NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

Consultation on the Draft Primary Language Curriculum

Junior Infants to Second Class

Interim report

September 2014

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Contents

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Introduction

The new Draft Primary Language Curriculum: Junior Infants to Second Class, was published for consultation on April 9th this year. It was informed and supported by findings from curriculum reviews (NCCA 2005; 2008), findings from three commissioned research reports (Sheil *et al.*, 2012, Kennedy *et al.*, 2012; Ó Duibhir and Cummins, 2012) and NCCA's work with schools. The Draft differs from the '99 curriculum for English and Gaeilge in several respects. Firstly, it is an integrated curriculum—it has the same curriculum structure and components for English and Gaeilge to support integration across the two languages. It has far fewer outcomes than objectives in the '99 curriculum and for each strand—oral language, reading and writing, it includes a continuum (map) of significant milestones and detailed steps involved in children's language learning and development. The outcomes and continua are complemented by examples of children's work and support material to help teachers to make professional judgements about, and to support children's achievement and progression across both languages. The Draft espouses the principles and methodologies of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009).

Two versions of the Draft Primary Language Curriculum: Junior Infants to Second Class were prepared for consultation—one for English-medium schools and another for Irish-medium schools: Gaelscoileanna and Gaeltacht schools. As noted, both versions use the same structure and differ only with respect to some contents of the outcomes and progression continua. The following are the key sections of the Draft:

- Rationale
- Aims
- Overview
- Using the Primary Language Curriculum
- Learning outcomes.

The Draft, when finalised will be published as an online curriculum at www.curriculumonline.ie. For this consultation, both versions of the Draft were published online in Portable Document Format (**PDF**). A short **video** on the consultation webpage illustrated how the key components of the Draft work together to support planning and teaching. An example of one continuum, the **Writing Continuum** was published online as part of the consultation materials. Respondents were encouraged to read the Draft

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which included a copy of the consultation questions at the end of each section, to watch the video and if they wished and to look at the Writing Continuum, before responding to the **online survey**. The 24-question survey included both open and closed question formats and all questions were optional. All consultation materials were published in English and Irish. The survey was open to anyone who wished to respond and was developed primarily for primary school teachers and principals and education professionals working in the field of primary education. Respondents could choose whether to respond to the English or Irish version of the survey.

Dissemination and promotion of information about the consultation were key to engagement. In the first instance, the consultation was highlighted on the homepage of the NCCA website among the 'featured' and 'new' items. An e-invitation with a link to the consultation webpages was sent to 3,200 primary schools, to all teachers and practitioners presently or formerly involved with NCCA networks, and also to all subscribers to info@ncca. The consultation was promoted at key NCCA events involving primary teachers and stakeholders such as the *Aistear* Tutor seminar and the *Buzzing with Books* conference in May. Weekly tweets helped to raise awareness about the consultation, using the Twitter feed #primary developments and the #Edchatie forum. Facebook was used to circulate the link to the consultation and invite interested parties to respond.

Direct, face-to-face engagement with teachers was a key consultation strategy. Members of the NCCA Primary Team visited local schools to provide an 'introductory session' on the Draft. In this session, teachers watched the overview video, received a hard-copy of the Draft, and completed the survey independently. Members of the INTO Education Committee also worked with colleagues in their own school and in some cases, in neighbouring schools also, to facilitate and support engagement in this way.

The consultation, which began in early April was expected to remain open for eight weeks. However, following an initial low response, and requests for more time from stakeholders, the closing date for completion of surveys and written submissions was extended to July 31st. Given the low response rate to the invitation for written submissions at the end of June, the Deputy CEO wrote to stakeholders to invite and encourage submissions. Several stakeholders responded to request more time and the closing date for receipt of written submissions was extended again to September 30th.

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The extended consultation period for receipt of completed surveys provided an opportunity to include the 'introductory session' on the Draft (which had been facilitated by NCCA Education Officers and INTO Education Committee Members) at literacy-related summer courses and at *Aistear* Summer Courses, organised by the Education Centres in collaboration with NCCA as part of the Aistear Tutor Initiative.

At the time of writing, 727 responses had been submitted and analysed across both surveys—707 using the English version of the survey and 20 through the Irish version. A further 73 surveys had been submitted from August *Aistear* Summer Courses and a total of 71 written submissions had been received (Appendix 1).

Every consultation has its limits. Three particular limitations are part of the story of this consultation. The first relates to the timing of the consultation, coinciding, as it did with the last—and arguably the most busy--term of the school year. This timing was planned from the outset, in line with targets and timelines in the Department of Education and Skills' Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (DES, 2011) for revision of this, and other curriculum areas at primary level. However, the timeframe has been revised to facilitate consultation and engagement with schools. In addition to extending the consultation period to facilitate responses, a further phase of engagement with schools is planned for the 2014/2015 school year. This provides an opportunity to work with schools to refine and improve aspects of the Draft and to develop 'practice components' of the curriculum—namely *Examples* of children's language learning and *Support Material* for teachers. Furthermore, this additional year for engagement ensures that the Primary Language Curriculum when published online is informed by feedback from teachers on the accessibility and usability of the online interface. As Language is the first curriculum area for revision at primary, feedback from teachers in the next year will also guide and inform development of the Curriculum Online website for all other primary curriculum areas.

A second limitation of the consultation, also related to timing, concerns the process of facilitating teachers to engage with the consultation and share their views. From the outset the INTO Education Committee had flagged the necessity to visit teachers on-site to introduce both the Draft and the consultation materials and many members had offered to lead these introductory sessions in their own and in neighbouring schools. As mentioned, members of the NCCA Primary Team also led introductory sessions in their

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own or a local school. Despite these interventions, the number of responses to the survey remained low at the end of May and as a result, an 'introductory session' was embedded in *Aistear* and literacy-related summer courses, where the opportunity arose to do so. Approximately 84% of all responses to the online survey were provided via summer courses. Mindful of the need to minimise the 'interruption' the introductory session presented at summer courses, hard-copies of the survey were provided and the NCCA managed the process of returning these for later entry online. Surveys are still being submitted to NCCA (from August summer courses) and full details of the number, timing and source of submissions will be included in the final report.

This Interim Report includes an initial analysis of consultation findings—survey responses and written submissions, received at the time of writing. The third limitation relates to the difficulty of generalising findings to all primary schools, given that consultation participants represent a relatively small cohort from the full population of primary teachers and schools. This is especially relevant to the Irish-medium sector, and in particular Gaeltacht schools. Given the low number of responses from teachers in these schools we must be cautious about making broader inferences. Indeed, the small number of responses, itself, provides a compelling argument for the additional year of engagement with schools outlined in response to the timing issue.

Bearing in mind the limitations identified above regarding the timing of the consultation, the intervention to solicit engagement via summer courses and the small number of responses from teachers in two of the three school settings, this Interim Report presents and discusses a robust set of findings to-date—across 24 questions for over 700 respondents and in over 70 additional written submissions. The Final Report will go one step further in signalling the implications of the findings for revisions to the Draft. At this stage, it would be premature to draw definitive conclusions. Instead, revisions are signalled in findings for each section.

This report has been prepared to facilitate discussion by members of the Early Childhood and Primary Language Development Group, the Board for Early Childhood and Primary, and the Council at their September and October meetings. The five main sections of this report correspond with sections of the Draft Primary Language Curriculum; the first, introductory section begins with an overview of the respondents themselves based on profile data gathered.

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Profile of respondents

A total of 727 responses to the Draft Primary Language Curriculum consultation were received across the two online surveys—707 through the English survey and 20 through the Irish survey. The majority of the responses (691) were from primary teachers. Others included 14 from early childhood practitioners, nine from researchers, five from post-primary teachers, and five from parents with three respondents having skipped this first profile question.

A number of teachers in Irish-medium schools responded in English and a small number of teachers in English-medium schools responded in Irish. Looking across both language versions of the survey, Figure P.1 represents the school language context of the 696 teacher respondents. In total, 93% were from English-medium schools with Gaelscoileanna making up 5% and Irish-medium Gaeltacht schools the remaining 2%. These figures are not surprising given the smaller proportion of Irish-medium schools relative to English-medium schools in the country.

**Figure P.1: Respondents by school language context**
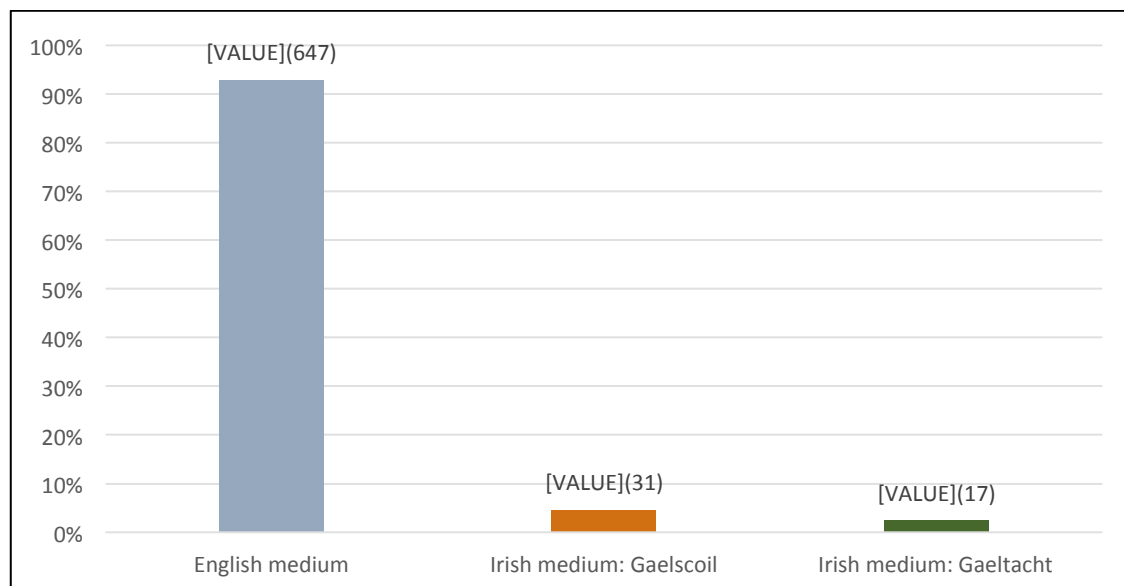
(n=17-647)

As shown in Figure P.2, the majority of respondents taught in vertical schools from junior infants to sixth class and/or in mixed-gender schools. A total of 113 teachers (16%) taught in schools with DEIS status with five of these from the Irish-medium sector (two

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Gaelscoileanna and three sa Ghaeltacht). Twenty-two respondents (3%) worked in special schools.

Figure P.2: Respondents by school type
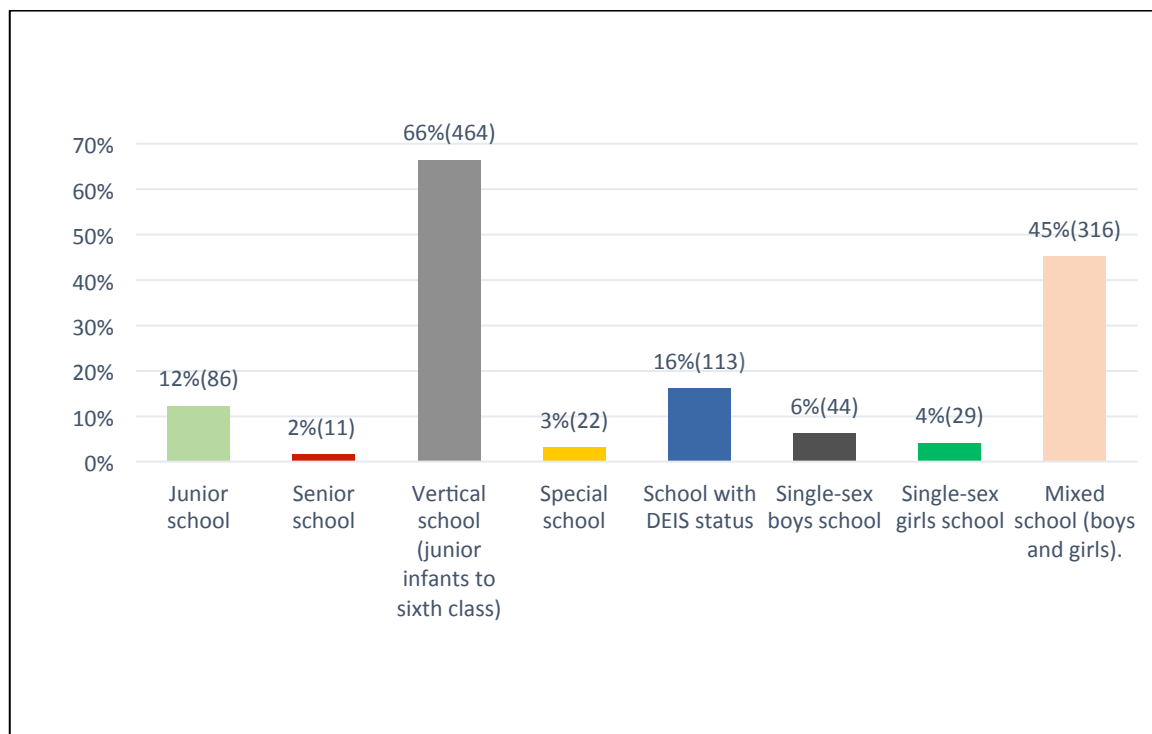
(n=11-464)

Most respondents taught in schools with enrolment numbers in excess of 101 children. The largest school sizes were in the English-medium sector with the majority of respondents working in schools with 301-500 children. Most respondents working in Gaelscoileanna were in schools of 201-300 children while the majority of teachers in the Gaeltacht were in schools with 61-100 children. A quarter (171) of teachers worked in schools with fewer than 100 children. Amongst these were 53% (9) of the respondents from Irish-medium Gaeltacht schools.

Looking at the teacher cohort of respondents, 72% were class teachers, 17% were principals or deputy principals, and 14% were resource/learning support teachers with some overlap occurring across these categories. A number of teachers noted that they were substitute teachers or working in Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) units. Most teachers had 1-15 years of experience working in a school as shown in Figure P.3.

