Sólás na nÓg

Comhbhá, Cothú, Cumasú

2024

Ag Cothú Comhpháirtíochta:

Exploring and Developing Opportunities for Collaborative Practice among Irish-Medium Schools and Youth Services Practitioners for Young People with Additional Needs

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Feabhra 2025

glór na móna 20 POBAL & ÓIGE

CISTE POBAIL COMMUNITY FUND

Contents

Foreword x

Academic x

Introduction x

Contextual Overview x

Irish-medium Youth Work and Collaborative Practice x

Aims of Research x

Methodology x

Discussion of Findings x

Summing Up x

Conclusion x

End References x

Foreword

Research in Irish medium education and in indigenous language educational contexts around the world has clearly demonstrated the benefits of maintaining and sustaining bilingualism in one's indigenous language. This is true regardless of neurotypicality or ability. Yet cultivating linguistic and cultural continuity is never simple, and it cannot be accomplished through schools alone. Programmes like Sólás na nÓg, an invaluable community resource for young bilingual Irish speakers who have additional learning needs, are critical to building community language ecologies in which all young people can thrive.

The aims of this report are ambitious. It not only evaluates the programme to enhance services locally, but also aims to connect with indigenous language youth work in minority language communities around the world. Using a participatory methodology, the report demonstrates the value of providing diverse contexts for learning through the medium of Irish outside of schools, and it highlights the importance of establishing structures of collaboration between the various contexts for a more ecological approach to education and community. This ecological approach puts relationships at the centre of Irish medium youth work. It aligns with the decolonising aims of indigenous language reclamation and it is a clear strength of Sólás na nÓg.

Findings from the report illustrate the value of constructing and protecting social spaces for young people with additional learning needs. This confirms what research elsewhere has shown regarding the importance of peer relationships to child development, and the critical role these relationships play in immersion and bilingual education contexts. Parents in the report recount their children's enthusiasm for Sólás na nÓg as a space where interests are cultivated and friendships can flourish without 'masking' their authentic selves. As one child puts it, "you know, they just get me." Experiencing such recognition is invaluable for young people in developing a strong sense of self—development that needs to be done in concert with others, and it is heartening to see how relationship-building at Sólás na nÓg helps cultivate identity across domains. The report details how staff mediate communication between parents, young people, and educators with an aim of providing better educational, social, and emotional support for young bilinguals with additional learning needs. And it articulates a clear argument for better communication and collaboration amongst all of those who contribute to a child's development—including the child themselves.

Sólás na nÓg is an extraordinary programme that provides a model for indigenous language youth work that can resonate across a wide range of community contexts. This report illustrates the programme's profound impact and potential, and provides clear recommendations that are evidence-based, creative, and feasible for making culturally sustaining education accessible to all children.

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Introduction

Sólás na nÓg is an innovative programme offering informal education and youth work services in the Irish language, specifically designed for young people with diverse learning, physical, social, emotional, and behavioural needs. Launched as a pilot initiative in 2019 with support from the Education Authority's 'Inclusion Programme,' this project is a key part of the emerging Irish-language youth services at Glór na Móna, a thriving Irish-language community organisation based in the Upper Springfield area of West Belfast. The initial pilot scheme of the youth service aimed to address the growing needs of marginalised young people who required additional support and individual interventions both within and outside the formal Irish-medium education system.

In 2020, Glór na Móna sought further development of the pilot project by applying for the National Lottery Community Fund's 'Awards for All' scheme. This application included a research scoping evaluation paper, 'Identifying, Exploring and Evaluating Gaps in Current Provision for Irish-medium Youth Work in Belfast' (McGurk, 2020) which aimed to assess the gaps in Irish-medium informal education and youth work opportunities for young people with additional learning needs. The paper's findings highlighted a significant demand for increased services for young Irish speakers with additional learning needs in the greater West Belfast area. These findings provided crucial evidence that supported Glór na Móna's subsequent, larger funding application to the National Lottery's 'Empowering Young People' programme which was successfully secured in 2021. The additional funding from the National Lottery Community Fund, enabled the expansion of the programme from one to three nights per week from May 2022 when the programme commenced. The project also obtained temporary accommodation at the Glór na Móna site, supported by the Department of Communities and Foras na Gaeilge's capital schemes.

