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Peter McCallion, Committee Clerk  
Room 243  
Parliament Buildings  
Ballymiscaw, Stormont  
Belfast BT4 3XX

A chara

**Re: Education Committee Inquiry into the Education and Training Inspectorate(ETI)**

As a major stakeholder in the provision of support to Irish Medium Preschool projects, I am writing on behalf of Altram, the leading regional support group for Irish language early years projects to raise some concerns with the inspection process in relation to Irish Medium Immersion Early Years preschools.

**Background**

Altram, which was founded in 1995 by local preschools in Armagh, Belfast, Derry and Newry, represents the growing Irish Medium Early Years Care and Education sector.

Altram promotes the development of quality early years services through the medium of Irish as the foundation of an Irish Language community. Altram believes the Irish language should be open to all and promotes inclusion and mutual respect.

**Growth in provision**

Parental choice and commitment have led to rapid growth in the enrolment and number of Irish medium settings regionally. There are now 45 early years' projects providing over 1200 places (almost 800 Peeps places and over 400 PrePeeps places) and 32 primary schools with 2675 pupils. As well as Pre-school provision, a number of projects in the Belfast area have, in partnership with the Belfast Health & Social Services Trust developed additional early years and family support services, including breakfast clubs, afterschool clubs, crèche/daycare services, holiday and summer schemes and Sure Start programmes.

### **Services provided:**

Altram has two regional offices, one in Belfast and one in Derry, which provide a wide range of services, including:

- Early Years Specialist Support for groups within the Pre-school Education Expansion Programme (PSEEP).
- Regional Outreach Support for Irish Medium early years projects, including standalone statutory nurseries and nursery classes, family support centres and non-statutory Pre-School groups.
- Curricular advice and support for staff in statutory & voluntary IM early years settings
- 6 staff training cluster days per year across the region as well as a yearly conference
- Local cluster meetings
- Facilitation of in service training
- Development and delivery of a University of Ulster accredited certificate course: *Certificate in Irish Immersion Education: Early Years*
- Regional information service for those managing and delivering Irish Medium Early Years projects and programmes.
- Development advice and support for new Irish Medium Early Years projects
- Management support, including providing up-to-date guidelines, for project committees
- Accredited Child Protection Training
- AccessNI child protection registration service.
- Representation on statutory and funding bodies
- Production and provision of high quality resources such as books and materials for use in the Irish Medium Early Years sector
- Support for staff and committees delivering the *Sure Start: Programme for Two Year Olds*
- Toy & Book Library (Western Childcare Partnership and Belfast & South Eastern Childcare Partnership)
- Spraoi Spórt Manual and CD (Play-Based Physical Exercise Programme)

### **Certificate in Irish Immersion Education: Early Years**

Altram developed the early years' Irish language immersion education qualification in partnership with the University of Ulster and the North West Regional College. The Certificate in Irish Immersion Education Early Years is directed at the specific needs of staff in the sector and provides training in methodology and language. The course equips students with the theoretical basis and the practical skills necessary to enable them to deliver an effective early years' language immersion programme. The course units draw on theories of second language acquisition, as applicable to young children, and on international methods of good practice in immersion and early years learning. The Certificate is the first of its kind in Ireland or Britain.

### **Regional**

Altram has 6 full-time and 3 part-time members of staff. Core funding comes from Foras na Gaeilge and the Health & Social Care Board provides funding for two of the full-time Early Years Specialist posts. It



works closely with Forbairt Náionraí Teoranta (an all-Ireland Irish medium early years' network) and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (the NI Irish medium Education Council).

Altram works in partnership with the Department of Education, including the Education & Training Inspectorate, the Department of Culture, Arts & Leisure, local Health Trusts and key voluntary sector partners in developing the Irish Medium sector. It represents the Irish language early years immersion sector on various statutory bodies including, in particular, the Department of Education Early Years 0-6 Strategy Advisory Group.

In partnership with the Health & Social Care Board Altram has provided capacity and funding support, family support programmes and early years specialist training and support to groups in the Board areas. It expanded its early years support service in 2012 through the appointment of a dedicated Irish Medium Regional Support Specialist for the Programme for Two Year Olds funded by the Regional Childcare Partnership. Regular cluster training and workshops are organized for preschools in the Board areas and accredited Child Protection Training and registration with Access NI are also available.

### **Language Immersion programmes**

Although Irish language immersion programmes in the North have been operational for over thirty-five years, there are many decision makers within educational agencies who have little or no theoretical background in or practical experience of early years immersion education.

Language immersion is a method of education in which children are taught through a language which is not the language used in the home. Children educated in language immersion programmes usually come from homes in which a dominant language is the language of communication. The parents of these children often choose language immersion for their children because they themselves identify with the cultural and linguistic values represented by the immersion language.

