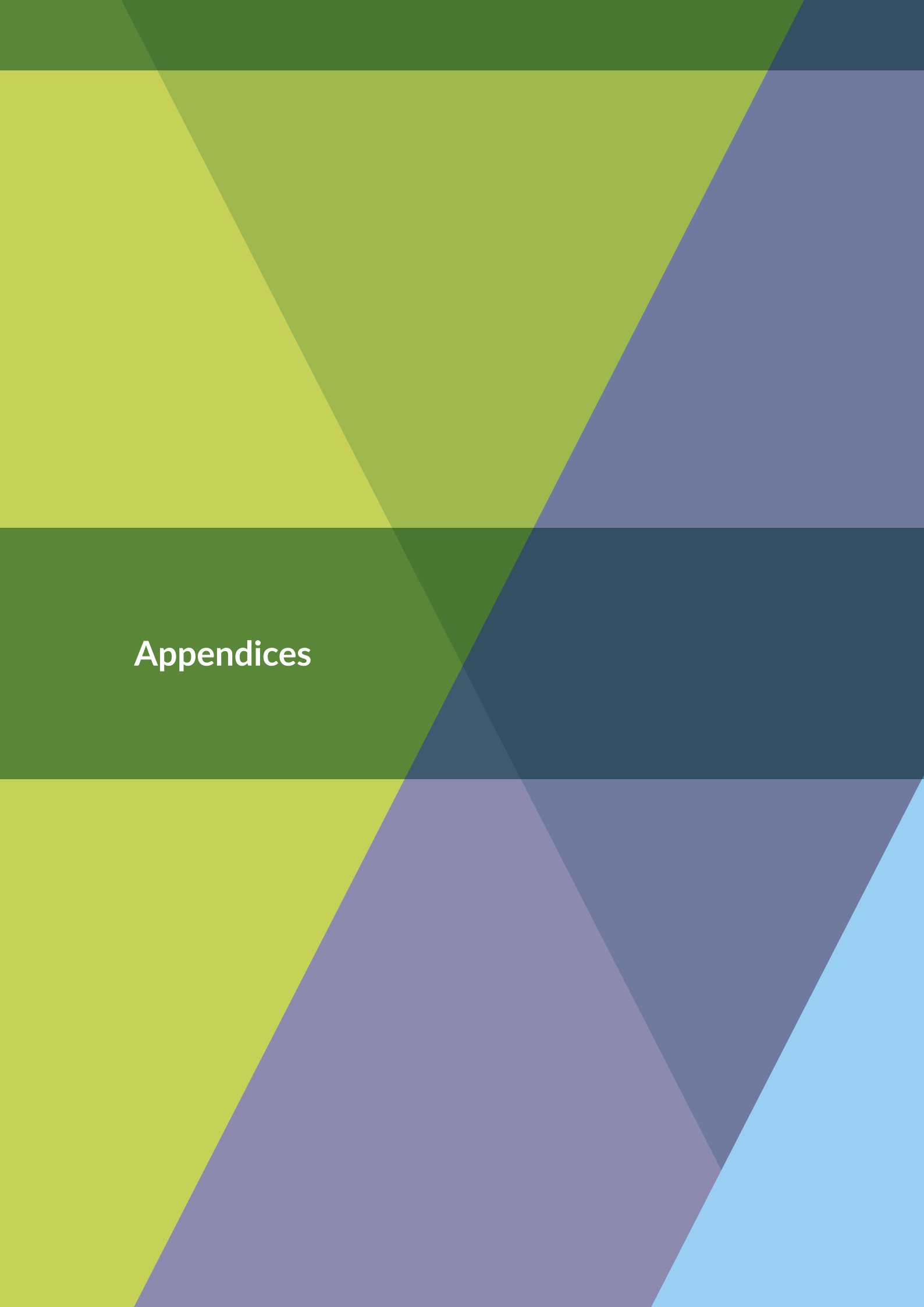
Digital transformation continues to shape all aspects of education, building on the momentum established during the early 2020s. As Ireland's schools and settings adapt to evolving technologies, the challenge remains to ensure that digital tools enhance, rather than supplant, the human relationships and creative practices integral to effective teaching.