From the outset, the project employed a participatory action research model which was critical throughout the first year of the project and in the summer of 2023, an evaluative research paper[1] titled 'Comhbhá, Cothú Cumasú: An Evaluative Research Report of Sólás na nÓg's Youth Services 2022-2023' (McGurk, 2023) which examined and evaluated the impact of the expanded Sólás na nÓg programme was commissioned and completed. The report highlighted the profound influence which enhanced service provision and investment in the services had on young people and their families whilst also highlighting further opportunities for development, continuous research and resource investment. The findings of this research will be further discussed in Section 4: Aims of Research.

This report serves as a follow-up piece which looks to specifically examine and build upon some of the key aspects of the many recommendations emanating from 2023's report. One of the primary findings sought to examine and develop opportunities for collaboration and sharing practice between teachers, additional needs co-ordinators, youth workers and parents in order to enhance the experiences of young people attending Irish-medium education schools and informal youth services. The next section will update the scoping literature, with particular reference to scholarship in relation to collaborative practice, followed by a discussion of the research aims, questions, and qualitative methodology employed in the study. The report will then present and analyse the findings from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with research participants, before concluding with recommendations for the future development and expansion of the Sólás na nÓg provision.

[1] See link for the launch of the Sólás na nÓg research report ag Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta's annual conference in September 2023 https://www.glornamona.com/general/evaluative-research-report-on-solas-na-nogs-youth-services-launched-at-comhairle-na-gaelscolaiochta-conference/?lang=en

Contextual Overview

Irish-medium education in the North of Ireland was established in the late 1960s, driven by Irish language activists in West Belfast who sought to set up an immersive education provision for the young families of the Shaws Road Gaeltacht (O'Baoill, 2007). Despite facing political opposition during the period of heightened civil unrest across the North of Ireland during this time, these grassroots efforts established the foundation for a burgeoning education sector where Irish is the primary medium of instruction. Recent figures from the latest Census (NISRA 2021) and the Department of Education (2023) indicate that Irish-medium education remains an increasingly popular choice and the fastest growing sector of education in the North of Ireland in spite of long-standing structural inequalities[2], with approximately 7,500 students enrolled in Irish-medium education in the academic year 2023/24. However, challenges and deficiencies persist, in formal Irish-medium education as highlighted by McGurk (2022; 2023) in youth and community services and campaigns (Mac Ionnrachtaigh, 2021) and as McVeigh (2022) argues, the Department of Education's failure to uphold its statutory duty to 'promote and facilitate the Irish language', particularly regarding adequate resources, linguistic recognition and legislation, and support from educational authorities[3].

Immersive pedagogical modes of education have been recognised worldwide not only for their linguistic, cognitive and more recently, physiological benefits on young people (Kipp, 2009; Hinton, 2011; McCarty and Nicholas, 2014; Bialystok, 2011,2018; Chandler and Lalonde, 2008) but also for their efforts in preserving and promoting indigenous languages in minoritised language communities on a global scale. Despite the significant contributions made by the establishment and growth of the Irish-medium education sector, in particular across the North of Ireland, immersion education institutions alone are not enough to undertake the aims of language revitalisation (Engman, McGurk and Mac Kenzie, 2023). Hence why the pioneering work of the Irish-language community and youth sector has been instrumental in strengthening Irish language revivalist efforts over the past number of decades, in particular for young people. Youth clubs such as the programmes developed at Glór na Móna play a pivotal role in providing informal education exposure to young Irish speakers, offering social spaces for young people to engage socially in Irish language,cultural practices and community development practices. These clubs have been imperative in developing Irish-medium youth work in Belfast, supported regionally by Fóram na nÓg[4], who have pioneered the development and implementation of their Indigenous Language Youth Work methodology through youth club capacity building, accredited training and course facilitation across the North of Ireland. Despite the recent successes and growth, the burgeoning sector still faces significant challenges in achieving full recognition and support.

Glór na Móna, functions as a dynamic Irish-language community hub offering a wide range of programmes and services for various groups located in the wider West Belfast community. In addition to Irish medium youth work; Glór na Móna also place an emphasis on community education and regeneration; participatory democracy practices centred on community fesitvals and political education; projects focussing on inter-generational family language transmission and social language use; and local community history and heritage recovery. All their activities utilise the Irish language, the unique community resources and local environmental amenities to challenge socio- economic inequalities by targeting poverty and social exclusion.

