

## Zachary

Zachary (Photo F.1) is four years old. He had his fourth birthday in April. He lives with his Mum, Dad and three sisters in a large town on the east coast of Ireland. His parents originally came from Nigeria. He loves playing with his toys, going to the park and watching children's programmes on television. He attends Naíonra Naoimh Pádraig from 9.15 a.m. to 12.45 p.m. every day from Monday to Friday.



Photo F.1: Zachary

## Naíonra Naoimh Pádraig – Background and context

Naíonra Naoimh Pádraig is situated in the town where Zachary lives. It was founded in 1993 by the local Gaelscoil. It is under the direction of a committee consisting of the Principal of the Gaelscoil, the school secretary, and the Director of the Naíonra. The Principal of the Gaelscoil acts as manager of the Naíonra.

The Naíonra is situated in a Sports Centre in the locality and the committee rents the facilities it uses there. These consist of a spacious room where most of the centre's activities take place, a larger carpeted area, and a large sports hall. The Naíonra is funded by a capitation grant from Forbairt Naíonraí Teoranta. This grant defrays the cost of renting the facilities, pays the salary of the Director of the centre, and meets the cost of resources needed by the centre. The other practitioners in the centre are members of employment schemes funded by FÁS (the national employment and training authority) and are remunerated through those schemes.

Zachary is one of 20 children ranging in age from three to four years who attend the Naíonra. Depending on when they enrol, the children will spend either one or two years in the centre. This Naíonra is situated in a disadvantaged area. Approximately 80% of the children live locally and the rest commute from other parts of the town. All but two of the children leaving the Naíonra this year will attend the Gaelscoil which is situated about half a mile from the Naíonra.

The staff of the Naíonra consists of the Director and three other practitioners. The Director, Siobhán, has a Diploma as a Nursery (Childcare) Nurse obtained in Northern Ireland. She has also completed a two year Diploma in Irish with the University of Ulster. One of the assistants left the centre after my first visit because her time on the FÁS course had expired. She wasn't replaced until just after my last visit. The staff of the Naíonra was, therefore, effectively three rather than four, during my visits.

## Curriculum and assessment

When the Director, Siobhán, took up her position in the Naíonra two years ago she found few resources available to support children's learning and development in the centre. She set about developing a curriculum for the children. In doing this, her principal resource was Altraim, an organisation based in Northern Ireland that supports pre-school education through the medium of Irish. Siobhán also received information and support from Forbairt Naíonraí Teoranta. Although located in the Republic of Ireland, Naíonra Naoimh Pádraig is affiliated to Altraim (one of only two in the Republic, the other being in Donegal). Siobhán and the other practitioners draw on the literature which Altraim circulates outlining approaches to early learning and how early learning can be supported through Irish. Siobhán has also accessed a resource from Altraim which outlines the basic principles of second language learning. It sets out language teaching approaches appropriate to a Naíonra and incorporates not only the basic principles of a language learning programme for children in this age group but suggests a variety of themes that can be used to facilitate language learning through the medium of Irish. Siobhán and the other practitioners use this resource in supporting Zachary's early learning and development.

Another support that Siobhán finds valuable is a series of booklets produced by Delta: Community Parenting Project Southern District, Newry (Delta: Tionscadal Tuismitheoireachta Pobail, Ceanntar an Deiscirt). These booklets, over twenty of which Siobhán uses, cover numerous topics including *Development and the Early Years*, *Early Language Development Guidance for Project Promoters*, *Early Mathematics*, *How Parents Can Help*, and *Early Years Creativity*. These booklets are presented in Irish and English. Siobhán and the other practitioners use these various resources in developing a curriculum for Zachary and the other children.

Siobhán has developed a curriculum for the children which is characterised by considerable flexibility that allows for different activities on different days. This provides the context and the structure for Zachary's experiences in the Naíonra. From 9.15 a.m. until lunch time at 11.15 a.m. Zachary follows the same routine each day, but from 11.35

a.m. until the children go home at 12.45 p.m. the activities he is involved in vary from day to day (Table 9).