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Figure P.3: Respondents by years of experience in school
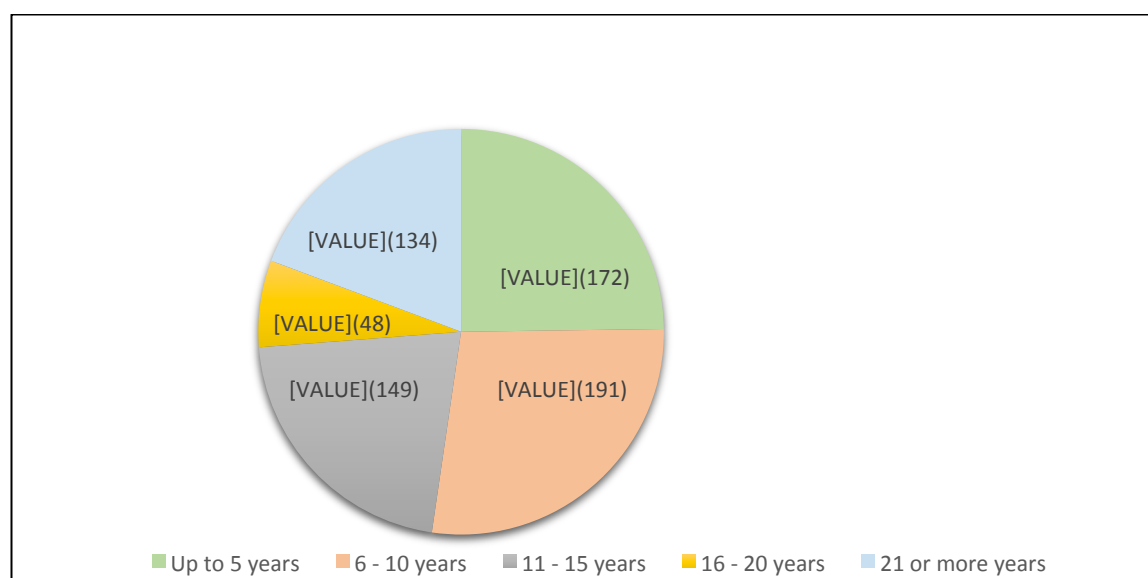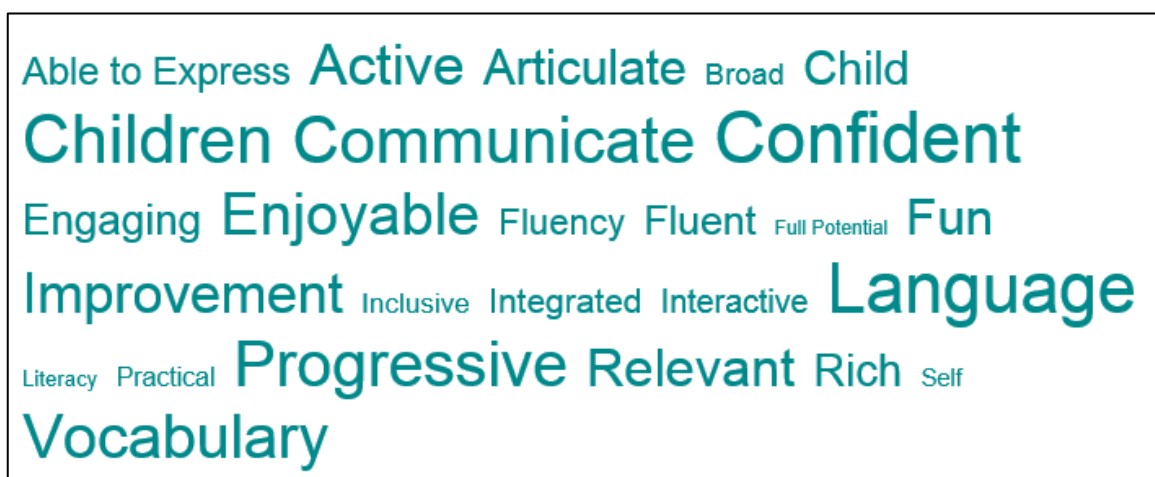

(n=48-191)

Q7: Hopes/wishes for primary school children's language learning and development

Respondents were invited to share a word or phrase to describe their hopes or wishes for primary school children's language learning and development today and into the future. The words and phrases used by nearly 600 respondents can be categorised into three broad themes:

- children's confidence and competence in language
- qualities of children's language learning experiences
- structure of the language curriculum.

The cloud view of responses in Figure P.4 indicates the frequency of terms used with larger print indicating a higher frequency of mention.

Figure P.4: Hopes and wishes for children's language learning

Able to Express Active Articulate Broad Child
Children Communicate Confident
Engaging Enjoyable Fluency Fluent Full Potential Fun
Improvement Inclusive Integrated Interactive Language
Literacy Practical Progressive Relevant Rich Self
Vocabulary

The first and most frequently cited theme by a quarter of respondents was that children would be confident and competent in their use of language. Some respondents expressed a desire for children to be *competent* and *effective communicators*, to have a good *vocabulary*, to be *fluent* and *articulate*, and able to *express themselves*. The hopes and wishes related almost exclusively to expressive language skills, with only a handful of respondents referring to listening/receptive skills.

The second main theme focused on qualities of children's language learning experiences. Respondents wanted these experiences to be: *enjoyable, active, fun, rich, engaging,* and *interactive.*

The third main theme referred to the language curriculum itself rather than children's experience. Respondents noted their desire for the language curriculum to be *progressive, relevant, integrated, broad, inclusive,* and *practical.*

Q8: Hopes/wishes for my language teaching

In this question respondents were again invited to share a word or phrase to reflect their hopes or wishes for their own language teaching today and into the future. Almost 600 responses were received and responses were categorised into the following three themes – relevant to all three language learning contexts:

- qualities of children's language learning experiences
- teachers and teaching
- supporting children's language progression.

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The cloud view of responses in Figure P.5 shows the frequency of terms used by teachers.

Figure P.5: Hopes and wishes for language teaching

The first theme focused on the features of children's language learning experiences (similar to the second theme in the previous question). Providing *engaging* language experiences was considered key and respondents used words such as *motivating, stimulating* and *inspirational* to describe these. Respondents noted that experiences should also be enjoyable, e.g., *learning in a fun way;* and *relevant,* e.g., *related to children's own lives out of school. Time for talk and discussion*; *play and playful*; *integrated* and *practical*, were additional qualities of children's language experiences described in this theme.

The second theme related to teachers and their teaching. Teachers noted the importance of high standards of teaching and used words like *effective, beneficial,* and *high-quality* to describe these in a general sense. Self-improvement was considered important in this context, e.g., *to be continually growing and improving; ag dul ó neart go neart*. The need for *upskilling* through *Continuing Professional Development (CPD)* and for a balance between accountability and professional autonomy was noted, e.g., *clear focus on children's language learning and not on paperwork*. Teachers noted the need to *develop good strategies* and *effective methodologies* through continual improvement. Teacher qualities such as the need for *agility and flexibility* were named. Similar to the previous question, there was little reference to teaching to improve children's receptive skills, however the importance of effectively teaching expressive skills was noted, e.g., *extend their vocab; teanga na bpáistí a shaibhriú; help them to express themselves; less talking 'at' and more talking 'with'.*

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The third theme focused on *supporting progression*. Respondents noted the importance of enabling children to *achieve their potential* in general terms and in particular, *to grow into confident communicators*. Respondents noted the need to have *clarity on curriculum outcomes*; *important milestones,* and *success criteria.* These were considered key for teachers to *support differentiation* and ensure all children can progress at an *appropriate and challenging pace.*

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1. Rationale

Q9: The Language Curriculum's Rationale

Question nine invited respondents to indicate their level of agreement with the rationale for the draft language curriculum. Figure 1.1 provides an overview of the responses.

Figure 1.1: Agreement with the curriculum's rationale – by language context
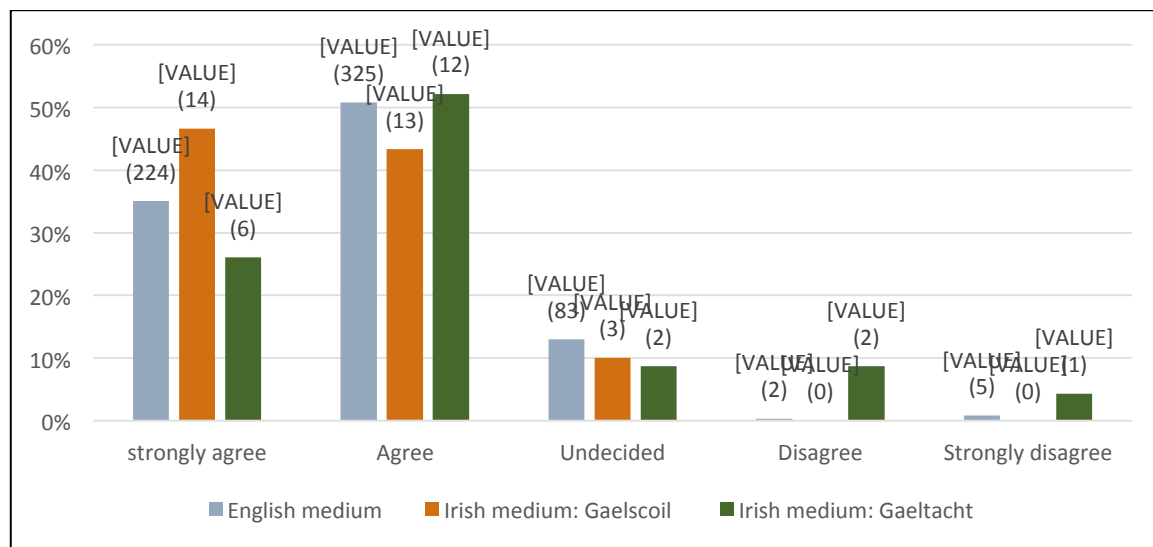
(n=23-639)

A significant majority (86%) of respondents *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with the rationale for the new Primary Language Curriculum. While 12% of respondents were undecided, only 1% *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* with it. These responses indicate substantial support for the curriculum's rationale.

There were some differences in responses across the school language contexts. Teachers from Gaelscoileanna were more likely to *strongly agree* with the rationale than were teachers from English-medium or Gaeltacht schools. However, a significant majority of respondents in Gaeltacht schools also supported the rationale.

In their comments, many respondents did not directly address elements of the rationale, but where they did, their comments frequently approved of:

- the emphasis on language for communicative relationships
- the integrated process of language learning
- the developmental process outlined for language learning.

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Roughly similar numbers of respondents considered the structure of the draft language curriculum to be more accessible or less accessible than its predecessor. The draft curriculum was frequently described as *excellent, concise, focused* and *more user-friendly*, as well as being *too lengthy*, and *too wordy*. Concerns were also expressed about the manner in which English and Irish are 'combined' or 'amalgamated', with some teachers (all from English-medium schools) feeling that relying on the transferability of language skills does a disservice to Irish. However, others supported the value of language transfer and cross-lingual connections. Many respondents affirmed the importance of a partnership between home and school and the significance of a child's mother tongue as he/she enters school, while some were concerned that the needs of EAL children in further developing their mother tongue were not adequately addressed in the rationale. A Gaelscoil teacher was concerned for *an páiste EAL (English as an Additional Language) sa scoil lán-Ghaeilge*.

Q10: Other ideas for inclusion in the rationale

Just over one fifth of respondents answered this question. The main suggestions made and in order of frequency of mention, related to assessment and screening, supports, resources and CPD, the needs of children with English as an Additional Language (EAL) and Special Educational Needs (SEN) and parental involvement.

The most frequently cited idea for inclusion concerned access to screening and diagnostic language tests for children in infant classes. Linked to this was the inclusion of specific assessment tools such as standard checklists or templates. Respondents suggested that this screening and diagnostic work needed to happen earlier and lead to quicker access to interventions. Many respondents also proposed that the rationale should highlight the importance of adequate resources being available to support schools' language work. Among such resources/supports were access to speech and language therapy; assistance from the Health Service Executive (HSE) and from the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS); the return of EAL teacher posts; and provision for children with special needs. A number of respondents suggested that the rationale should recognise EAL children as having particular language needs, while a Gaelscoil teacher considered that the particular language needs of Traveller children should be recognised: *Ba chóir tagairt don lucht siúil agus a ndeacrachtaí teanga (support for Traveller children and their language difficulties)*.

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Although it might not be part of the rationale itself, the upskilling of teachers through CPD featured prominently as a proposed inclusion with teachers feeling that the new curriculum would only succeed if supported by CPD. While it was recognised that the rationale did refer to parents and to adult/child communication, it was felt by some that teachers needed more specific guidelines and strategies in order to support parents, in particular parents of EAL children.

Among items suggested for inclusion by a smaller number of teachers were: spelling; handwriting; pre-schools' transfer of information to the primary school; and greater recognition of the role of technology in children's language development.

Written submissions from education partners noted that it was necessary to make EAL children more visible and that it was important to recognise the benefits which plurilingualism and increasing intercultural awareness can bring to the teaching and learning of languages. The importance of parental involvement in language development was echoed. Other groups identified for inclusion in the rationale were children with special educational needs and children from low socio-economic backgrounds. Some written submissions cautioned against the use of qualifiers in the rationale such as 'most children' or 'the majority' and called for these to be removed in order to make the curriculum more inclusive of *all* children.

In relation to Irish a number of written submissions asked for a greater teasing out of the differences between the learning contexts of the Gaelscoil and the Gaeltacht. A number of written submissions from the Gaeltacht called for a curriculum to be supplied specific to the needs of the native speaker, these same submissions required the practice of early immersion to be referred to as compulsory. In other written submissions clarity was sought on timing and when to introduce the teaching of formal and early literacy skills for second language learners in each of the school language contexts. A number of submissions from those working in the area of Irish sought a clearly outlined and structured approach to second language teaching in the absence of the *téamaí* and *feidhmeanna teanga* that were part of the 1999 Irish curriculum. Some submissions requested that Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) would be explained in detail and that reference be made to the acquisition of Cognitive and Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) for native Irish speakers.

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2. Aims

Q11: Aims of the Language Curriculum

Question 11 provided respondents with an opportunity to indicate their level of agreement with the aims of the draft language curriculum. Figure 2.1 provides an overview of the responses.