[2] https://www.independentreviewofeducation.org.uk/files/independentreviewofeducation/2022-09/Comhairle%20na%20Gaelscolaiochta.pdf

[3] See the 2023 Sólás na nÓg report for an extensive insight to the shortcomings and funding deficiencies which the Irish-medium youth work sector have faced in recent years: https://www.glornamona.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/ENG-Second-Half-Solas-na-nOg_Report2023-1.pdf

The organisation plays a crucial role in the revitalisation and reclamation of the Irish language, with the goal of decolonisation[5] as the driving force behind the organisation's prolific community output, by engaging young people and members of the local community through fostering critical thinking and participation in raising awareness and campaigning in relation to other social, political and economic issues which they and other minority communities may face on a local and worldwide basis. The organisation's approach to youth work 'Obair Óige Dúchasach' is described as a mechanism for 'radical social change' (Hurley and Treacy, 1993: 45) and fosters political and critical social education, focusing on empowering young people to 'challenge the systems which exclude them' (Neill and McArdle, 2023: 229) and encourages the acquisition and promotion of social justice.

The impact of indigenous language youth work in relation to additional educational, emotional and behavioural needs and for those young people who tend to face further instances of marginalisation and exclusion both in and outside of the school system remains largely under-researched and unexplored as the 2023 Sólás na nÓg report found. Irish-medium Youth Work as evidenced through the Sólás na nÓg programme can undoubtedly support and enhance the social experiences of young people, by helping participants connect with their cultural indigeneity which thereby fosters a strong sense of identity and belonging to community. It creates an inclusive environment that promotes social interaction and action,

[4] Fóram na nÓg is a Regional Voluntary Youth Organisation (RVYO) for the Irish Medium Youth Sector which aims to promote and strengthen IM Youth Work, in order to increase informal learning opportunities for young people through the medium of Irish. In 2021, Fóram na nÓg was officially recognised by the Education Authority and given core strategic funding and project funding to develop the Irish medium youth sector.

[5] The theoretical praxis of decolonisation is one which permeates the community empowerment ethos on which programmes and services at Glór na Móna are based, with the wider aims of cultural, psychological and economic freedom from ingrained colonial conditions at the core of the burgeoning Irish language reclamation movement in the North of Ireland. Glór na Móna have recently created space, in collaboration with Queen's University Belfast, for both community activists and academics to come together to showcase ground-breaking research and work at the first international conference held between Queen's and a local community organisation on the subject of decolonisation. See link for the event's press release and video: https://www.glornamona.com/irish-language-classes/comhdhail-idirnaisiuntachomhoibrithe-phobail-ar-an-dichoiliniu-i-naomh-comhghall-ar-bhothar-na-bhfal/

teamwork, collaborative community practices, and critical thinking, while also boosting self-esteem, self-compassion and confidence. These emerging features are typical themes which were highlighted in the 2023 report on Sólás na nÓg, which provides a bespoke service to young people who would otherwise be marginalised or excluded from informal youth services which are facilitated through the Irish-language.

The 2023 Sólás na nÓg research report, provided a detailed account of education and additional needs policy and scholarship both of international and domestic literature which outlined the current state of provision and also highlighted gaps and shortcomings in indigenous language, educational and youth services. Since the completion of last year's report, additional statutory policy and framework documents as commissioned by the Department of Education titled 'Independent Review of Special Educational Needs Services and Processes' (2023) have been published which aimed to provide the basis for 'transformational change' of the SEN sector in the North of Ireland. The report noted an increase of over 10% of the amount of pupils with an SEN statement from 2017/18 (23%) to 35% in 2021/22. Despite the application of early intervention being of crucial importance to implementing effective interventions, the research acknowledged that under the current system and processes that implementation of such practice is 'almost impossible' due to a number of factors highlighted as shortcomings in provision and resource by the report. Issues surrounding appropriate accommodation and needs focused resources were also raised; a recurrent theme which is of particular relevance to the Irish-medium education and community sector. There was also a distinct lack of reference specifically in relation to the particular needs of the Irish-medium education sector in its delivery of bilingual education in the report despite Irish-medium stakeholders being represented through an IM advocacy body in the data collection. More recently, the DE in collaboration with EA have began the implementation of a four phased strategy which was initiated in February 2023, the 'End to End Review of SEN' which comprises of an evaluation process aimed at examining and improving the entire system of support for children and young people with special educational needs in the North of Ireland. The review was initiated in response to ongoing concerns about the effectiveness, efficiency, and accessibility of Special Educational Needs services provided by the Education Authority and calls for schools and education provisions to be 'more inclusive'.