While digital platforms offer unprecedented opportunities to streamline administrative tasks and support innovative pedagogy, the essence of teaching – marked by relationship, empathy, artistry and authentic engagement – must be preserved and elevated within this context. The Inspectorate continues to prioritise the development of digital literacy that empowers learners to question, challenge and thrive in a complex, interconnected world, while ensuring that technology remains a complement to, not a replacement for, pedagogical integrity and human connection.

Closing comments

The Inspectorate is grateful to all those in the education community with whom we have engaged, through our inspection, advisory and research work, in order to arrive at the insights in this report and thematic review. We look forward to continuing, reciprocal, professional engagement with education partners and stakeholders, including children and young people.

As an Inspectorate, our aspiration is for an education system where every child and young person feels valued and is actively supported and nurtured to reach their full potential. It is hoped that the *Inspectorate Report (2024) and Thematic Review* will stimulate reflection, debate and actions that contribute to a high-quality, inclusive education system.



Appendices

Appendix 1

Staffing and organisation of the Inspectorate

The Inspectorate is structured into nine business units, with overall leadership provided by the chief inspector and a senior management team. The majority of inspectors are allocated to five regional units, each led by an assistant chief inspector. The regional assistant chief inspectors are responsible for the core programme of inspections and advisory activities in early learning and care settings, primary and post-primary schools. Each also has a policy remit.

There are four specialised business units, also led by assistant chief inspectors, that focus on areas such as evaluation support and research; inclusion (including special education), access and participation; curriculum and assessment policy; and Inspectorate business operations.

Two deputy chief inspectors, along with the chief inspector, provide strategic leadership and oversight of both the core work in schools and settings and the Inspectorate's policy remit.

Inspectorate organisational structure

- Yvonne Keating – Chief Inspector
- Gary Ó Donnchadha – Deputy Chief Inspector
- Orlaith O'Connor – Deputy Chief Inspector
- Declan Cahalane – Assistant Chief Inspector
- Suzanne Conneely – Assistant Chief Inspector
- Esther Doyle – Assistant Chief Inspector
- Jason Kelly – Assistant Chief Inspector
- Treasa Kirk – Assistant Chief Inspector
- Martin Lally – Assistant Chief Inspector
- Brian Mac Giolla Phádraig – Assistant Chief Inspector
- Ger Power – Assistant Chief Inspector
- Martin Whyte – Assistant Chief Inspector

Table 1: Summary of Inspectorate activities 2024

	31/12/2024
Senior management	13
Early years inspectors	14
Senior early years inspectors	5
Primary inspectors	29
Primary divisional inspectors	27
Post-primary inspectors	32
Senior post-primary inspectors	25
Inspectorate secretariat	12

Appendix 2

Inspectorate staff as at 5 September 2025

Aherne, Siobhán	Post-primary inspector
Báicéir, Mícheál	Primary divisional inspector
Bambury, Noreen	Primary district inspector
Barry, Niamh	Senior post-primary inspector
Brazil, Charlene	Senior post-primary inspector
Breen, Pauline	Post-primary inspector
Broderick, Siobhán	Senior post-primary inspector
Byrne, Freda	Post-primary inspector
Cahalane, Declan	Assistant chief inspector
Cahill, Bríd	Primary district inspector
Carter, Martina	Senior early years inspector
Carty, Anthony	Post-primary inspector
Casserty, Christina	Primary divisional inspector
Collins, Barbara	Primary divisional inspector
Collins, Heidi	Primary district inspector
Collins, Rory	Primary district inspector
Conachy, Gráinne	Senior post-primary inspector
Condon, Edel	Senior early years inspector
Condon, James	Post-primary inspector
Conlon, Celine	Executive officer
Conneely, Suzanne	Assistant chief inspector
Cooper, Frieda	Clerical officer
Corcoran, Edel	Primary district inspector
Corry, Rose Marie	Primary district inspector
Cosgrave, Nicholas*	Primary divisional inspector
Cotter, Ursula	Primary divisional inspector
Cull, Gráinne	Primary district inspector
Cullen, Catherine	Early years inspector
Daly, Ann	Senior post-primary inspector
Donnelly, William	Senior post-primary inspector
Donoghue, Carmel	Senior post-primary inspector
Doody, Brendan*	Assistant chief inspector
Doyle, Esther	Assistant chief inspector
Doyle, Gavin	Senior post-primary inspector
Duff, Claudete	Clerical officer