Figure 2.1: Agreement with the curriculum's aims – by language context
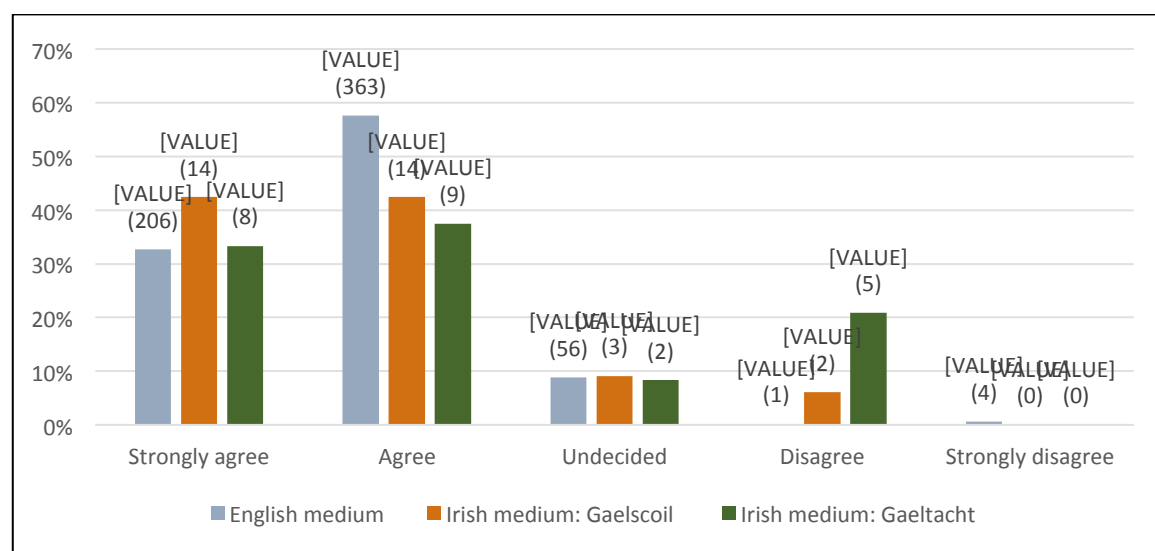
n= (24-630)

Reflecting the largely positive responses to the curriculum's rationale, the great majority of respondents (90%) endorsed the draft curriculum's aims. While one in ten were undecided, just over 1% *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed.* Almost identical levels of support for the aims came from teachers in the different school language contexts: 90% of teachers from English-medium schools and 91% of those from Gaelscoileanna either *agreed* or *strongly agreed..* As with the rationale, teachers from Gaelscoileanna were more likely to *strongly agree* than were those from English-medium schools. Among respondents from Gaeltacht schools, 71% *agreed* or *strongly agreed.* The survey responses here suggest no significant differences in levels of support for the aims from teachers in English- and Irish-medium schools

Some 86 respondents commented on the aims. Reflecting the responses to Q11, these comments were largely positive. The aims were variously described as *commendable, realistic, simple and clear, very comprehensive, concise, more relevant,* and *more*

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accessible. One respndent believed the aims *support the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.* A minority of negative comments referred to the aims being *too vague, too wordy,* and *unrealistic* while a few respondents felt there were too many aims. A Gaelscoil teacher commented: *Is ar éigean a lúaitear múineadh na léitheoireachta sna haidhmeanna agus is é sin príomhghnó na scoile.* Respondents differed in their interpretation of 'implicit knowledge' of L2, while Aim 10 (concerning understanding of the history of languages) was considered by some to be 'inappropriate' for junior classes. A few teachers suggested a re-ordering of the aims to reflect their relative importance. Quite a number of comments emphasised teachers' concern that language skills be taught explicitly possibly indicating a fear that an integrated curriculum could disadvantage either or both languages. No significant issues were raised in the three comments from teachers in Irish-medium settings other than a desire for the provision of Irish-language materials by the Department of Education and Science (DES). Written submissions from partners working in the area of Irish asked for greater emphasis to be placed on learning and appreciation of the heritage and cultural significance of the Irish language.

Q12: Other ideas for inclusion in the aims

Respondents were invited to list up to three additional ideas for inclusion in the aims. These were to be listed in order of imnportance, the first being the most important. Of the 74 respondents to this question, five were from Gaelscoileanna and three from Gaeltacht schools. Ideas for inclusion as listed by the respondents in descending order of frequency of mention, included:

- active promotion of Irish especially outside formal lessons
- greater partnership with parents
- helping children towards confident expression and fluency in everyday speech
- support for children with Special Educational Needs (SEN)
- promotion of bilingualism
- inclusion of non-verbal communication such as signing
- inclusion of specific elements of language such as phonics, spelling, grammar, handwriting, listening, memory development
- continuity of language development within the school and between pre-school and primary school.

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Suggestions from teachers in Gaelscoileanna and scoileanna Ghaeltachta included: *scileanna éisteachta a chothú,* and *Teanga chainteoirí dúchasacha na Gaeltachta a shaibhriú.* However, many of the ideas concerning the promotion of Irish came from teachers in English-medium schools.

3. Overview of the curriculum
Q13: Concepts, Dispositions and Skills

Question 13 invited respondents to indicate their level of agreement with the appropriateness of the concepts, dispositions and skills for each of the two stages. Figures 3.1 and 3.2 provide an overview of the responses.

Figure 3.1: Appropriateness of concepts, dispositions and skills for Stage 1– by language context
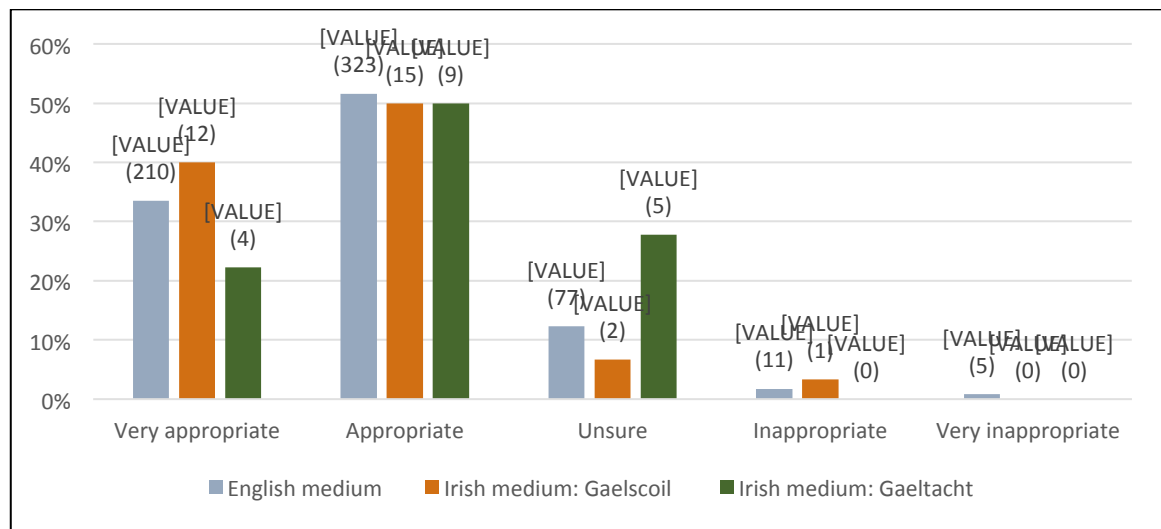
n= (18-626)

Figure 3.2: Appropriateness of concepts, dispositions and skills for Stage 2– by language context
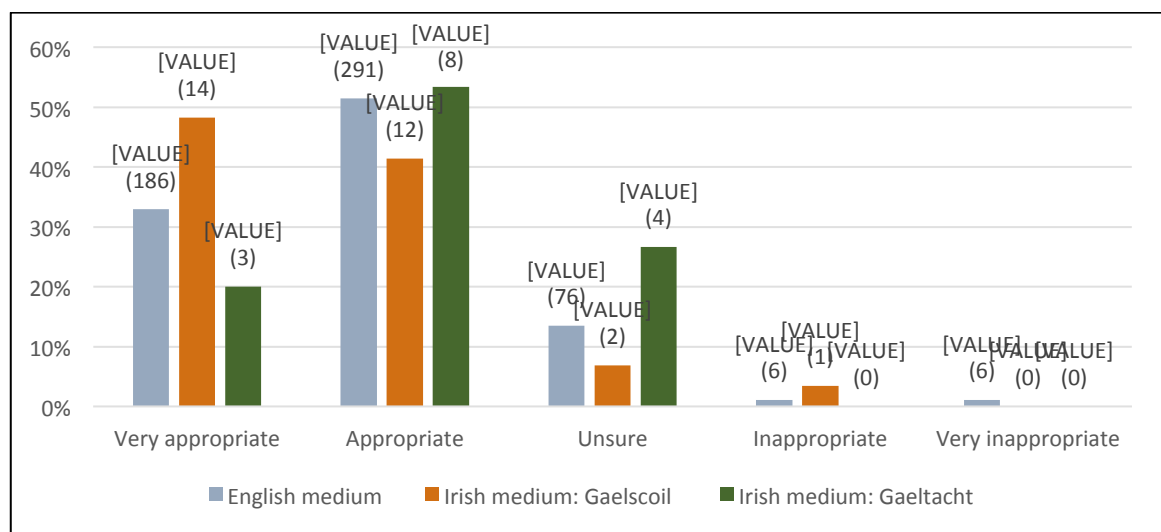
n= (15-565)

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Taking the two stages together, 85% of respondents felt that the concepts, dispositions and skills listed were *appropriate* or *very appropriate,* 13% were *unsure* while just over 2% felt they were *inappropriate* or *very inappropriate.* These figures indicate very strong support for the concepts, dispositions and skills listed. However, significantly more respondents felt the concepts, etc. were *appropriate* (51%) rather than *very appropriate* (33%). This was the case for all three school contexts but was most obvious in the case of English-medium schools' respondents. This might indicate some uncertainty among teachers around the meaning of concepts, dispositions and skills, and/or their role in language teaching and learning. Some responses to Q14 indicated similar uncertainty.

Taking the two stages separately, there were no significant differences between them in the percentages of respondents who approved or disapproved of the appropriateness of the concepts, dispositions and skills listed. Taking the language medium of schools into account, there were no significant differences between the approval and disapproval ratings from respondents in any of the school settings. This was the case for the combined ratings for the two stages, and also for the stages taken separately. Although fewer in numerical terms, teachers from Gaelscoileanna were somewhat stronger in their approval of the concepts, dispositions and skills than were respondents from the other school settings. Interestingly, virtually all teachers who felt the concepts, dispositions and skills to be inappropriate or very inappropriate were from English-medium settings.

Q14: Other ideas for inclusion in the concepts, dispositions and skills

Respondents were invited to list up to three additional ideas for inclusion in the Concepts, Dispositions and Skills. These were to be listed in order of importance, the first being the most important. This question had 69 respondents, three of whom taught in a Gaelscoil, with three others in Gaeltacht schools. Teachers suggested the following ideas they would like to see reflected in the Concepts, Dispositions and Skills:

- readiness; concentration; motivation
- confidence to speak aloud; expression in voice when reading
- listening skills; auditory processing; memory skills
- breakdown of phonological skills
- Information and Communications Technology (ICT) skills
- grammar skills; punctuation; awareness of tenses in writing
- pre-writing skills; handwriting quality

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- more structured approach to the writing genres.

As can be seen, responses largely referred to the language skills that should be taught, although some of these were already either implicitly or explicitly presented in the curriculum text. Responses were distributed across the three suggestions boxes, with no particular emphasis being evident in their prioritising. Examples of ideas suggested included: *prediction and visualising in oral language work; more emphasis on mechanical aspects of handwriting; use of the voice in reading; elements of language should include sign language; teach listening skills.* A Gaelscoil teacher wanted more supports in the form of *níos mó smaointe agus samplaí.*

Just under half of all respondents to this question expressed dissatisfaction with the manner in which this section of the language curriculum was written. Most criticism was directed at the language register which was variously deemed to be *intricate*, *complex*, and w*ordy*. A cause of particular dissatisfaction was the inclusion of the glossary, which some saw as confirming the complexity of the concepts presented. *Dispositions* appear to have caused the greatest difficulty for the respondents, some of whom asked for the dispositions to be more clearly defined and linked to the language elements.

Written submissions requested that the language used in the rationale, aims and overview sections be consistent and any unfamiliar terminology be clarified in both language versions of the document. Given the number of new components in the language curriculum, some respondents felt that clear diagrams illustrating how the components work together would be of benefit to teachers. The definition of text was referred to in one written submission and it was recommended that it be amended from the current 'all products of language use' to include children who may be non-verbal.

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4. Using the Primary School Curriculum

Q15: Progression – Entry to Stage 1

The draft language curriculum has three progression continua, one for each of the strands. Each continuum consists of eight progression milestones labelled a to h. These describe, in broad terms, children's language learning and development and are intended to support teachers in working with children of a wide range of abilities from junior infants to second class. These continua are one of the newest components in the curriculum compared to the 1999 curriculum for English and for Irish. Question 15 in the survey invited respondents to identify the milestone(s) that best represented the range of children's language learning and development in oral language, reading and writing at the beginning of junior infants in primary school. Figures 4.1 to 4.3 present an overview of the findings in the case of the three school language contexts.

Figure 4.1: Entry points at the beginning of Stage 1 in English-medium schools
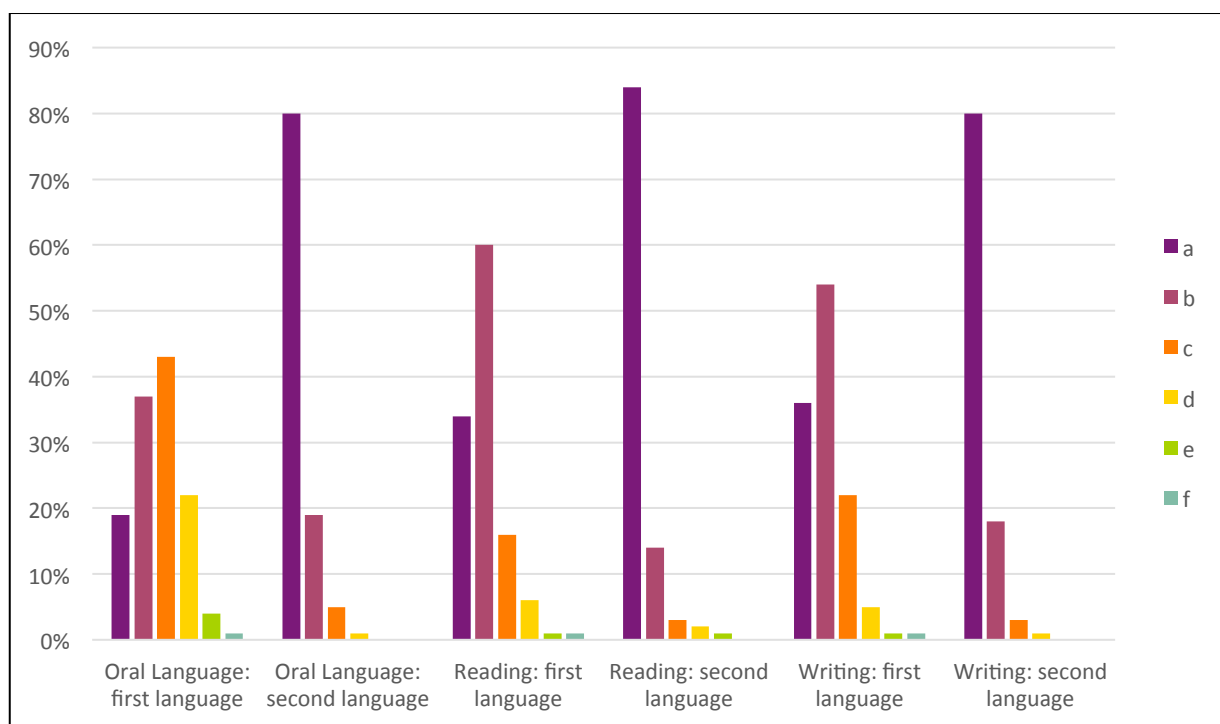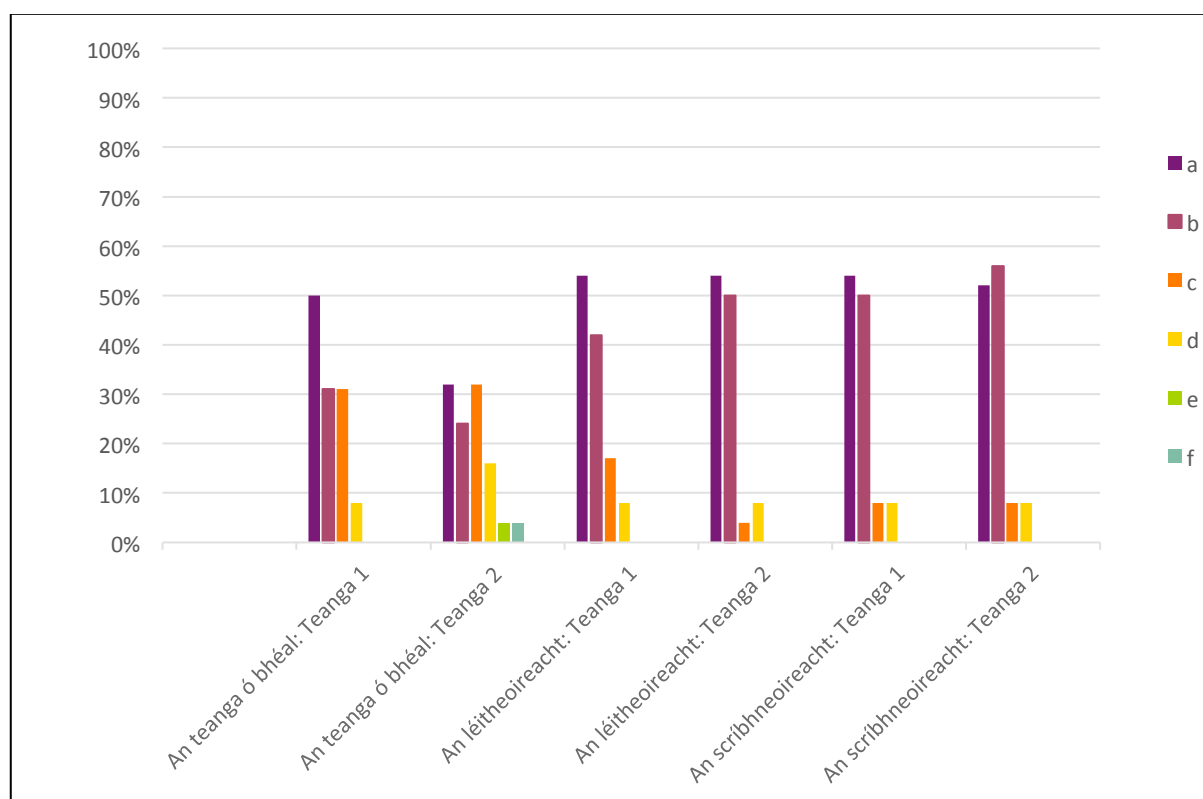