More recently, this was followed by a report last November by the representative body on Irish Medium Education, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, entitled, 'The Provision for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities in Irish Medium Education. By way of context, the report emphasised that the majority of Irish medium schools are located in areas of socio-economic disadvantage with one-third located in the top 100 super output areas as defined in the Multiple Deprivation measures. (CnG 2024: 10) Moreover, 22.5% of pupils in the Irish medium sector are recorded as having special educational needs as compared to 19.1% in the English medium sector. Furthermore, the report noted that only 4% of pupils in the Irish medium have received a statement of special educational needs in contrast to 7.6% in the English medium sector (CnG 2024: 11) The report concluded by pointing out that is 'extremely disappointing that little progress has been made to date to ensure that all pupils have the same opportunities to grow, develop and meet their potential' whilst emphasising the urgent need for more 'tangible progress' in the area of special needs to support 'Irish medium schools in implementing 'internationally recognised best practice'.
(CnG 2024: 28)

Despite the aforementioned policy developments being specifically targeted towards formal education and special educational needs reform, these shortcomings in provision for additional needs support can surely be evidenced in informal IM educational youth services. With deficient research literature in existence relating to indigenous youth work provision for young people with additional needs facilitated through the Irish language as highlighted in the 2023 Sólás na nÓg Report, it is imperative that we undertake ongoing research and project evaluation as is central to the aims of the Sólás na nÓg programme, but also to examine alternative philosophical, ideological and theoretical frameworks in order to guide, inform and enhance practice being carried out by practitioners on the ground. In the next section, inclusivity and opportunities for collaboration between key stakeholders of the Sólás na nÓg programme will be discussed through the theoretical lens of Florian's collaborative practice.

Irish-medium Youth Work and Collaborative Practice

Inclusive education and inclusive pedagogical practice has become a central goal of educational and rights based policy and practice in many countries worldwide (Pantic and Florian, 2015; Riddell 2007), reflecting a commitment to providing equitable opportunities for all young people, including those with additional needs. Despite scholarship (Forlin and Loreman et. al 2014) contending the complexity in defining and measuring 'inclusivity', Berlach and Chambers (2011) note several common philosophical underpinnings of theories of inclusivity to include; availability of opportunity, acceptance of disability and/or disadvantage, superior ability and diversity, and an absence of bias, prejudice and inequality. These framing characteristics of inclusivity can provide a theoretical framework of inclusive practice both in and outside of classroom settings for practitioners as acknowledged by Pantic and Florian (2015:334):

> ***'While 'pedagogy' is often understood as a practice related exclusively to classrooms, the present conceptualisation of teachers as agents of inclusion and social justice emphasises the need to develop teachers' capacity for working with other agents in order to remove the structural and cultural barriers for some students' learning and participation.'***

Florian (2011; 2015; 2018), a prominent scholar in the field of inclusive pedagogy, has significantly influenced the discourse of inclusion through demonstrating examples of effective collaborative practice. This work has been significant in shaping contemporary philosophical ideas of inclusivity; emphasising the need for collaboration among educators and educational practitioners, to include support staff, families, and communities to ensure that all young people, regardless of their abilities, have access to quality and non-discriminatory education and service provision:

> ***'Inclusive pedagogy is an approach that attends to individual differences between learners while actively avoiding the marginalisation of some learners and/or the continued exclusion of particular groups, for example, ethnic minority students, those from culturally diverse backgrounds, non-native language speakers, students with additional needs, and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds who may be disadvantaged by poverty.'***
> **(Florian and Pantic 2015: 334)**

This theory is substantiated by Slee (2010:13) who contends that 'one of the most relevant areas of competence for promoting inclusive practice to be developed is understanding of how broader social forces influence exclusion and disadvantage'. Therefore, through reflection and collaboration, educational and youth work practitioners can exercise inclusivity in their efforts to build professional relationships and networks with each other whilst also including parents (Flecha and Soler, 2013) in order to attend to the specific and diverse needs amongst young people. Developing inclusivity, as Florian (2014) articulates, involves the design and implementation of practices that are designed to challenge and move beyond traditional interventions and approaches in relation to additional needs which traditionally tend to exclude, stigmatize, remove and to marginalise.

This approach challenges the notion of 'normal' and advocates for a learning environment that supports the participation and achievement of every young person. Florian has emphasised that effective inclusive education provision relies on collaborative practices involving multiple stakeholders, including teachers, special educators, teaching assistants, families, and external professionals (Florian and Kershner, 2009). Collaboration is seen as essential for developing and implementing individualised support strategies that address the unique needs of each student and young person. In her research, Florian has explored various models of collaboration, such as co-teaching and multi-disciplinary teams, where professionals from different fields collaborate to provide comprehensive support (Florian, 2008).