**Table 9: A day in the Naíonra for Zachary**

|                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| 9.15 –10.15 a.m. | Zachary enjoys free-play with the other children in the Naíonra.  |
| 10.15–10.30 a.m. | Siobhán and the other practitioners encourage Zachary and the other children to learn to be responsible for the play-things and other resources in the Naíonra, and for their own actions, by giving time for tidy-up.  |
| 10.30–10.45 a.m. | The children enjoy learning through Circle Time.  |
| 10.45– 1.00 a.m. | The children have an opportunity to use the toilets and to wash their hands following their morning activities and before they have something to eat.   |
| 11.00–11.15 a.m. | Zachary and the other children enjoy time for music and singing.  |
| 11.15–11.35 a.m. | Lunch time  |
| 11.35–12.00 p.m. | Zachary has an opportunity to learn using a range of resources. His experiences vary from day to day. The following is an outline of Zachary's experiences across a week: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monday <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Threading</li> </ul> </li> <li>Tuesday <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Playing with blocks</li> </ul> </li> <li>Wednesday <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Playing with animals</li> </ul> </li> <li>Thursday <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Constructing with straws</li> </ul> </li> <li>Friday <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Constructing with sticky blocks</li> </ul> </li> </ul>           |
| 12.00–12.40 p.m. | The following is a further outline of Zachary's experiences across a week: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monday <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Dathanna (colours)/Theme/Prewriting/Dough</li> </ul> </li> <li>Tuesday <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Outdoors/Upstairs/Lotto games/Prewriting</li> </ul> </li> <li>Wednesday <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Theme/Dice/Story time/Dough</li> </ul> </li> <li>Thursday <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Story time/Lotto games/Jigsaws/Sorting</li> </ul> </li> <li>Friday <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Prewriting/Matching/Theme/Halla (hall for Irish dancing)/Music</li> </ul> </li> </ul> |
| 12.40–12.45 p.m. | Zachary and the other children have time for exploring and enjoying books before going home.  |

# Zachary's experiences in Naíonra Naoimh Pádraig

## Well-being

Zachary spends most of his day in the Naíonra in the *seomra (room)*<sup>21</sup>, a large, carpeted, rectangular room. It has a large table that can accommodate all the children and three smaller ones around which they can sit in groups. Each table has a sufficient number of child-sized chairs. The groups are made up of children who are at roughly the same developmental stage. The tables are covered with different shades of waterproof material that can be wiped clean easily when necessary. The groups are identified by the shade of the table covering, *an bord glas (the green table)*, *an bord dearg (the red table)*, and so on. Artificial lighting is used to supplement the natural lighting in the room. A coat stand and hooks at child level are provided for the children's coats and bags. The room has a sink, a microwave oven, and a fridge for storing the children's lunches and drinks. There are suitable toilets and washing facilities available for the children in the centre. At 10.45 a.m. along with the other children in his group, Zachary goes to the *leithreas (toilets)* and then washes his hands.

Upstairs the Naíonra has access to a large carpeted room which is used for activities involving movement. On ground level, the Naíonra has the use of a large sports hall where the children can enjoy being physically active and play a range of games including ball games. During my visits, Zachary took part enthusiastically in the activities, and very competitively in the games. On one visit, Zachary refused to participate in a ball game in the hall because he wanted to play with a hula hoop instead. He looked downcast and refused to join in for a little while until Siobhán persuaded him to run in races. He found the ideal outlet for his natural competitive spirit in this and was in high good humour after winning two races, demonstrating again his competitive nature.

At the time of my visits, the Naíonra had no outdoor play area, although negotiations were ongoing to acquire access to an outside area of the Sports Centre that would be

---

<sup>21</sup> As with Amy's portrait, Irish words/phrases used by the practitioners and/or Zachary are presented with the English translation.

suitable and safe for the children to use. Siobhán and her colleagues take Zachary and the other children on nature walks outside but Siobhán informed me how challenging this was becoming due to the number of unsupervised dogs in the area. Outdoor activities were further hampered at the time of my visits due to road construction work near the Sports Centre.

Siobhán and the other practitioners arrive at the centre before 9.00 a.m. each morning. They wash all the tables with disinfectant, set up the *seomra* (room) for the day's activities, and check the toilets to ensure they are clean and safe for Zachary and the other children. When the children go home at 12.45 p.m. Siobhán and her colleagues tidy the *seomra*, clean the tables and the floor, and empty out the bins. Every Friday they sterilise all the toys. Through this daily routine, the staff ensure the provision of a clean learning environment for the children.