(n=576)

Looking firstly at English-medium schools, the findings in Figure 4.1 from 576 respondents are broadly similar to the entry level expectations for the majority of children beginning junior infants as set out in the consultation document (page 29 in the English document). The most notable exception concerns oral language. Drawing on the language research reports and international curriculum developments, progression

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milestones b, c and d were suggested as entry level expectations for children commencing junior infants. The survey findings show 19% of respondents identifying milestone a: *The child gestures to and shares attention of an object with another person. He/she exchanges a smile and vocalises to respond. The child relies on the other person to interpret to share meaning.* This finding may reflect the number of respondents working with children for whom English is an additional language.

Ninety respondents provided comments which focused on three main themes. Twenty-nine (32%) referred to the strands of reading and writing in the school's second language (L2) of Irish being largely irrelevant when thinking about junior infants at the beginning of the school year: *reading and writing in 2nd language is n/a in junior infants.* This likely reflects teachers' experience with the '99 language curriculum in which emergent literacy in L2 is largely absent at the infant level. The second theme noted by 19 respondents (21%) related to the wide range of children's abilities in language. Collectively, these respondents made specific reference to EAL learners, children with special educational needs, 'average' children and gifted children. The third theme emerging from the comments and referred to by nine respondents (10%) concerned challenges in working with EAL learners who can make up 40% of the junior infant intake.

Figure 4.2: Entry points at the beginning of Stage 1 in Irish-medium: Gaelscoil


(n=26)

As with the English-medium schools, the findings above from 26 respondents are broadly similar in the school's first language (T1) and its second language (T2) to the entry level expectations for the majority of children beginning junior infants as set out in the consultation document (leathanach 28 sa doiciméad as Gaeilge). Again, the most notable exception concerns oral language with 32% of respondents identifying 'a' as an entry point for children in T2 (English) at the beginning of their primary education. While eight of the 26 respondents provided comments in addition to identifying entry points on the language continua, these didn't elucidate the findings on the entry points. Two of these respondents referred to the importance of immersion education including total immersion in the infant classes:

> *Sílim go bhfuil sé an-tábhachtach an tumoideachas a aithint agus a chosaint mar chur chuige. Tá tumadh iomlán sa Ghaeilge againn sa scoil seo. Oibríonn sé. …Tá an tumadh dhá bhliain an-tábhachtach chun cumas sa teanga ina bhfaighidh siad oideachas a fhorbairt.*
> *(I think it's very important to recognise and safeguard immersion education as an approach. We have total immersion in Irish in this school. It works…Two years of immersion is very important in order to develop an ability in the language in which they are educated.)*

Figure 4.3: Entry points at the beginning of Stage 1 in Irish-medium: Gaeltacht
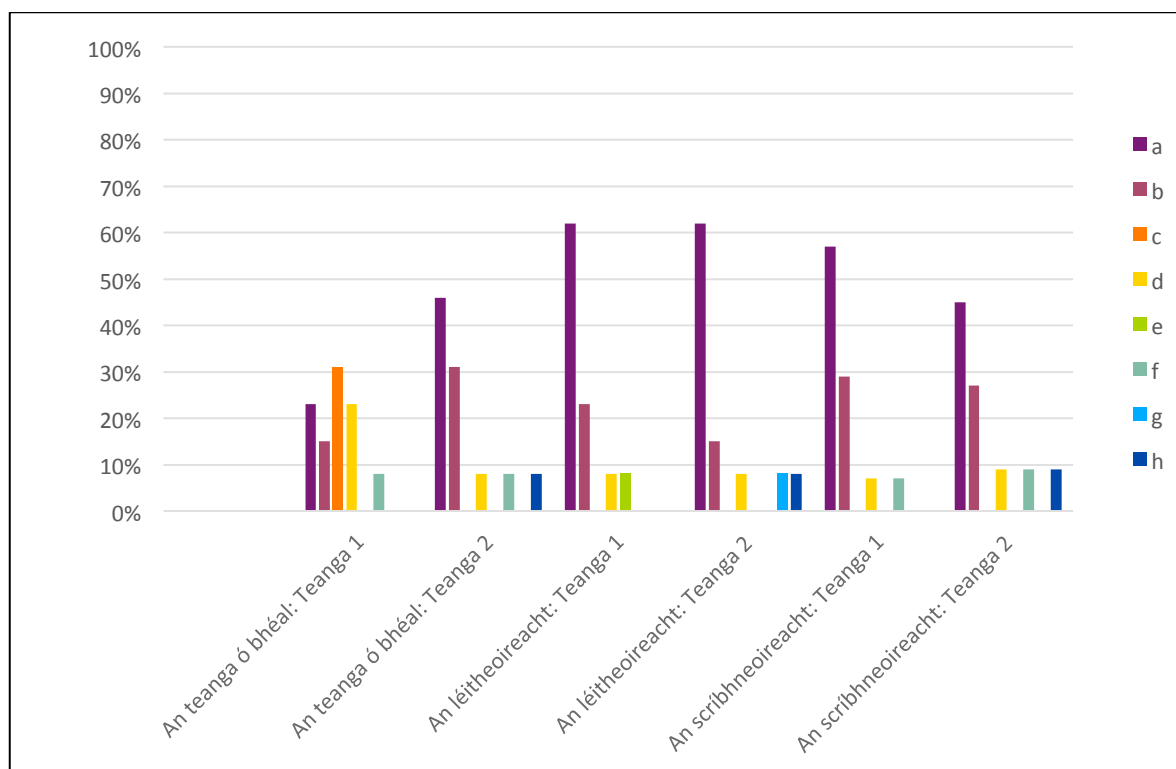
(n=13)

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Figure 4.3 provides an overview of the findings from 13 respondents from Irish-medium schools in the Gaeltacht. While caution is needed in interpreting the data given the small number of responses, it is nonetheless interesting to see a somewhat different 'spread' of entry points when compared with figures 4.1 and 4.2. Perhaps this links to the changing demographic within these schools whereby children whose first language is English are enrolling alongside children whose first language is Irish. One of the comments provided focuses on this diversity of children's starting points in language learning in junior infants:

> *Teanga 1 – ag brath ar chúlra an pháiste. Uaireanta tagann siad gan focal Gaeilge ar bith. Uaireanta le cúpla focal, uaireanta le an-chuid, má thagann siad ó naíonra nó ó theach le Gaeilge. Beidh páistí ar chlochmhílte difriúla i gcónaí. Ní féidir litir amháin a phiocadh don rang ar fad.*
> *(Language 1 – depending on the child's background. Sometimes, they come without a word of Irish. Sometimes with a few words, sometimes with a lot if they come from a naíonra or a house with Irish. Children will always be at different milestones. You can't pick a single letter for the whole class).*

Q16: Progression – Entry to Stage 2

Question 16 invited respondents to identify the milestone(s) that best represented the range of children's language learning and development in oral language, reading and writing at the beginning of first class in primary school. Figures 4.4 to 4.6 present an overview of the findings in the case of the three school language contexts.

Figure 4.4: Entry points at the beginning of Stage 2 in English-medium schools
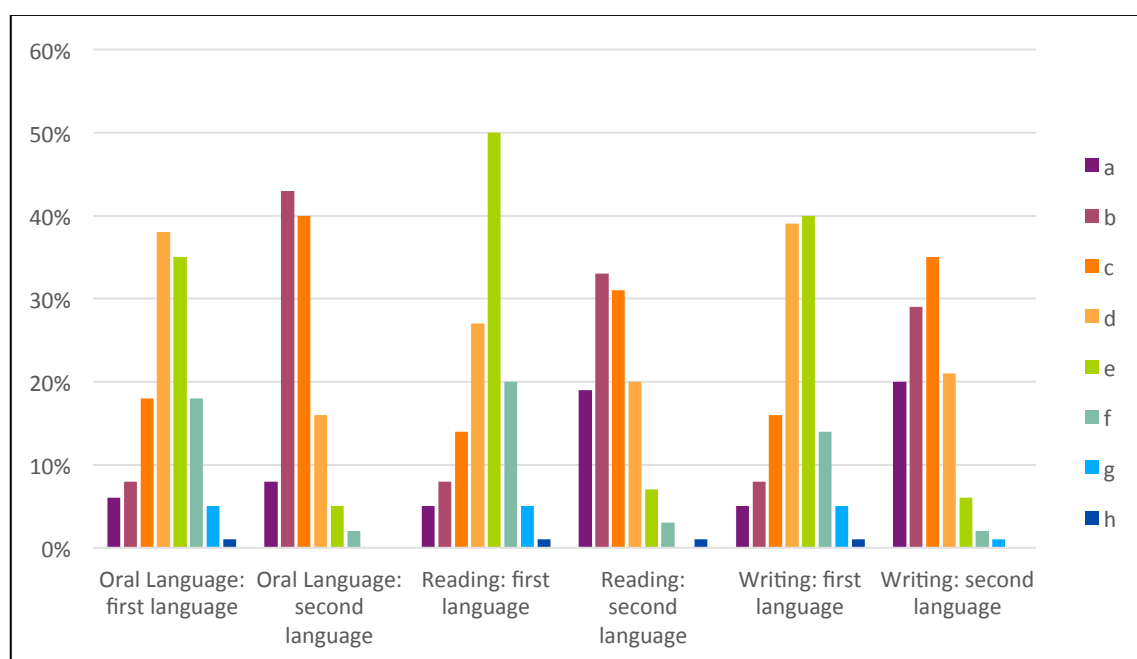
(n=538)

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A total of 538 teachers working in English-medium schools responded to this question. While the findings shown above have some similarities with the entry level expectations set out in the consultation document (page 29 in the English document), there are a number of notable differences. Beginning with first language learning (English), the consultation document suggested progression milestones d, e and f as entry level expectations for children commencing first class. The survey findings show 18% of respondents identifying milestone c:

> *The child refers to familiar objects and events, and shared experiences. He/she uses language from home and their surroundings to communicate. The child uses non-verbal cues to help understand spoken language and when sharing meaning with others. The child uses basic social conventions when interacting. He/she responds showing some appreciation of others.*

In addition, 6% and 8% of respondents identified points a and b respectively as entry points. Similarly with reading and writing, the consultation document focused on points d, e and f while sizable proportions of respondents also identified points a (5%), b (8%) and c (14%). Looking across the three stands, the frequency with which points a, b and c were highlighted may reflect the number of teachers working with children with EAL or SEN. Turning to second language learning (Irish), the findings for oral language match the suggested entry points as outlined in the consultation document. However, the findings suggest the entry points for reading and writing in the document (b and c) are too narrow and should include points a and d.

Seventy respondents provided comments on children's entry points to stage 2. Three main themes emerged in these with similar frequencies. Sixteen (23%) respondents noted their limited or lack of experience in working with children at first and second class level and hence their uncertainty in indicating entry points for the majority of children starting first class. Fourteen (20%) respondents referred specifically to the strands of reading and writing and noted the irrelevance of these in the case of L2 for children in first class. Two of these fourteen indicated that they were working on the basis of the current Irish curriculum for primary schools. The third key theme emerging in the data and noted by thirteen respondents (19%) concerns the range of starting points for children's language learning and development in first class. Elaborating on this point, respondents referred to children's individuality as learners, their backgrounds and the language learning needs of children with EAL or SEN.

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A number of the written submissions cautioned against referring to suggested entry points to the continua in order to reduce the risk of standardisation. Mention was made of the need to clarify for teachers how they could use the *First Steps* programme in conjunction with the progression continua.