Duffy, Imelda	Senior early years inspector
Duignan, Maresa*	Assistant chief inspector
Dullaghan, Diarmuid	Primary divisional inspector
Egan, Jennifer	Post-primary inspector
Fahey, Pádraig	Primary district inspector
Falcini, Ulrike	Early years inspector
Farrell, Aisling	Higher executive officer
Farren, Margaret	Primary district inspector
Fitzgerald, John	Primary divisional inspector
Fitzpatrick, Anne	Primary district inspector
Flanagan, Shane	Post-primary inspector
Folan, Eimear	Post-primary inspector
Foley, Kay	Primary district inspector
Gallagher, Emma	Post-primary inspector
Galligan, Rebecca	Senior post-primary inspector
Gavagan, Barbara	Early years inspector
Geary, Amanda	Senior post-primary inspector
Geraghty, Imelda	Primary district inspector
Ginnane, Sinéad	Primary district inspector
Grant, Amanda	Primary divisional inspector
Greene, Sinéad	Senior post-primary inspector
Griffin, Clare	Primary divisional inspector
Halpin, Jillian	Early years inspector
Hanley, Norma	Early years inspector
Heeney, Denise	Executive officer
Heffernan, Áine	Early years inspector
Heffernan, Ciara	Clerical officer
Henson, Jennifer	Early years inspector
Hillas, Sarah	Post-primary inspector
Hora, Sandra	Early years inspector
Hyland, Elaine	Primary divisional inspector
Hynes, Elaine	Senior early years inspector
Hynes, Rory	Post-primary inspector
Keane, Adana	Post-primary inspector
Keating, Yvonne	Chief inspector
Kelly, Aishling	Senior early years inspector
Kelly, Craig	Clerical officer
Kelly, Jason	Assistant chief inspector
Kilroy, Leo*	Primary divisional inspector
King, Catherine	Primary divisional inspector
Kingston, Úna	Primary district inspector
Kirk, Treasa	Assistant chief inspector
Lally, Martin	Assistant chief inspector
Larkin, Niall	Primary district inspector
Lorigan, Maria	Senior post-primary inspector
Lynch, Julia	Post-primary inspector