Florian also notes the challenges and shortcomings of this theoretical approach when shifting from concept to praxis which involves a commitment towards continuous professional development and training for educators and practitioners to enable the implementation of effective collaboration practice (Florian and Rouse, 2009). Opportunities for collaboration and practitioner development support can at times come up against and be impeded by organisational barriers such as rigid school structures, restrictions from sharing sensitive data requiring permissions, lack of time for planning and restricted resources (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011).

For practitioners, Florian's research emphasises the importance of adopting a holistic approach to inclusion, where collaboration is embedded in the daily practices of educational provisions, such as the Sólás na nÓg programme which strives to seek out opportunities for holistic, social and well-being development for its young people. Inclusive practice seeks to create a culture of collaboration, where all components of collaborative networks see themselves as responsible for the success of every young person, and where young people with additional needs are fully enabled and supported to flourish and encouraged to achieve their full potential.

The theoretical concept of increasing inclusivity through the implementation of collaborative practice will be explored in the data collection portion of this study to examine how opportunities between all stakeholders of the Sólás na nÓg project, teachers, staff members and parents can be developed in order to further enhance the experiences of young people with additional needs in attendance at Irish-medium education and Irish-medium youth services.

Aims of Research

This research report serves as an ongoing evaluation tool for the Sólás na nÓg Youth Project at Glór na Móna. This project focuses on including and empowering young people with additional needs, providing them with access to informal Irish-medium education opportunities. The continuous research and evaluation will help develop, refine, and enhance the youth service program and its facilities over the four-year duration of the project. This report also aims to contribute valuable and unique research literature and data to the Irish-medium youth work sector, enhancing best practices within the Irish-medium informal education sector across Ireland and potentially influencing similar indigenous language reclamation efforts amongst minority language communities elsewhere. The research adopts a participatory methodology designed to engage key stakeholders in the project by facilitating critical thinking and active participation, striving for positive social change, particularly for marginalised and excluded groups.

The initial report, titled 'Identifying, Exploring and Evaluating Gaps in Current Provision for Irish-medium Youth Work in Belfast; by McGurk (2020), was a scoping paper aimed at evaluating and identifying gaps in the capacity of the first year of the Sólás na nÓg pilot scheme to meet the needs of young people with additional learning requirements. This research sought to provide a strong evidence base to support efforts to attract additional resources which were successful in supporting the project to access funding to expand the program from one to three nights per week and increasing staffing levels.

The first-year report completed in 2023 for Sólás na nÓg aimed to assess the impact and explore the collective learning of the increased service provision from one to three nights per week due to the success of the funding achieved to enhance the service. Below is an outline of the recommendations made for future practice from the 2023 research report:

- A need for appropriate and needs specific accommodation for the service to make use of
- Development of suitable resources for young people
- More opportunities for voluntary work for young people to be created
- Additional informal education services for school leavers
- Continued fostering of participatory practice with the involvement of young people on programme design
- Enhanced collaboration between stakeholders of Sólás na nÓg
- A needs specific counselling service developed for those young people with Autism.

Another key conclusion emanating from the 2023 report was the potential for exploring and developing structured collaborative practice between the Sólás na nÓg project and local Irish medium schools. It argued for the need ' skilfully utilise the unique relationship between those project staff members and the local Irish medium schools to develop a more comprehensive, evidenced based collaborative learning and development model between school and youth club' with a view to developing 'a collaborative learning model' which could be 'comprehensively monitored and researched with huge potential for shared cross-thematic learning opportunities.' In practice, staff at Sólás na nÓg have already been implementing opportunities for collaborative practice through developing strategic partnerships with three local Irish-medium schools whose students attend the youth services on a three night per week basis. Special educational needs co-ordinators, teachers and classroom assistants have met with the co-ordinator of Sólás na nÓg and have expressed interest in building partnerships between formal and informal educational provision and were keen to take part in the data collection of this research, as will be outlined in the following section. Staff members have also been working to develop an assessment and evaluation tool framework for the informal youth setting which corresponds withthe Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) which young people with additional needs would have in place to monitor and assess their individual needs on an academic basis in the formal education setting.. The framework which is being devised at Sólás seeks to adopt a more holistic overview of development of the young person, by tracking their social and emotional development through gauging their interpersonal social interaction with their peers at Sólás na nÓg. This evaluative framework will continue to be developed through gaining insight from the recommendations made from this research.