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Figure 4.5: Entry points at the beginning of Stage 2 in Irish-medium: Gaelscoil
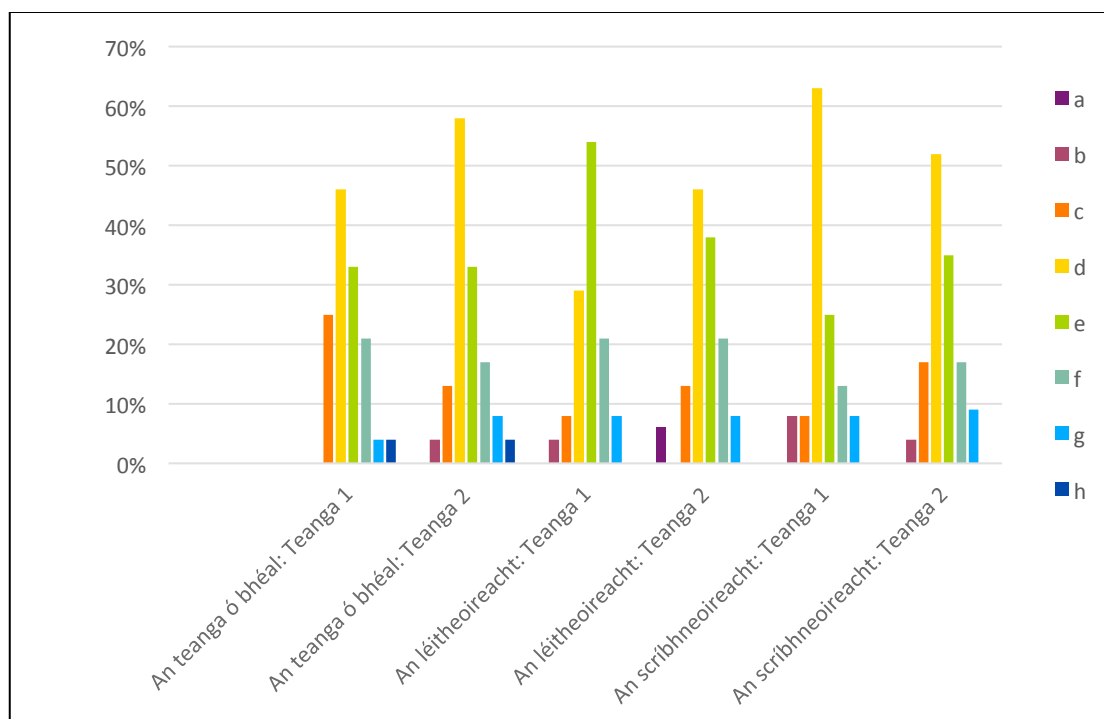
(n=24)

The findings in Figure 4.5 from 24 respondents are broadly similar for oral language, reading and writing in T1 (Irish) to the entry level expectations for the majority of children beginning first class as set out in the consultation document (leathanch 28 sa doiciméad as Gaeilge). In the case of reading and writing, 8% of respondents identified point g as an entry point in addition to c-f. In the case of T2 (English), the suggested entry points for oral language may need to be extended backwards to include point c with 13% of respondents selecting this one and 8% selecting point g. For reading and writing, the suggested entry points in the draft curriculum are somewhat narrower than those represented by the findings: c-e compared to c-f. Six of the 24 respondents provided comments which noted their lack of experience teaching first level, the range of ability in an individual class and the ease with which they envisaged the progression continua being used and understood.

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Figure 4.6: Entry points at the beginning of Stage 2 in Irish-medium: Gaeltacht
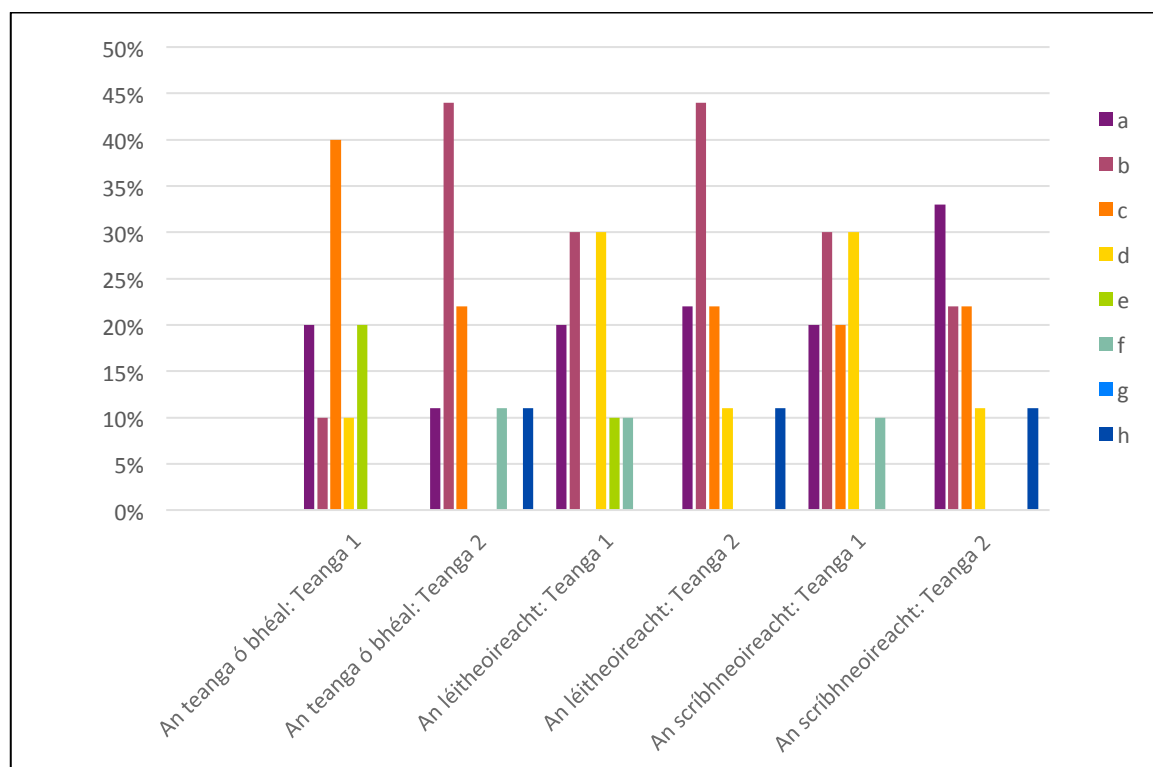

(n=10)

Ten teachers working in Irish-medium: Gaeltacht schools responded to question 16. As highlighted in the analysis of question 15, care is needed in interpreting the data from such a small number of participants. Nonetheless, the findings present some interesting observations. In the case of T1 (Gaeilge), the entry points suggested in the consultation document are more advanced than those represented in the data above: for example, suggested points c-f in oral language compared to points a-e above. In the case of reading and writing in T1, the data above would suggest that points a and b are entry points to Stage 2 for sizeable proportions of children starting first class. Looking at T2 (English), the suggested entry points are again pitched at a more advanced place on the progression continua in the draft curriculum compared to the findings above. As with question 15, these findings may reflect changed demographics in schools in Gaeltacht areas. One respondent provided a comment which noted the limited focus on English up to the beginning of first class.

Q17: Examples of children's work

Respondents were invited to give their opinion on the usefulness of examples of children's work linked to learning outcomes and the continua in progressing children's language learning and deveopment. The majority of respondents (89%) indicated that

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they would find examples either *helpful* (32%) or *very helpful* (57%). A minority (2.4%) considered the examples would be *unhelpful* or *very unhelpful*.

Figure 4.7: Helpfulness of examples of children's work
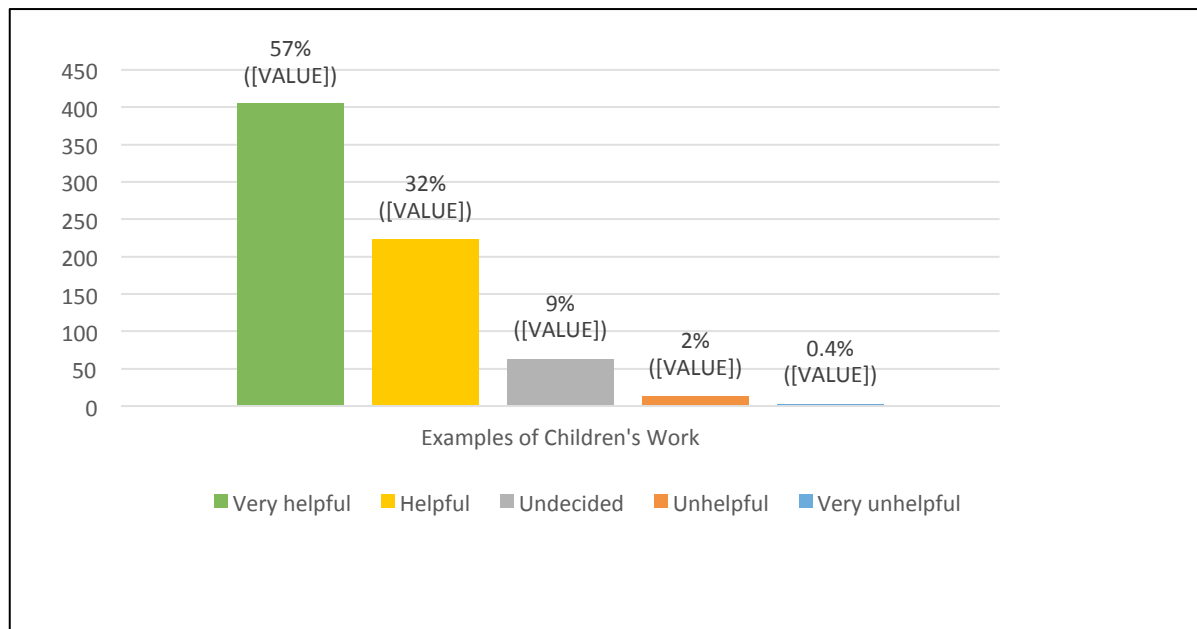
(n=706)

Respondents from English-medium schools indicated the importance of having a wide range of examples from across curriculum strands, linking to points on the continuum and relating to particular contexts. The usefulness of examples in illustrating progress in a child's language development was a common theme from the English-medium school respondents. Respondents also saw examples of children's work as being a useful reference point when explaining to parents about language development in primary school.

The most positive response to examples of children's work came from respondents in Gaelscoileanna. Of the 22 respondents, 20 (90.9%) indicated they would find the examples either *helpful* or *very helpful*, the remainder were undecided. One respondent drew attention to the current workload of teachers and the time constraints upon them. This point was also raised by respondents from Irish-medium Gaeltacht schools.

Respondents from Irish-medium Gaeltacht schools indicated a high level of agreement (71.4%) for the use of examples of children's work linking to learning outcomes and the progression continua. Of the 10 respondents, two indicated that the examples would be

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unhelpful or *very unhelpful*. Both respondents identified teachers' increasing workload and the growing focus on assessment in primary schools as the reason for their negative response.

Q18: Practice guides

Question 18 invited respondents to share their opinions on the development of practice guides to support language teaching and learning. The preamble to the question included lists of practice guides already in development. In the case of English, these included guides on children's vocabulary, critical thinking and book talk, cursive writing from junior infants, engaging children with literature, guided reading, Reader's Theatre, socio-dramatic play and language learning, supporting children's reading at home, and the writing workshop.

There was a total of 328 respondents to this question. From analysis of the responses across school types, the areas of oral language (55 responses), phonics (42 responses) and comprehension strategies (38 responses) emerged as areas perceived to be in need of practice guides. Oral language was perceived as needing particular focus by teachers in schools with disadvantaged status (DEIS) school (15 mentions out of 29) while teachers in special schools placed an emphasis on general communication strategies such as non-verbal cues, conversation skills and social skills. Respondents across all school types highlighted the need for a practice guide on phonics related to the teaching of English. Some of those who focused on comprehension strategies, referred to the 'Building Bridges of Understanding' approach to comprehension development.

Regarding Irish, the question informed respondents that practice guides under development include: Conas litríocht na nÓg a úsáid d'fhonn straitéisí tuisceana a fhobairt; Cur chuige cumarsáideach; Eolas le haghaidh Tuistí: conas tacú leis an nGaeilge agus litearthacht na Gaeilge; Fónaic na Gaeilge; Gníomhachtaí litearthachta/ fónaic; Graiméar na Gaeilge; Leabhair phictiúir gan focail sa seomra ranga; Léitheoireacht faoi threoir; Scéalta mar áis teanga i rang na Naíonáin; Taifead Reatha.

There were 52 responses to this part of the question. From analysis of the responses across school types the areas of support material (10 responses), the use of songs/rhymes/poems (5 responses) and the use of drama (5 responses) in the teaching of Irish emerged as important areas for practice guide development. As is indicated in

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the number of responses the need for Irish support material was emphasised. This opinion was expressed in particular by respondents in Gaeltacht Irish-medium schools. The respondents drew attention to the need for reading books, whole class teaching books and interactive resources in Irish. In English-medium schools there was particular emphasis placed on the need for a practice guide on teaching Irish through drama. Written submissions emphasised the need for clear guides in the areas of vocabulary development, morphological awareness, phonics and comprehension. One written submission noted the usefulness of prioritising work on the 'planning and teaching' section of the curriculum and providing this to teachers in advance of the outcomes and the continua in order to enable teachers to try out and use different methods for effective language teaching.

In relation to the area of assessment in section 4 on using the curriculum, a number of written submissions focusing on the Irish language highlighted the importance of assessment for language learning and called for greater detail on this aspect of practice. Submissions also suggested that the Common European Framework Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the European Language Portfolio (ELP) could contribute to the area of planning and assessment for second language learning.

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5. Learning outcomes

Q19: Number and nature of learning outcomes

Question 19 invited respondents to rate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the learning outcomes in general. They were invited to respond on whether they deemed the number of outcomes to be appropriate, whether the language in which they were phrased was accessible, whether the inclusion of dispositions and skills alongside concepts was welcomed and whether section six on the 'explanation of concepts, dispositions and skills' was considered helpful to use with the outcomes.

The draft primary langauge curriculum contains fewer outcomes than the 1999 curriculum with 67% of these stretching across the two stages. As shown in Figure 5.1, a total of 650 teachers responded to question 19 with 606 teachers in English-medium, 29 in Gaelscoileanna and 15 in Irish-medium: Gaeltacht schools rating how strongly they felt that the number of outcomes were appropriate for their school context. The majority in all three school contexts were in agreement with the number of outcomes. The greatest support came from teachers in Irish-medium: Gaeltacht schools with 87% *agreeing* or *strongly agreeing*. However, given the small sample size of fifteen respondents it may be difficut to generalise from this finding. Eight percent of Gaelscoil teachers and 74% of teachers in English-medium schools also *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with the number of outcomes.