The staff hold a meeting in May/June with parents whose children will attend the Naíonra the following year. The routine of the day in the Naíonra, the activities the children participate in, the approaches the staff use to support the children's learning and development, the centrality of the use of Irish, the ways parents can support their children's learning and development in the setting, and the overall ethos and function of the Naíonra are outlined at this meeting. Thereafter, communication between parents and Siobhán and the other practitioners takes place on an informal basis, when children are being left at the setting or collected from it. During my interview with a group of the parents, they spoke about how satisfied they were with this arrangement. One parent said, *you can talk to them [the staff] on a one-to-one basis, and if there is anything wrong they can take you aside and talk about it.*

## Identity and Belonging

Siobhán and the other practitioners in Naíonra Naoimh Pádraig make every effort to ensure that Zachary is happy and that he feels valued and respected. Along with the other children he addresses the practitioners by their first names: *múinteoir Siobhán* (teacher Siobhán), *múinteoir Deirbhile* (teacher Deirbhile), and so on. His and the other children's work is liberally displayed around the walls. The display is continually changing as different themes/topics are explored and developed with the children. The

theme/topic work includes both individual and group work and consists of various types of paintings, collages, drawings, etc. A large coloured chart divided into the months of the year showing the children's birthdays is also displayed on a wall in the *seomra* (room). Zachary's birthday is displayed in the section for *Mí Aibreáin* (April).

Lunch time is from 11.15 a.m. until 11.35 a.m. The children take it in turns to hand out the lunch bags or boxes. If it is Zachary's turn he stands on a small stool, one of the practitioners hands him in turn the bags or boxes belonging to the other children, and he says *Cé leis an lón seo?* (*whose lunch is this?*) Otherwise he waits until his own bag is held up and says *Is liomsa é* (*it's mine*).

During my visits to the Naíonra, Zachary was involved in a group collage of *an ghrian* (*the sun*). Along with the other children he helped make a large cut-out of the sun decorated as a face. This was pasted onto a large board. Then he made a print of his feet using paint. These footprints were then cut out and along with those of the other children, formed the rays of the sun in the collage (Photo F.2).



Photo F.2: *An ghrian* (*the sun*) which includes Zachary's footprints

An activity particularly popular with Zachary and all the children is taking a large rag doll called Róisín home for the weekend. When it was Zachary's turn he took Róisín home on Friday, undressed her for bed, put her to sleep, dressed her again in the morning, brought her along with the family to do the shopping on Saturday, bought her a treat and shared it with her, and had photographs taken of himself with Róisín and the family. He brought these photographs and Róisín back to the Naíonra on Monday morning. Siobhán and her colleagues encouraged Zachary to recount Róisín's weekend with him and his family. His photographs were displayed on the wall in the Naíonra for the rest of the week. In talking with Zachary's Dad following the weekend with Róisín, he spoke to me of the value this exercise had for Zachary in inculcating a sense of responsibility and respect for others.

At the moment Naíonra Naoimh Pádraig seems to be a central part of Zachary's life. Much of what he does in the Naíonra draws on his home experiences where he likes playing with his toys and particularly likes going to the park and watching children's programmes on television.

## Communicating

Circle Time from 10.30 a.m. to 10.45 a.m. is a consistent feature of Zachary's experience in Naíonra Naoimh Pádraig. He joins his group at one of the group tables for this. The activity usually involves him recounting his experiences outside the centre, an opportunity for the staff to link Zachary's experiences in the Naíonra with his other experiences. When his turn came Siobhán said to him *An bhfuil aon scéal agat Zachary?* (*Have you a story Zachary?*) He told her, for example, about going to the park with his Dad and what he did there. She prompted him to use as many Irish words as possible and, where necessary, offered the Irish word or phrase, for example, *Ó bhí tú ag súgradh.* (*Oh, you were playing.*) It is very obvious that his comprehension of Irish exceeds his ability to use it, as might be expected at his stage of development. He hears the practitioners using words and phrases in Irish consistently, and regularly follows the various directions given to him in Irish.

Zachary is actively and enthusiastically involved in pre-writing activities, which happen at least twice a week. He can already write his name on the various pieces of work, such

as paintings, that he has completed. He joins in with the singing during song time for fifteen minutes at 11.00 a.m.

Siobhán sings songs such as *Baa, Baa, caora dubh (Baa, Baa black sheep)* and he joins in along with the other children. Siobhán has a wide range of appropriate songs and varies the selection from day to day for the children. On certain days Zachary joins the other children in playing musical instruments. These are mainly simple versions of blowing and percussion instruments. He clearly enjoys experimenting with the sounds different instruments can make and the opportunity this gives him of expressing himself. At the end of one of my visits, while Zachary was waiting for his Dad to collect him, Siobhán had a track of dance music playing on the CD player. Quite spontaneously, Zachary began an improvised dance to the music that was very rhythmic and most expressive, demonstrating his fondness for, and his ability to communicate and to express himself through music and body movement.