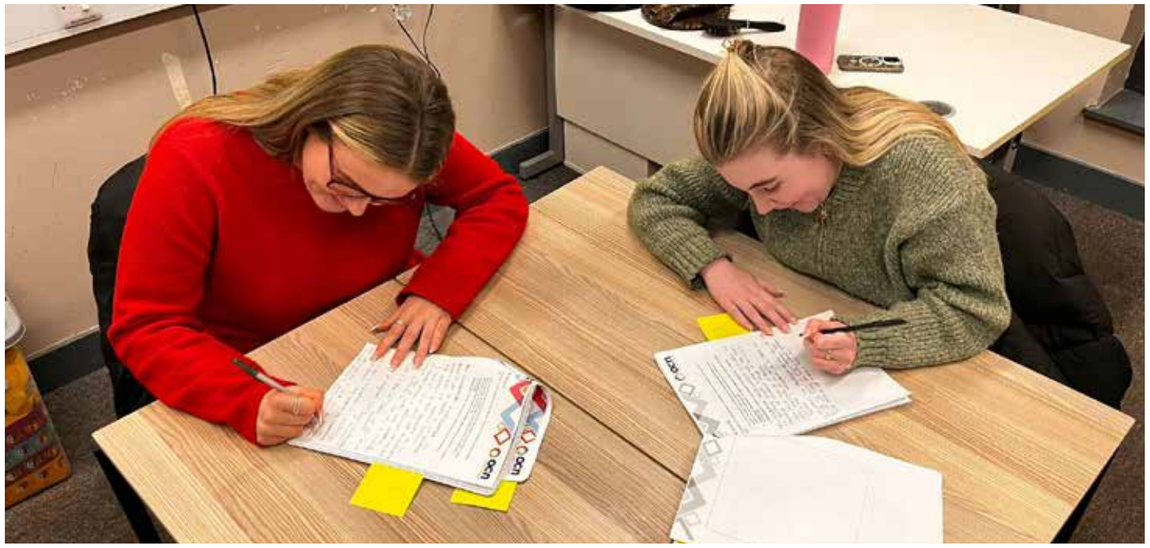
Methodology

The research questions presented in this study were formulated in line with the evaluative framework and continuous participatory research methodology developed as an ongoing part of the Sólás na nÓg project. These questions were designed in light of the recommendations made in relation to increasing opportunities for collaboration between formal and informal IM educational and youth services provision. The research questions guided the focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews.

This research adopts a participatory approach which actively involves the youth club staff, parents, and other relevant stakeholders who utilise and are associated with the community programme at Glór na Móna. Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a systematic, strategic, and collaborative research approach which involves the exploration of an issue by involving and including the individuals affected by it (Baum, MacDougal & Smith, 2006). As outlined in the previous section, Sólás na nÓg's youth provision focuses on social and emotional developmental goals aimed at the holistic development of the young people who attend its programme , as opposed to the formal academic goals which they are presented with in schools. This research seeks to develop strategies and opportunities for collaboration between both formal and informal educational providers in order to package a holistic methodology of strategic and cohesive development to benefit the young people of Sólás na nÓg.

The following questions formed the basis of guiding discussion with research participants:

- What impact, if any, does the attendance of young people at Sólás na nÓg have on their educational potential, development or outcomes at school?
- Are there any opportunities that could be created to develop effective and communicative strategies between stakeholders to enhance young people's development?
- Are young people developing interpersonal and social skills which are helping them make friends in school?



In contrast to the 2023 research, it was decided to focus on a smaller and more focussed research cohort in order to draw out more specific data. A total of 5 different data sets were collected during the data collection period of this research study involving semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with staff members of Sólás na nÓg, parents of both junior and teenage cohorts of and also with special education needs co-ordinators from two local Irish-medium primary schools. In order to assure ethical and confidential presentation of the data, all research participants have been anonymised and will be named in the data with the following labels:

Participant Reference	Tagairt an Rannpháirtithe	Participant Description
Parent 1	Tuismitheoir 1	Parent of junior Sólás na nÓg attendee
Parent 2	Tuismitheoir 2	Parent of Sólás na nÓg attendee and teacher at local Irish-medium school
Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator 1 (SENCO 1)	Comh-ordaitheoir Riachtanais Sain-Oideachas 1 (CORSO 1)	SENCO and key stage 1 teacher in a local Irish-medium primary school
Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator 2 (SENCO 2)	Comh-ordaitheoir Riachtanais Sain-Oideachas 2 (CORSO 2)	SENCO with over 30 years of experience in IME
Sólás na nÓg Team Members	Baill Foirne Sólás na nÓg	Focus group with Sólás na nÓg staff members

All data sets were translated as necessary and transcribed before undergoing thematic processing, from which 4 themes transpired; Space, Relationships, Assessment and Interventions and Sharing Practice.