Figure 5.1: Appropriateness of the number of outcomes – by language context

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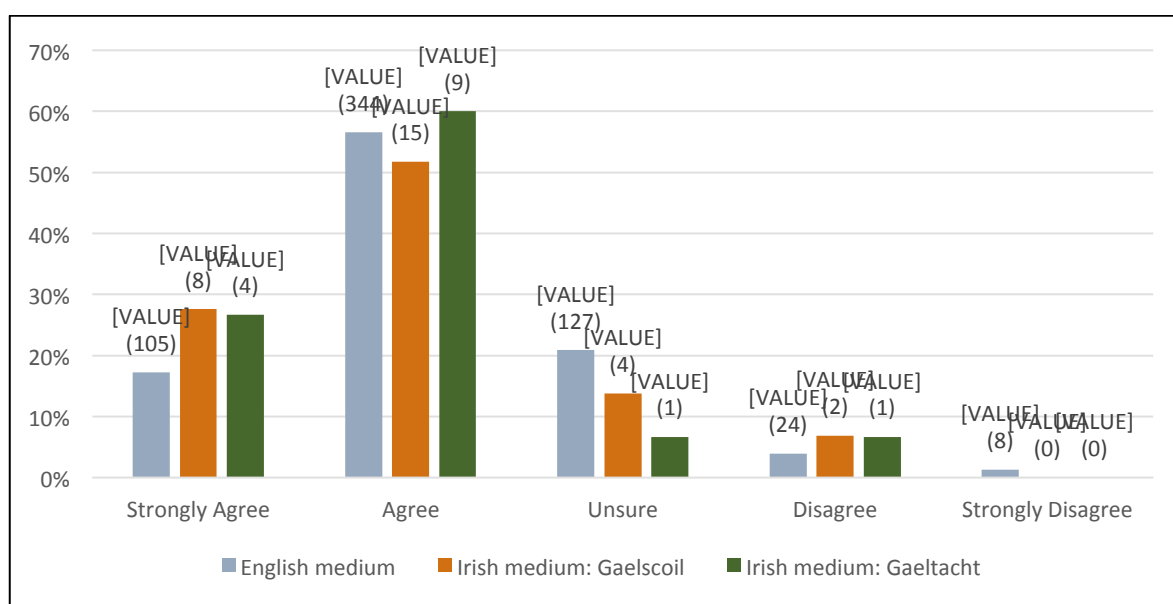
(n=15-606)

**Figure 5.2: Appropriateness of the number of outcomes – by school type**
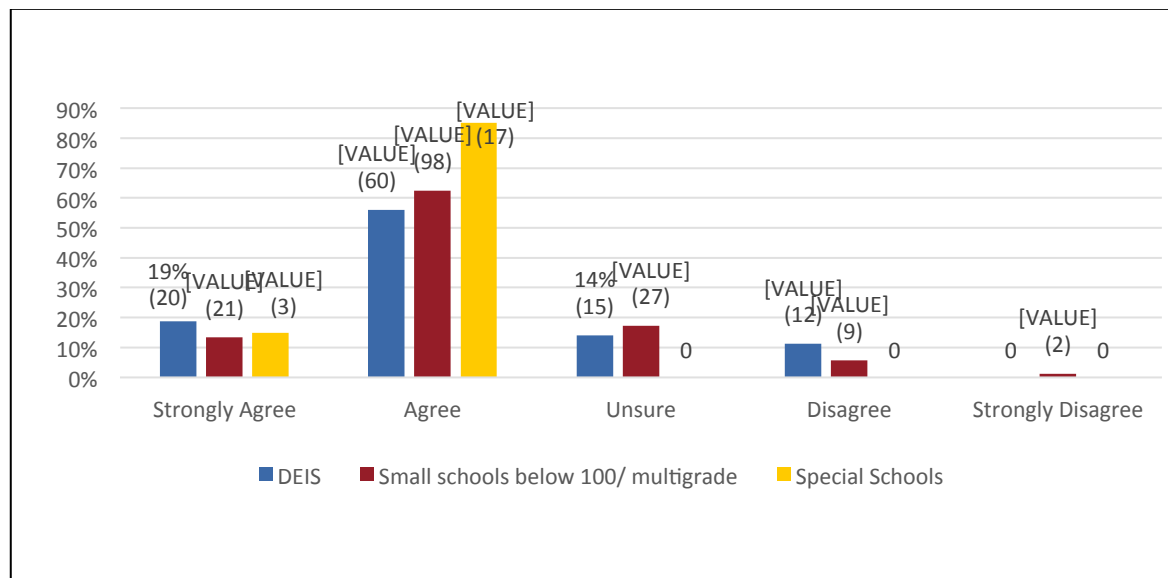
(n=20-157)

Results were filtered further to see if teaching in a particular school context such as a school with disadvantaged status (DEIS), small school/multigrade or a special school, had any bearing on teachers' views on the number of outcomes. In total, 107 teachers in DEIS schools, 157 in small schools and 20 in special schools responded to this question. Of these groups, teachers showing the highest level of agreement were those teaching in special schools. Seventy-five percent of teachers in DEIS and smaller schools agreed with the number of outcomes with 25% being unsure or disagreeing.

Of the 5% (35) of respondents who *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* with the number of outcomes, the majority were teachers in English-medium schools with 12 of them working in DEIS schools. Nine of those 35 teachers provided written responses. Two of these felt the outcomes were either too vague or broad and would be difficult for teachers to break down as they stretched across four years. Concern about the breadth of the outcomes and the potential for this making planning difficult was mirrored in a number of writen submissions. Perhaps the detail of thre three progression continua can address this. One teacher felt that there were too many outcomes while another considered them to be *too wordy* and possibly *too lengthy*.

Of the 74 teachers across the three school contexts who provided written commentary on the learning outcomes question, only 3 of them (4%) referred to the actual number of

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outcomes and felt that there may be too many. Education partners expressed satisfaction with the number of outcomes in their written submissions.

Figure 5.3: Accessibility of the language in which the outcomes are phrased– by language context
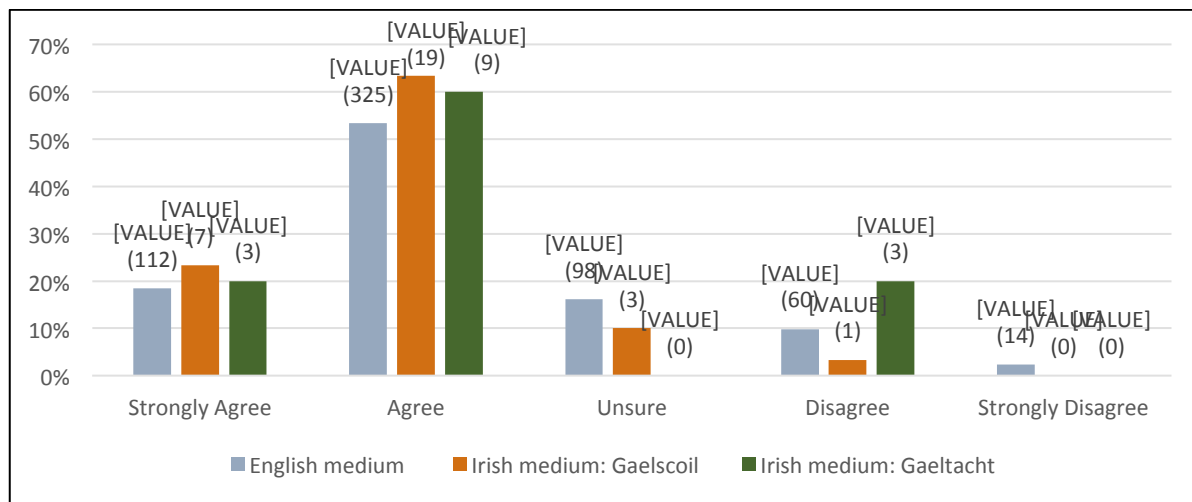
(n=15-608)

In total, 654 survey participants responded on the accessibility of the language used in the outcomes—608 in English-medium, 30 in Gaelscoileanna and 15 in Gaeltacht schools. The majority of teachers across all three school contexts agreed with the language used. Of the 74 teachers who provided written commentary, 30% (22) referred specifically to the language used in the draft curriculum document. Some noted that there may be too much in each outcome with eight teachers referring to the outcomes as being *too wordy* and calling for them to be more concise. Likewise, education partners through their written submissions, queried whether the outcomes were too broad and felt they would benefit from being more specific. They also felt that seeing the full progression continua and making clear links between the outcomes and the continua would be beneficial. Twelve teachers asked for the language to be simplified. It may be that these teachers were linking terminology in the outcomes with the tables of concepts, dispositions and skills in the overview section. One written submission highlighted the potential for the tables of concepts, dispositions and skills to be confused with the similar-looking tables of learning outcomes.

In contrast, ten other teachers commended the outcomes for being clearer, condensed and easier to use than the content objectives in the 1999 curriculum.

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A total of 672 teachers responded to the inclusion of dispositions and skills in the outcomes and the usefulness of a section providing an explanation of these alongside concepts. Seventy-seven percent welcomed their inclusion while 81% agreed that providing explanations would be helpful. Of the 74 respondents who provided written commentary, three wanted dispositions to be made more explicit in the outcomes. Five respondents suggested that a glossary would not be necessary if the language used was simplified while one teacher in an English-medium school found section 6 helpful in understanding the outcomes for Irish.

Thirty-nine percent (29) of the respondents who provided written commentary focused on the layout and presentation of the outcomes. Some found the tables hard to read or the colours distracting while others recommended the use of bullet points and clearer headings. Twenty-three percent (17) highly commended the new outcomes noting their usefulness as assessment criteria, their clarity and their practical focus. A number of written submissions called for clear links to highlight where transference of skills occurs across languages.

Q20: Suitability of the learning outcomes

Question 20 invited responses on the appropriateness of the learning outcomes for children in stages 1 and 2 in their schools' first and second languages. The data was filtered for school language context. The results were then filtered further to see if responses were impacted by other contextual factors such as working in a school with DEIS status, a smaller school/multi-grade or a special school.

The first part of the question looked at the general appropriateness of the outcomes for stages 1 and 2. In total, 628 survey participants responded with 610 of these being teachers. The majority of teachers in all three language contexts deemed the outcomes appropriate as shown in Figure 5.4.
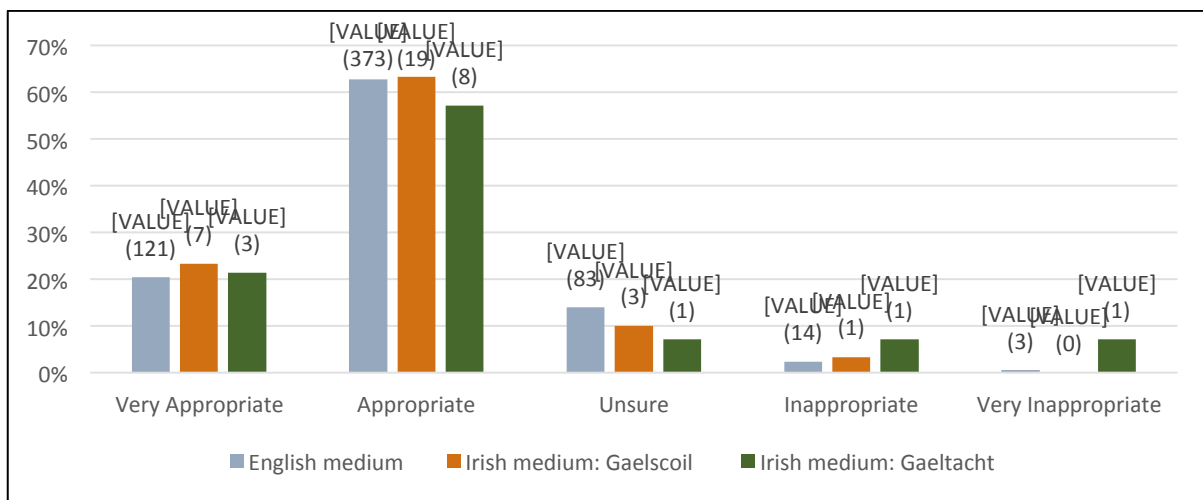
Figure 5.4: Suitability of learning outcomes for stages 1 and 2 – by language context
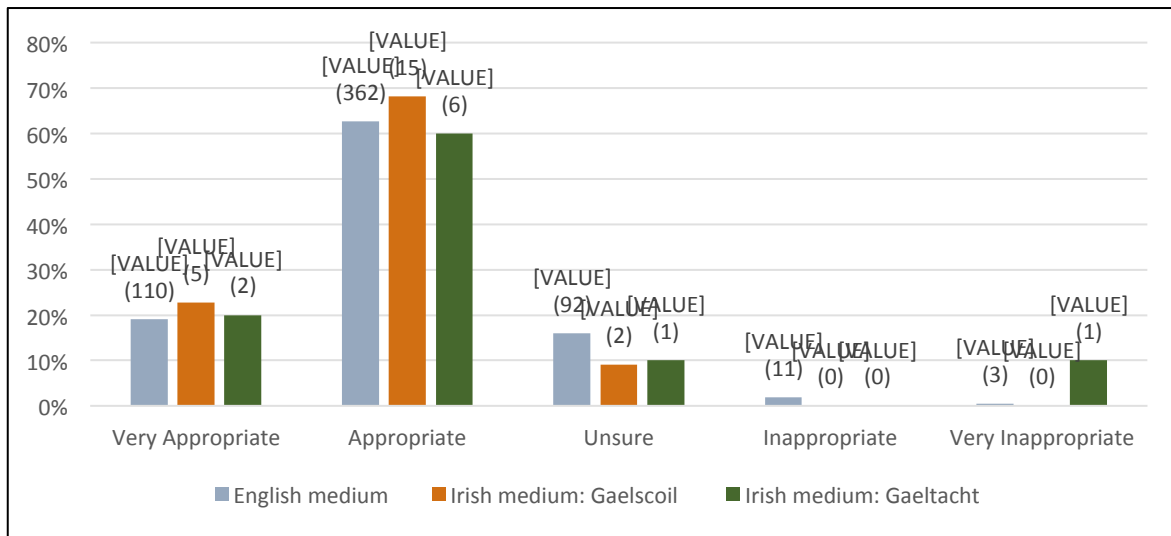

(n=10-578)

Respondents were then asked to provide more in-depth insights into their level of agreement with the appropriateness of the outcomes. They were asked to rate the appropriateness of the outcomes for each of the two stages in both the school's first language and second language. Figures 5.5 to 5.10 illustrate not only the responses from each of the three language contexts but also the responses from teachers teaching in DEIS, small schools/multigrade and special schools to provide a more rounded picture.