Mac Fhlannchadha, Pádraig*	Assistant chief inspector
Mac Giolla Phádraig, Brian	Assistant chief inspector
Magner, Eilís	Primary district inspector
Mangan, Paula	Post-primary inspector
Mannion, Dara	Primary divisional inspector
McCarthy, Maria	Primary divisional inspector
McConway, Gary	Senior post-primary inspector
McCoy, Dympna	Post-primary inspector
McGrath, Maria	Primary divisional inspector
McMorrow, Noreen	Senior post-primary inspector
McSorley, Teresa*	Primary divisional inspector
Meleady, Mark	Clerical officer
Moore, Stephen	Post-primary inspector
Moss, Frances*	Senior post-primary inspector
Mulligan, Niamh	Post-primary inspector
Murphy, Shirley	Senior post-primary inspector
Nally, Kenneth	Post-primary inspector
Needham, Paula	Post-primary inspector
Ní Áinle, Ailís	Post-primary inspector
Ní Bhaoill, Joanne	Primary district inspector
Ní Bhriain, Caitríona	Primary divisional inspector
Ní Bhroin, Ailbhíne	Post-primary inspector
Ní Chatháin, Helen	Senior post-primary inspector
Ní Chíosóig, Saundra	Primary district inspector
Ní Choncheanainn, Máire	Post-primary inspector
Ní Dhuinn, Lena	Primary divisional inspector
Ní Fhearghusa, Jacqueline*	Senior post-primary inspector
Ní Fhoighil, Niamh	Primary divisional inspector
Ní Láimhín, Máire	Primary district inspector
Ní Mháirtín, Máire	Primary divisional inspector
Ní Mheachair, Fiona	Primary divisional inspector
Ní Mhurchú, Yvonne	Primary divisional inspector
Ní Ruairc, Bernadette	Post-primary inspector
Ní Scannláin, Eibhlín	Senior post-primary inspector
Ó Cadhain, Colm	Primary district inspector
Ó Caoilte, Micheál	Post-primary inspector
Ó Coileáin, Diarmaid	Post-primary inspector
Ó Donnchadha, Gary	Deputy chief inspector
Ó Murchú, Colm	Senior post-primary inspector
O' Brien, Majella	Post-primary inspector
O' Connor, Orlaith	Deputy chief inspector
O' Connor, Triona	Early years inspector
O' Donoghue, Eavan	Primary district inspector
O' Donovan, Kevin	Senior post-primary inspector
O' Grady, Margaret	Clerical officer
O' Loughlin, Aisling	Early years inspector

O' Mahony, Fintan	Post-primary inspector
O' Neill, Liz	Senior post-primary inspector
O' Shea, Caroline	Post-primary inspector
O' Sullivan, Brendan	Post-primary inspector
O' Sullivan, Eileen	Primary divisional inspector
O' Sullivan, Joanne	Clerical officer
Ormond, Stephanie	Primary district inspector
Patten, Sinéad	Primary district inspector
Pender, Jean	Primary district inspector
Power, Deirdre	Early years inspector
Power, Ger	Assistant chief inspector
Quigley, Deborah	Senior post-primary inspector
Quinn, Niamh	Primary district inspector
Quirke, Gerard	Primary divisional inspector
Ramsbottom, Linda	Senior post-primary inspector
Regan, Mary	Primary district inspector
Reidy, Claire	Primary district inspector
Roe, Joanne	Early years inspector
Rushe, Fiona	Primary divisional inspector
Ryan, Michael	Primary district inspector
Sheeran, Orla	Primary district inspector
Shortt, Elaine	Early years inspector
Smith, Elizabeth	Senior post-primary inspector
Smith, Michelle	Clerical officer
Stevenson, Lee-Anne	Clerical officer
Treacy, Catherine	Primary district inspector
Uí Ghrianna, Caitríona	Primary divisional inspector
Victor Byrne, Michelle	Post-primary inspector
Wallace, Sandra	Post-primary inspector
Walsh, Angela	Early years inspector
Walsh, Laura	Senior post-primary inspector
White, Lisa	Senior post-primary inspector
White, Susan	Post-primary inspector
Whitlow, Niamh	Primary district inspector
Whyte, Martin	Assistant chief inspector
Whyte, Tara	Post-primary inspector

* *Seconded/Career break/Principal Officer in other section of the department.*

Appendix 3

Inspectorate publications 2024

In 2024, the Inspectorate released a range of publications, including guides, reports of thematic evaluations and newsletters. It published videos about promoting and facilitating student participation and student leadership in schools and on the importance of listening to students' views during inspection. It also published a young person's guide to inspection in post-primary schools.

In December 2024, the Inspectorate published *Inspectorate Report (2021–2023) and Thematic Review*. That publication comprised a report on the Inspectorate's activities over the three-year period as well as thematic analyses of and reflections on a range of pertinent education matters, drawing on inspection findings.