The examples of work the children bring home from the Naíonra every day, serve as a further link with parents. In talking to Zachary's Dad, he told me how helpful the samples of Zachary's work were to him and to Zachary's Mum in following his progress and his experiences in the Naíonra. He also said that the extent to which Zachary talked consistently about, for example, pictures he brought home provided not only a valuable link between his family life and his learning experiences in the Naíonra but an opportunity for his Mum and Dad to extend that learning at home.

## Exploring and Thinking

The Naíonra provides Zachary with a variety of facilities and resources that support his learning and development. These include a sand tray, a large dish for water activities, a CD player, a home corner that can be set up for different contexts such as *an bialann (the restaurant)* or *an t-ospaidéal (the hospital)*, a book corner, and a variety of child-size soft chairs and sofas. The Naíonra also has a wide range of resources designed to stimulate Zachary's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical learning and development, for example jigsaws, lotto and bingo games, musical instruments, dolls, paints, brushes, crayons, pencils, playdough, blocks, straws, and different materials from which he can construct things. All around the walls are brightly-coloured charts picturing the

vocabulary associated with different topics, such as *na baill beatha* (body parts), *na héadaí* (clothes), *na hainmhithe* (animals).

From 9.15 a.m. until 10.15 a.m. Zachary is involved in free-play, when he can choose from a variety of activities, including playing with pasta shells, painting, playing with water, playing in the home corner, playing with the sand tray, and doing jigsaws. Zachary is particularly fond of jigsaws, but involves himself in many other activities too. At 10.15 a.m. he helps to tidy the room and put away the different materials that he and the other children have been using. In general, he takes part in this enthusiastically, as he does in all the activities in the Naíonra.



Photo F.3: Zachary exploring with a straw at the water tray

Activities change from day to day after lunch. From 11.35 a.m. until 12.00 Zachary is involved in a variety of activities including threading, playing with blocks, playing with toy animals, constructing shapes and exploring and constructing with plastic straws (Photo F.3), and playing with sticky blocks. While involved in these activities Siobhán speaks to him, prompts him to talk about what he is doing, and encourages him to use different

Irish words. He regularly inserts an Irish word into an English sentence, for example, *I have ceathar (four) beads on.*

From 12.00 until 12.40 p.m. Zachary is involved in various activities connected to the theme being used to shape learning at that time. These themes are central to both his language learning and general development in the Naíonra. They include *ainmhithe (animals)*, *daoine (people)*, *bréagáin (toys)*, *éadaí (clothes)*, *an corp (the body)*, *an teach (the house)*, *an gáirdín (the garden)*, *an aimsir (the weather)*, *taistil (travel)*, and *bia agus deoch (food and drink)*. During my visits, having explored and learned through the theme *an aimsir (the weather)*, the children were starting to learn about *taistil (travel)*. Zachary drew pictures, coloured pictures, made collages, painted, and used playdough to illustrate different aspects of the two themes. On one visit, he played with dice whose sides showed different aspects of the theme in question. The staff encouraged Zachary to identify the picture on a particular side, for example, *ag cur fearthainne (raining)*.

Zachary particularly likes playing lotto and bingo games. These appeal to him and he tends to enjoy calling out the names of the objects on the cards when they are held up, even when he is not meant to! He also plays with different jigsaws, and when he finishes his own, he helps other children to finish theirs. Another activity he enjoys is matching and sorting a variety of materials, such as shapes, colours, or locks and keys.

Zachary's day in the Naíonra ends with book time. Siobhán reads a story to the children every day. Zachary particularly enjoys responding to the stories and Siobhán encourages him to supply words or phrases in stories he has heard before. She used to use large format books for this, but these were stolen from the centre and haven't yet been replaced.

I had the opportunity to join Zachary and the other children on a number of trips. A Teddy Bears' Picnic was to have taken place on the day of one of my visits but had to be held in the large room upstairs because of the weather! We also visited the Fire Station on another day. On a subsequent visit to the Naíonra, Zachary delighted in showing me photographs of him holding a fire hose with one of the officers as the water gushed out. Following my visits, Zachary was due to visit the local Bowling Alley. During June he will

take part in a Sports Day which he will doubtless enjoy, and he will participate in a concert before the Naíonra closes for the summer. Zachary is a very busy young man!

## Conclusion

Zachary's parents are delighted with the progress he has made since joining the Naíonra in September and are very impressed with the amount of Irish he has learned. They see this facility he has with a second language as a particular benefit he has gained from attending Naíonra Naoimh Pádraig. Despite how much he has enjoyed his time in the Naíonra, Zachary will not go to the Gaelscoil next year. His parents originally intended to send him there, but he has insisted that he wants to go to the same school as his sisters, and they have acceded to his wishes.