Next, I will discuss the data presented by each participant group in the research before outlining the findings of the research and making recommendations for further development and enhancement of practice for the Sólás na nÓg youth programme at Glór na Móna.

Discussion of Findings

1. Space

Research participants spoke about the importance of the creation of and engaging and nurturing social space for young people where they are able to connect, play and explore with peers, with particular emphasis placed on the fact that their children have no other outlet in which they openly socialise with other young people. Participants shared that the social space at Sólás na nÓg enables the young people to let go of the need to conform or 'mask' their personalities and that it is a space where young people feel relaxed, feel seen and heard by the workers and their peers. SENCOs spoke of the social difficulties facing young people with additional needs and commended the services at Sólás na nÓg for providing a service which encourages young people to step out of their 'comfort zones':

> ***'It is difficult for these children to leave the sanctuary they have at home, but this is something else for them that is kind of outside their comfort zone. That in itself is a significant achievement—that these children want to go, not to mention their personal development. That is a huge thing, that they are willing to be there.'***

Parents referenced the particular activities which their children participate in at the youth club, stating that the club both attends to their interests but also has been a space where their children have been given the opportunity and encouragement by workers and other young people to develop their interests, which they otherwise would not have explored:

> ***'He needs that structure to play... especially the art. I mean, the art is a big thing for him. He would sit in the house at night and he would sit and draw. He has a wee pad and he's forever doing his own sketches...I mean, he loves the art stuff, but he came straight here and he is out playing with the ball, he loves to go out and play with the other kids there, But when it's at home, he finds it harder. You know, if I ever look out in the street, if he is out, he just stands there and the kids are playing in front of you.'*** **Parent 1**

> ***'You know, he talks about the things that are going on here in the club. He would say, 'I did art, we played a game...' He talks about his worker and the other young people. It's clear that he is sharing information about himself... and that is kind of a special thing for him. This is the only place he has to mix with other people.'*** **Parent 2**

Parents also spoke about the various interventions which the youth workers have developed and put in place in order to make their children feel welcomed into and supported in a safe space where they are accepted and able to express their interests and personalities.

> ***'There are specific things in place to support him, so usually, a worker would come out to the car to take him across and bring him inside. That transition is difficult for him, so at the beginning, he would kind of sit and cry, hide under the chair, and everything. But now, he just waits for whoever comes out, and he goes inside—he's just happy and content'*** **Parent 2**

A parent who also works with children who attend the Sólás na nÓg services provided insight into the impact the service has on their students and how it provides a social outlet for young people whose friendships, social skills and connections made at the club are seen to be transferring to their ability to connect and communicate in school. This was also substantiated by Sólás na nÓg staff.

> ***'The pupils that I work with at school, most of them come here at night, and if they didn't have this, they wouldn't be doing anything social. They wouldn't be leaving the house, and I know that they are developing specific skills - communication skills, social skills, and those kinds of things. The children would be talking about them at school'*** **Parent 2**

> ***'Just thinking about the children's relationships as well, taking the relationships they built here to school. We had plenty of young people who weren't friendly at school, and now you see them connecting with each other and sitting together at lunchtime and break time'*** **Staff**