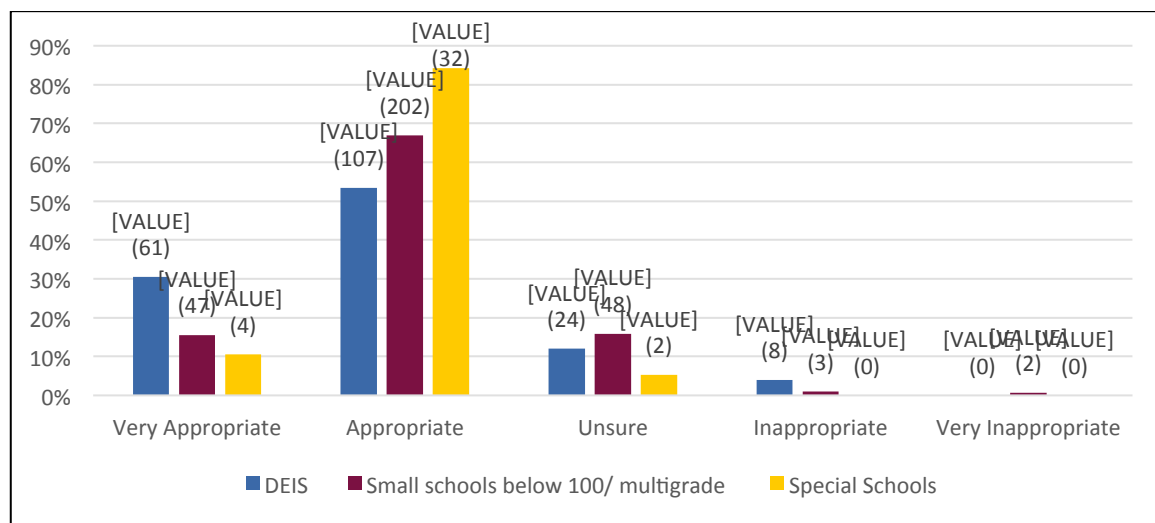**Figure 5.5: Suitability of learning outcomes for stage 1, first language – by language context**

(n=14-592)

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Figure 5.6: Suitability of learning outcomes for stage 2, first language – by language context
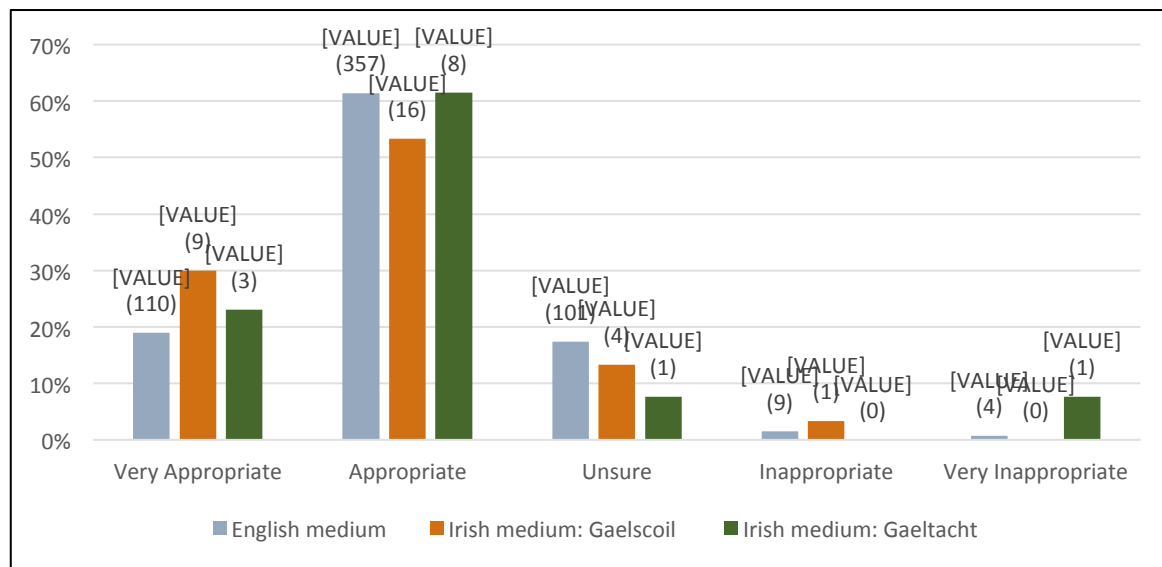
(n=13-581)

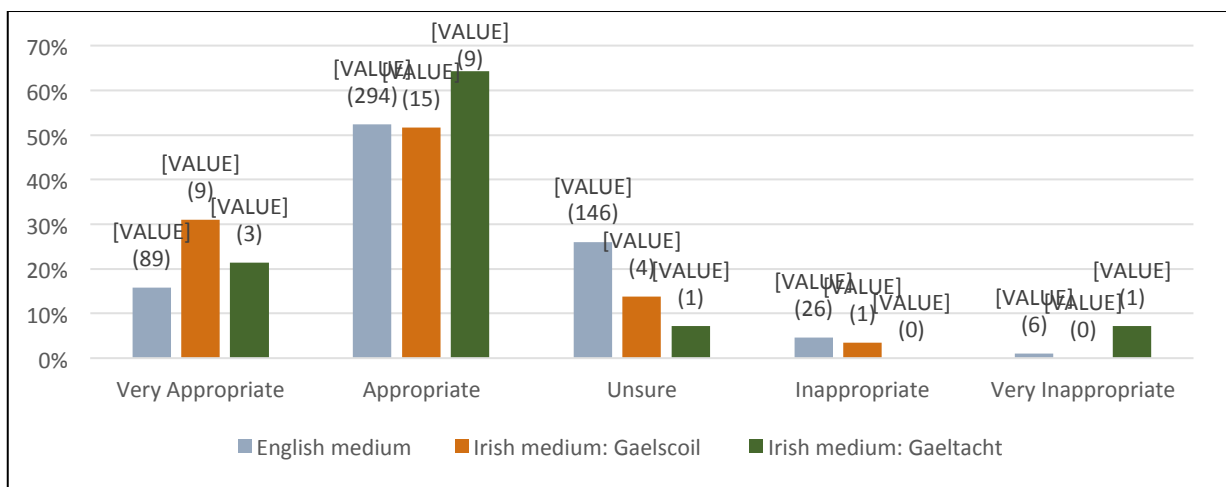**Figure 5.7: Suitability of learning outcomes for stages 1 and 2, first language – by school type**

(n=38-302)

In English-medium schools the learning outcomes for the school's first language for stages 1 and 2 were broadly welcomed by 80-83% (467-494) of teachers. Of these, 4% (18) were in special schools and 17% (79-81) were in DEIS schools. Of the 17-20% (100-114) of teachers who were either *unsure* or who *disagreed*, 15% (15) worked in schools with DEIS status. Comments from these teachers indicated that they needed more time to familiarise themselves with the materials in order to comment fairly. A number of these respondents felt that the outcomes were too lengthy and that they would

benefit from being more specific echoing some responses to Q19. There was a query around the appropriateness of the outcome for cursive writing for stage 1. The outcome for cursive writing in stage 1 was also questioned in written submissions.

In both of the Irish medium sectors the outcomes for the school's first language were welcomed, Gaelscoileanna 83-86% (25-26) and Gaeltacht 78-85% (11). Four of these respondents were from DEIS schools. 16% (2-5) of teachers in both Irish medium contexts were unsure of or deemed the outcomes inappropriate. Due to the small number of respondents it may be hard to generalise such findings. Of the 33 teachers from the Irish medium sector who responded to question 20, six supplied written commentary. One respondent felt that grammar and writing genres should be postponed until third class as children would have more interest in them as a new area. One teacher requested lists of vocabulary for each stage and one teacher felt that children may be more advanced than the standard articulated given recent advances in phonics. Those who submitted written submissions from the Irish sector requested that lines of development in accuracy, grammar, phonics and vocabulary be more evident in the outcomes for those learning Irish as a first language. One written submission felt the outcomes for Irish while suitable for children in Gaeltacht schools may need to be differentiated for children in Gaelscoileanna, many for whom Irish will not be their home language.

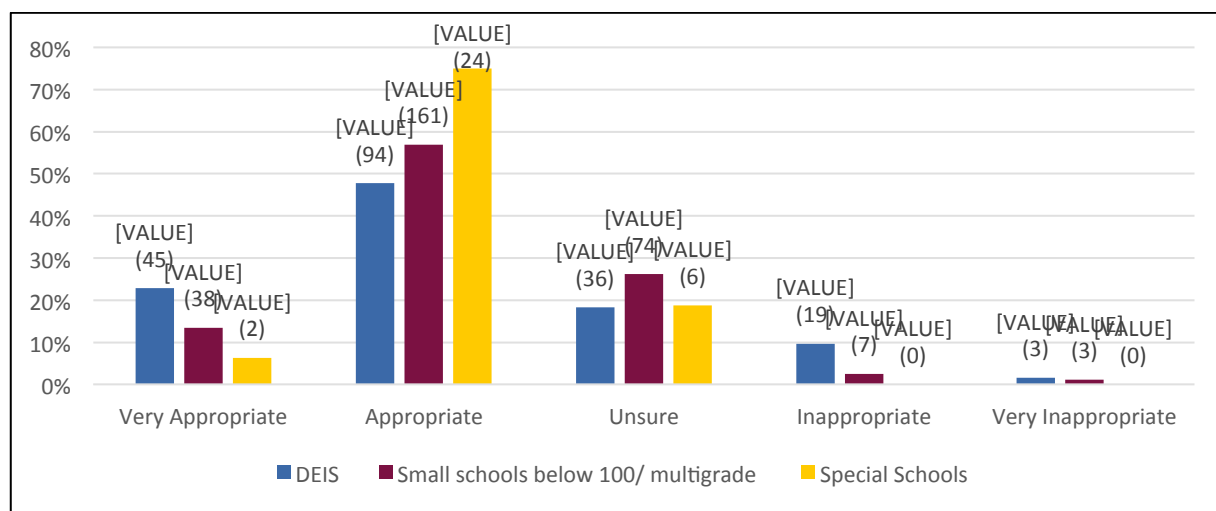**Figure 5.8: Suitability of learning outcomes for stage 1, second language– by language context**

(n=14-561)

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Figure 5.9: Suitability of learning outcomes for stage 2, second language – by language context
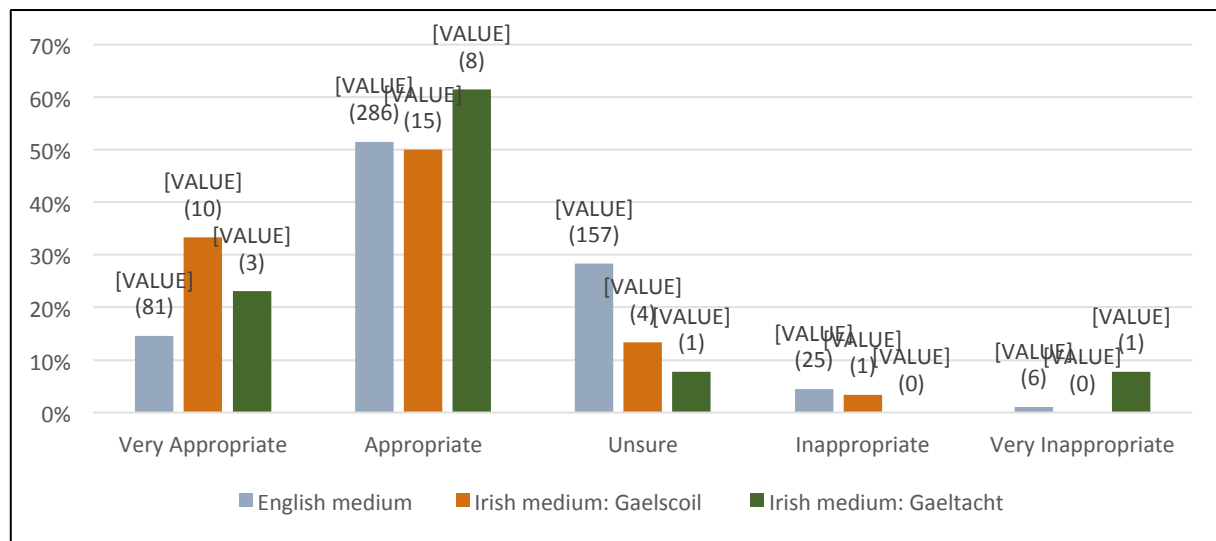
(n=13-555)

Figure 5.10: Suitability of learning outcomes for stages 1 and 2, second language – by school type

(n=32-283)

The majority of teachers (67-68%:367-383) in English-medium schools deemed the learning outcomes for the school's second language of Irish in stages 1 and 2 appropriate. It was noted that there were more teachers who were either unsure of or deemed the outcomes inappropriate for the school's second language of Irish than did for the school's first language of English. A total of 32-34% (178-188) of teachers were either unsure of or deemed the outcomes to be inappropriate for the school's second language, with the majority of these 26-28% (146-157) being unsure. Of the teachers

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who were unsure, 11% (16-18) were in DEIS schools and 2% (3) were in special schools. Twelve of these teachers commented, the main reasons given for their uncertainty was that they felt they did not have sufficient time to engage with the materials and two teachers felt the outcomes were 'too wordy'. One teacher felt she couldn't comment on stage 2 as she only had experience of infants and one teacher felt there was no recognition given to EAL children's home language, a sentiment which was echoed in the written submissions received from education partners.

Six percent (31-32) of teachers in English-medium schools deemed the second language outcomes for Irish to be inappropriate. Of this group of teachers, 33% (11) were from DEIS schools. Eleven teachers in this group provided written commentary outlining the primary reason for their objection; these respondents felt that there should be no outcomes for reading or writing in the school's second language for stage 1. In contrast, the written submissions welcomed the addition of informal literacy outcomes for reading and writing in English schools' second language for children in Stage 1. They recognised that while children in the infant classes would not engage with formal literacy skills in reading and writing in the school's second language, the outcomes would provide children with valuable opportunities to engage informally with literacy and with the written word. They cautioned that this would need to be explained to teachers from the outset as any outcomes provided for reading and writing in the school's second language in stage 1 could otherwise be misinterpreted by teachers. Of the remaining teachers who commented, one felt the outcomes were too lengthy and two teachers felt they were pitched too low. Three teachers called for the outcomes for Irish in an English-medium school to be presented to teachers in English.

There was a welcome for the outcomes for the school's second language of English from both Irish-medium sectors, with 83% (24-25) of teachers in Gaelscoileanna and 85% (11-22) of Gaeltacht teachers deeming them appropriate. Four teachers in a Gaelscoil and one in a Gaeltacht school were unsure about the outcomes for the school's second language and unfortunately these teachers didn't comment on their reason for this. One teacher in both a Gaelscoil and Gaeltacht school deemed the outcomes inappropriate. As noted already, due to the small number of respondents from the Irish-medium sector it may be hard to generalise from these findings.

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In the case of the outcomes, written submissions focused primarily on oral language with particular reference to the skill of listening. While the submissions noted that the importance of listening was implied in the curriculum's overview and in the learning outcomes, they expressed concern that without explicit references, there was a danger that teachers would not afford the skill the attention it requires. This point was made by those working in English-medium and Irish-medium education. Some suggestions were made to include outcomes focusing specifically on listening, and to rename the Oral Language strand as Oral Language (Listening and Speaking).

Q21: Language learning through play

Question 21 asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed that play could be used as an effective methodolgy in supporting children's language learning and development. A total of 654 people working across the three language contexts responded. Of these, 630 (96%) agreed or strongly agreed that play as outlined in *Aistear* could support learning as presented in the outcomes for junior infants to second class. Figure 5.11 shows the responses across the three language contexts. Clarity on how on how a playful methodology such as that outlined in *Aistear* could be used with the language curriculum, was sought in one written submission.