Guides

A Guide to Inspection in Primary and Special Schools – Updated 2024. Published January 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/inspection-guidelines/>

A Guide to inspection in Post-Primary Schools – Updated 2024. Published January 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/inspection-guidelines/>

A young person's guide to inspection in post-primary schools. Published December 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/information-for-children-and-young-people-about-inspection/?#information-for-young-people-in-post-primary-schools>

Thematic reports

Summer programme 2023 – Building confidence and connections. Published February 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/inspectorate-publications/#special-educational-needs>

Quality of education for children and young people from Ukraine. Published February 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/inspectorate-publications/#corporate-reports>

Meeting additional language needs: Whole-school and classroom approaches for inclusive language learning. Published February 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/inspectorate-publications/#corporate-reports>

Early intervention classes for children with autism: Towards a coherent, inclusive system. Published June 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/inspectorate-publications/#corporate-reports>

Perspectives on bullying behaviour (2023). Published June 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/inspectorate-publications/#corporate-reports>

Living today for a better tomorrow: Insights into effective practice in education for sustainable development in early learning and care settings and schools. Published August 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/inspectorate-publications/#corporate-reports>

Unlocking creativity: Insights into effective practice in early learning and care settings and schools. Published August 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/inspectorate-publications/#corporate-reports>

Young people on alternative educational and training pathways: Evaluation of Youthreach provision. Published August 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/inspectorate-publications/#corporate-reports>

Towards high-quality learning experiences for all: Provision for children and young people with special educational needs in primary and post-primary schools. Published September 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/inspectorate-publications/#special-educational-needs>

Improving outcomes and experiences for children and young people: Evaluation of home school community liaison (HSCL) in primary and post-primary schools. Published December 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/inspectorate-publications/#social-inclusion>

Department of Education Inspectorate Report (2021-2023) and Thematic Review. Published December 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/campaigns/the-department-of-education-inspectorate-report-2021-2023-and-thematic-review/>

Newsletters

Inspectorate Update for Children and Young People. Published December 2024.

Inspectorate Update for Primary Schools. Published October 2024.

Inspectorate Update for Special Schools. Published October 2024.

Inspectorate Update for Post-Primary Schools. Published October 2024.

Inspectorate Update for Early Learning and Care Settings. Published June 2024.

Inspectorate Update for Primary Schools. Published April 2024.

Inspectorate Update for Special Schools. Published April 2024.

Inspectorate Update for Post-Primary Schools. Published April 2024.

All Inspectorate Updates available at:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/inspectorate-updates/>

Videos

Promoting and facilitating student participation and student leadership videos in primary and post-primary schools. Published May 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/information-for-teachers-and-school-leaders-primary-and-special-schools/#promoting-and-facilitating-student-participation-and-student-leadership-in-schools> and <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/information-for-teachers-and-school-leaders-post-primary/#promoting-and-facilitating-student-participation-and-student-leadership-in-schools>

Promoting and facilitating student participation and student leadership videos in primary and post-primary schools. Published October 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/information-for-teachers-and-school-leaders-primary-and-special-schools/#promoting-and-facilitating-student-participation-and-student-leadership-in-schools> and <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/information-for-teachers-and-school-leaders-post-primary/#promoting-and-facilitating-student-participation-and-student-leadership-in-schools>

Students interview Chief Inspector about article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), 1989. Published November 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/information-for-children-and-young-people-about-inspection/?#listening-to-students-views-during-inspection> and <https://www.gov.ie/ga/an-roinn-oideachais/foilseachain/eolas-le-haghaidh-leana%C3%AD-agus-daoine-%C3%B3ga-maidir-le-cigireacht/#ag-eisteacht-le-tuairimi-na-scolairi-le-linn-cigireachta>

Introduction to Insights – Quality in early years education webinars. Published September 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/insights-quality-in-early-years-education-webinars/#introduction>