Immersion language learning in the early years setting is not, as many individuals feel, a simple, straightforward, uncomplicated process. Children do not absorb the language simply by being exposed to it. A systematic approach and the use of deliberate strategies on the part of the staff, beyond their ability to speak the immersion language, are necessary to assure successful acquisition of the language.

The skills in methodology needed by staff in early years immersion settings cannot be met simply by translating material designed for a home language early years situation through the medium of the immersion language. Outside the immersion language sector, individuals tend towards an even more

simplistic version of this and presume that the only difference between the home language situation and an immersion language situation lies in the language used by the staff. For them, the immersion language setting is just a home language situation with the immersion language as an additional factor. This leads to their perception of the quality of the early years immersion setting as being defined, almost exclusively, by the home language template.

There are many commonalities between a home language early years settings and an immersion language early years settings. In both situations the focus is on the development of the child. Child care issues are the same so the general principles involving the provision of a high quality learning environment are the same. The early years Irish immersion PEEPS programmes in Northern Ireland incorporate the guidance outlined in the DE document "Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education" to ensure the delivery of this curriculum in a holistic way through play and other relevant experiences. Staff in an immersion setting, however, must have additional skills and competences and also need to have a firm knowledge regarding the processes of language learning.

Early Years language immersion staff must be able to identify the fundamental principles of good early years immersion practice in order to promote effective language learning. They have to understand the additional challenges which arise from immersion language learning.

In order to provide an effective language immersion environment, staff need to:

- participate in maximizing exposure to the immersion language
- support the development of children's ability to understand the immersion language
- support the emergence of children's ability to speak the immersion language
- contribute to the planning and implementation of immersion language activities to promote and maintain the interest, motivation and emotional well-being of children in an immersion setting.

In order to plan, implement and evaluate the provision of an effective language immersion environment, it is necessary for staff to:

- Plan for immersion language learning using relevant frameworks and guidance
- Plan and organize the physical environment to optimize children's immersion language learning
- Plan and implement specific activities and experiences to promote children's immersion language learning



- Monitor and evaluate activities and experiences to promote children's immersion language learning

Language is learnt by children by hearing the language spoken. Therefore, in an immersion language educational setting staff must contribute to the creation and maintenance of an environment in which children are surrounded by the language they are learning and hear the language being spoken constantly to themselves and others.

Therefore, it is vital that staff in an early years immersion setting:

- Use the immersion language at all times
- Speak the immersion language naturally and frequently in a variety of activities
- Maintain a high level of verbal interaction with children in all activities
- Maintain a sustained flow of language with children
- Cooperate with colleagues in providing opportunities to use language with children
- Provide clues which will help children understand what is being said
- Use strategies to increase exposure to key language areas
- Use coherent strategies to help children remember key language
- Build up children's familiarity with key language areas systematically
- Provide children with opportunities to say things in the immersion language
- Respond appropriately to children's attempts to use the immersion language
- Make useful contributions to language planning
- Implement language plan
- Promote children's enjoyment and success
- Practise a simplified language register placing the use of language in concrete, practical contexts and situations
- Build up children's specific understanding of key language items systematically
- Be familiar with the content of the language programme
- Use techniques of repetition, restatement and expansion regularly in verbal interaction with the children
- Target the language focus of the current language plan through repetition, restatement and expansion techniques
- Use repetition, restatement and expansion to consolidate and maintain key language items of past planning and past experience
- Collaborate with colleagues to model verbalization

These language strategies must be integrated into the daily routine so that staff may counteract additional challenges to an early years immersion language setting which include:

- Reduced exposure to the immersion language
- Ratio of fluent speakers to learners
- Children's immature learning strategies
- Lack of any conscious motivation on the part of children to learn a new language

The immersion language early years setting requires a direct and interventionist approach. Adult presence in children's activities is more frequent and the adult input in verbal interactions is more predominate-this is inevitable. The adult cannot remain a discreet presence in the background waiting for opportunities initiated by children to enrich their linguistic competence. At the same time, there is no place in the language immersion environment for a heavy-handed coercive approach. Children need to enjoy their learning, feel comfortable with all staff and experience some sense of control in their choices and decisions.


Too often, the inspection process does not take the above factors into consideration when inspecting Irish language Early Years settings.

As a result Inspection Reports and oral feedback reports often reflect:

- a shortfall in awareness of what early years immersion education involves
- the tendency to include evaluations based only on the characteristics of good preschool education but to ignore the evaluation on the characteristics of a good early years language immersion programme
- the lack of cognizance of the necessary balance of adult interaction and the child's freedom in order to ensure focused approach to language development
- the lack of awareness of the need to consistently use the immersion language through all activities for all children
- inconsistencies in the ratings awarded to immersion early years settings
- the inclusion, at times, of subjective factors in determining the quality of provision
- the absence of any reference to the specialised needs of Irish immersion staff in relation to language and methodology in evaluating and recording templates

Altram request that the above factors be taken into consideration in the inquiry.

Is mise le meas

  
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