Figure 5.11: Appropriateness of language learning through play – by language context
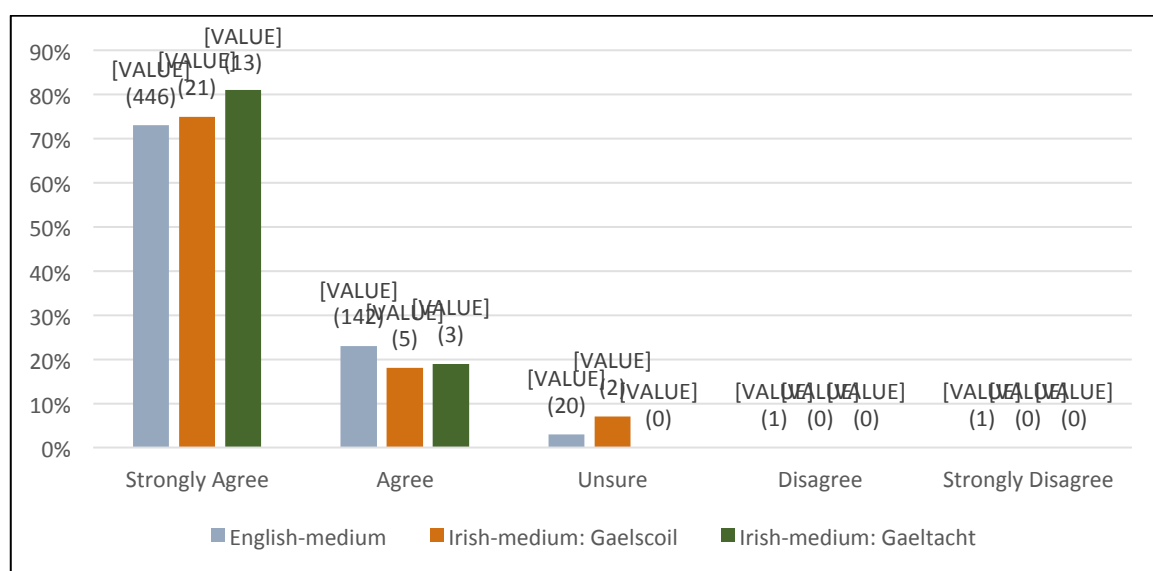

(n=16-610)

Expanding on this, 92 respondents provided additional comments; 82 of these were working in English-medium schools, six in Gaelscoileanna and four in scoileanna lán-

Ghaeilge sa Ghaeltacht. Most of the 92 respondents were positively disposed to using play methodologies to support children's language learning and development. Thirty-one (33%) of them referred to the importance of using play when working with young children: *Best way for children to learn; Play should be encouraged and supported*. A further 13 respondents referred specifically to the role of play in nurturing and promoting children's oral language development: *Play is the corner stone upon which oral language develops; Tá sé go maith an bhéim a bheith ar theanga labhartha trí shúgradh (Play is a good way of putting a focus on oral language).* Twenty-three (25%) respondents identified challenges in using a play-based methodology in their classrooms. These included time constraints, large class sizes, the absence of support personnel, and lack of training, funding and resources. A small number referred to their own successes in using play: *I am using the Aistear framework and am amazed by the results; it has changed and refreshed my teaching.*

Q22: Familiarity with *Aistear*

Question 22 asked respondents to indicate their familarity with *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* which was published in October 2009.

Figure 5.12: Familiarity with *Aistear* across school language contexts
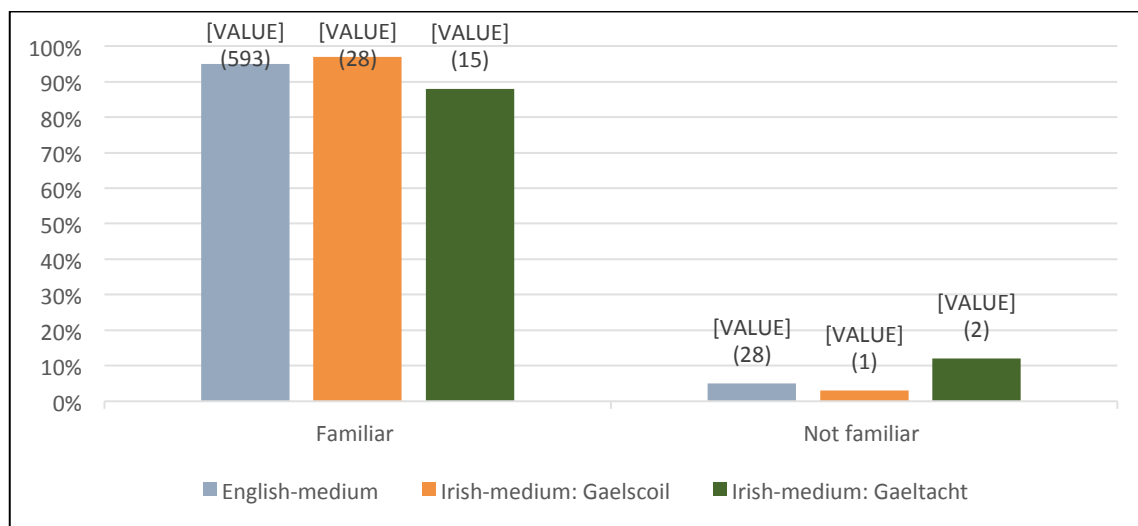
(n=17-621)

In total, 667 respondents completed the question with only 31 (5%) indicating that they weren't as yet familiar with the Framework. Since *Aistear*'s publication, over 10,000 primary school teachers and principals in both English-medium and Irish-medium schools have participated in *Aistear* workshops and/or summer courses provided through

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the network of Education Centres. This work has helped to raise awareness of the Framework amongst teachers and especially those working at the infant level.

A number of written submissions queried the references to the links between *Aistear* and the new language curriculum. They cautioned that as many teachers had not yet received training in using *Aistear* that explicit references to it may cause apprehension. These submissions called for clarity on whether or not teachers needed *Aistear*-specific training in order to implement the new language curriculum.

Improvements, hopes and aspirations

Q23: Suggestions for improving the language curriculum

Respondents were invited to make up to three suggestions, in order of importance with the first being the most important, for how the draft Primary Language Curriculum could be improved. These were to be listed in order of importance with the first being the most important. In total over 410 responses were provided across all three school contexts. Some of the most frequently cited words/phrases in response to this question are included in Figure 5.13.

Figure 5.13: Suggestions to improve the draft language curriculum – cloud view

Across responses, three main improvements were identified. These related to:
- effective communications
- support for teaching and learning
- Aistear

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The most frequently suggested improvement related to effective communications. It included both how information about the new Primary Language Curriculum is presented and communicated 'in the curriculum' itself and also how information 'about the curriculum' is disseminated and shared with teachers and others. Respondents made general calls for *greater clarity*; for information to be *more concise*; *not to be too complicated* and for priorities to be clear. Respondents asked for the curriculum itself to be made *more accessible* and more *user-friendly,* and to be written in *simpler language* avoiding *jargon.* Regarding the curriculum structure and components, there were calls for clarity on the nature of the relationship between different curriculum components—most notably the Outcomes and Progression Continua and for *priorities to be clearer*. There were also calls to improve the 'presentation' of curriculum contents, and recommendations for greater/different use of a range of formatting devices, e.g., *bullet points*; *headings*; *shading*; and *simpler tables*. The need for effective communications 'about' the curriculum was also noted, i.e., to *make all primary teachers aware of the changes*. Many teachers commented that they weren't aware of any plans to change the curriculum until they encountered the 'introductory session' in their summer course.

The second priority for improvement related to support for teaching and learning with the new language curriculum. Two aspects were noted—specific support material for teachers and classroom resources. Teachers called for a range of support material to show how the new Primary Language Curriculum can be made *more manageable*. There were calls for *guidelines on using the Progression Continua* and the Outcomes for planning, teaching and assessment and specific suggestions for *templates and tools*. Teachers pointed to the need for additional guidelines and *pointers* on *how the pieces of the curriculum work together*. Specific areas of children's language learning and development were highlighted for more guidance and support including listening activities; handwriting; language enrichment; basic conversational skills; teaching children with SEN and EAL (where English and Irish may be second and third languages); and assessment, e.g., *making judgements about children's progression* and *explain(ing) criteria needed to assess work.* Responses for resources focused almost entirely on the need for standardised resources in a range of areas most notably vocabulary development, reading schemes, phonics, and *graded resources*. There were suggestions also for more classroom whiteboards, posters, and children's reading books

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for libraries. And finally, respondents called for reduced class size in the early primary years.

The third main improvement suggested concerned *Aistear*. In the first instance, there were calls for the Primary Language Curriculum to reflect the principles of Aistear, in particular the third set of principles concerning how children learn and develop. Respondents called for the language curriculum to be more child-centred with a greater focus on supporting children's oral language and communication in *enjoyable, relevant activities*, and *through play*. In this context, there were some references to the outcomes being pitched at too high a level for young children in second class. Respondents suggested also that important *dispositions* for children's language learning and development should be made more overt. The second set of findings for Aistear related to the need for professional development supports for the new Primary Language Curriculum to begin first and foremost with an introduction to the Aistear – its principles and guidelines for practice, e.g., *compulsory Aistear training for all teachers*.

Q24: Suggestions on how to support teachers to engage with the Primary Language Curriculum

Respondents were invited to share up to three suggestions for how teachers could be supported to engage with the draft Primary Language Curriculum. As for the previous question, these were to be listed in order of importance with the first being the most important. In total, over 670 responses were provided across all three school contexts. Some of the most frequently cited words/phrases in response to this question are included in Figure 5.14.

Figure 5.14. Suggestions to support teachers to engage with the curriculum – cloud view

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Across responses, three areas of support were identified:

- Continuing Professional Development
- resources
- information dissemination.

The first area for support, Continuing Professional Development (CPD), included many one-word/one-phrase responses including *CPD; professional development; in-service; in-career support* and *training.* Many respondents referred to the low-moral of teachers in this context, e.g., *In-service training is a must. Teachers experiencing low morale with cuts, Croke Park hours, etc.* While many respondents suggested that CPD could be provided in Education Centres, the most popular site for CPD was the school itself, e.g., *whole school workshops*. The classroom was also considered an important CPD-site, e.g., *classroom visits; classroom* modelling and *more in-class support*. Respondents called for CPD to include all teachers and *not just link teachers*, e.g., *I feel this is vital otherwise a (very) few staff are trying to fight an uphill battle!* Those who submitted written submissions requested that training on *Aistear* be provided to more teachers and a number of submissions also requested greater supports for teachers in teaching Irish as both a first and second language.

The second main area of support focused on provision of adequate resources. Respondents called for resources to be *teacher-friendly* and available *for all class teachers* and all curriculum levels/stages. Responses noted the need for resources to be practical rather than theoretical in focus, e.g., *resources for practical application in classrooms* and to include examples of the process and outcomes of children's work, e.g., *lots examples of children's work to refer to at each class level*. Many respondents suggested that resources would be available online, e.g., *resources online like photos, posters etc.*; videos of good practice; online toolkits; online demonstrations. Online resources also included CPD materials, e.g., *online lessons; continuous up-dated online support* and *online tutorials*. Structural supports identified in this context included *improved broadband in schools* and *IT support for primary schools.* Written submissions from those involved in the Irish sector called for graded reading materials suitable to native speakers and a comprehensive phonic scheme to be supplied for Irish.

The third main area of support identified by respondents related to dissemination of information about the new Primary Language Curriculum and its implementation, e.g.,

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cuir amach an t-eolas… ní raibh mórán eolas agam go raibh curaclam nua ag teacht – is tré sheans go raibh mé ar an suíomh NCCA agus go bhfaca me an nasc ann. Respondents called for the curriculum itself to support teachers by ensuring its contents were accessible and clear for teachers, e.g., *be as accessible as possible* (reiterating findings for Questions 7 and 8, reported earllier in this document). Again, respondents called for *improved broadband* in primary schools to access the curriculum and support material. Respondents welcomed the proposed 'synergy' between curriculum components and noted the value of these connections in supporting teachers to engage with the curriculum, e.g., *making it simple and easy to map the outcomes to the skills to the continua as this is what its intention is. If this is made clear to teachers and the planning and assessment and feedback can be neatly tied in, I think it will be supportive.*

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Next steps

The development of a new Primary Language Curriculum is a significant step in the continual process of updating and improving the curriculum. The Draft for consultation responds to teachers' calls (in curriculum reviews and work with schools) for greater support for their language planning and teaching, with children as the ultimate beneficiaries. Building on research and on evidence from classrooms, one of these key changes focuses on supporting children's learning and development in and across languages—in an integrated language curriculum—rather than in two discrete languages. Other key changes include using learning outcomes to describe what children should know and be able to do as language users in the first four years of their primary education. Linked to this and through the use of progression continua and associated examples of children's work, the new curriculum provides specific support for teachers in differentiating their practice in order to help *all* children make progress in their language learning and development.

As noted in the introduction to this Interim Report, caution is needed in generalising from the survey findings and particularly in relation to feedback on the Irish curriculum as T1 given the small number of respondents from Gaeltacht schools in particular. Nonetheless, the survey findings highlight a general and largely positive response to the Draft Primary Language Curriculum for junior infants to second class. Alongside high levels of agreement regarding many of the curriculum's components, there are some clear indications of components which may warrant further consideration and work. These areas include:

- the **language register** across the curriculum
- the breadth of learning presented within individual **learning outcomes**
- the **differentiation** of outcomes for the **two Irish language contexts**.
- the prominence and visibility of, and supports for the **skill of listening**
- the suggested **entry points on the continua** for the beginning of Stages 1 and 2
- the **relationship/connections** between the outcomes and progression continua.
- the **illustrations** of how the main components interact and skills transfer
- the inclusivity of, and support for teaching children with **EAL and SEN**
- the approach recommended for **second language learning**
- the visibility of **Aistear** including its principles and guidelines for practice.

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As noted at the outset, the school-based work planned for the 2014/2015 school year provides the scope to engage with and respond to these areas working with teachers and principals across the three language school contexts.

Work will continue over the coming weeks to complete the analysis of consultation findings and to develop the Final Report. The Final Report will draw out clear implications of the consultation findings for the work in finalising the Primary Language Curriculum for junior infants to second class. This report will be presented to Council in November.

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Shiel, G., Cregan, Á., McGough, A. and Archer, P. (2012). Oral Language in Early Childhood and Primary Education (3-8 years). Commissioned Research. Dublin: NCCA.

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Appendix 1: Written Submissions received

Source of submission/Affiliation	Lead name(s)
Aighneachtaí ó mhúinteoirí-scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge	X 2
Aighneachtaí ó thuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta	X 37
Barefield NS, Ennis, Co. Clare	John Burns
Church of Ireland College of Education	Áine O'Neill (*Independent Response)
COGG	Muireann Ní Mhóráin
Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta	Mairéad Mac Con Iomaire
Conradh na Gaeilge	Peadar Mac Fhlannchadha
Department of Education- Inspectorate	Pádraig Mac Fhlannachadha
Dice Project	Siobhán Sleeman
Foras na Gaeilge	Seosamh Ó Coinne
Foras Pátrúnachta	Caoimhín Ó hEaghra
Froebel College-Language Department	Niamh Fortune, Fiona Nic Fhionnlaoich
Gaelscoileanna	Bláthnaid Ní Ghréacháin
Gaelscoil na Lochlanna	Seán Ó Cearnaigh
Hibernia College-Primary Education	Anna Davitt
One voice for Languages	Kristin Brogan
PDST	Catherine Treacy
Reading Association of Ireland	Gerry Shiel
Royal Irish Academy	Paul Lynam
Scoil Bríde, Blanchardstown, Dublin 15	Déirdre Kirwan
Scoil na Maighdine Muire gan Smál, Camus, Co. na Gaillimhe	Bairbre Ní Thuairisg
St. Nicholas Montessori College	Ian McKenna
St Patrick's College-Theagaisc na Gaeilge	Máire Ní Bhaoill
St Patrick's College-Special Education Dept	Anna Logan
St Patrick's College-Special Education Dept	Thérese Day, Anna Logan, Ellen Reynor
Teacher feedback-English medium	X 6
Trinity College-School of Education	Gene Dalton
Tuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta	Sorcha Ní Chéilleachair
YoungBallymun	Hazel O'Byrne

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