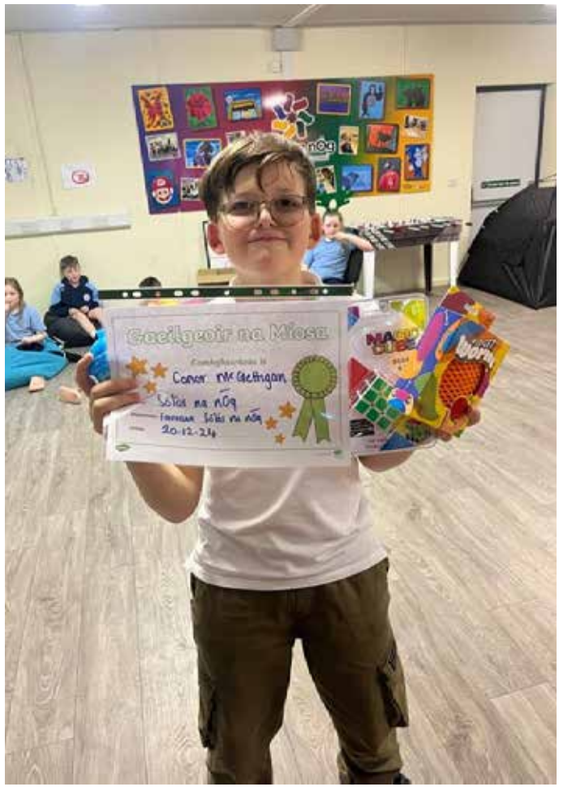
The staff team at Sólás na nÓg also discussed the kind of nurturing and welcoming setting which they feel is created for the young people at the youth club. Many of the staff team also work in the schools where the young people attend where they are employed as classroom assistants or teachers thus enabling them to compare the two settings and how each has different impacts on the young people both emotionally and socially. The staff spoke of how the youth club provides a space that is safe, comfortable with a relaxing environment for young people in comparison to that of school, which has additional expectations and pressures attached to it which are often overwhelming for children with additional learning needs.

'They are at ease here, and they can relax. There is no pressure on them to achieve anything, and I think because of that, they feel more comfortable.' **Staff**

'The school environment is too formal for some of our students. They get lost among the thousand students, and the teachers deal with hundreds of students daily—they don't have the time to engage with individuals. And for those students, that is not the right place for them. Many of our students get much more from their OCNs here than they do from school.' **Staff**

One of the parents, who also works with young people in a local Irish medium school, made comparisons to the kinds of pressure and expectations which are placed on the young people at school which can prove stressful and overwhelming for them. They also spoke of the addedl pressures associated with different additional needs; how a single diagnosis of autism may present additional physical and cognitive challenges for young people and that they are having to deal with this alongside the challenging additional academic expectations which are placed on them in school.

'The formal setting expects a lot from them—they have to sit and listen. Most of the students also have physical difficulties, and I think that's something not often recognized in students with autism. For example, my son has dyspraxia. Every student I have worked with has had difficulties with writing—their motor skills in their hands are very weak... They can't hold a pencil properly. There are many co-morbidities... It's not just autism alone.' **Parent 2**



2. Relationships

Participants provided significant insight into the impact that attendance at Sólás na nÓg on the young people's ability to engage and form connections with their peers and how they work collaboratively with the youth workers to develop their social skills. Parents gave high praise to the youth service and commented on how the impact of the youth service and their child's willingness to attend the youth club has been transformational for their family life:

'We would be lost without Sólás, Its his wee social life and it's definitely helped him like mature. He's still not there, but he is definitely developing. He's getting better and his friendships are definitely getting better. He loves coming here. And just how much it has changed our lives? It gives us a little bit of respite and knowing he's going and he's enjoying it. And that's sent him off somewhere. And he's coming back happy.' **Parent 1**

Parents also commented on how the youth club seems to raise their child's spirits and offers a topic of conversation with which they keenly engage and has helped to strengthen the bond between parent and child:

'Personality wise, from coming to Sólás he definitely talks to me more. Like before we came here tonight he was chatting away like mad, asking different questions and stuff. It's definitely brought him out of himself.' **Parent 1**

Teaching staff also acknowledged how parents have reported developments in their children's personalities and ability to communicate with their parents and families at home and have attributed this progress to their attendance at Sólás na nÓg.

What the mother is telling me herself about children attending Sólás na nÓg more regularly is that she sees more progress in him at home. Now, even though he still has difficulties at school in terms of work, she feels that it is helping him and her in a way—helping him just to socialize with other children, children who are at the same level or maybe have the same interests. And that's what I see myself, that progress. **SENCO 1**

Parents also spoke of the profound impact that the youth workers and staff team at Sólás na nÓg have had on their children in enabling them to develop their personalities and to gain confidence. Parents spoke of how the youth workers encourage and strive to understand each young person individually and their own personal interests:

'He seems to thrive better when there's an older person around to give him guidance to what to do. And he gets along so well with the leaders here...'

My son told me, 'The staff understand me.' He said, 'You know, they just get me, Mummy.' So that was incredibly, incredibly important to me because he doesn't have that with everyone... they just don't understand.

The staff of Sólás na nÓg also spoke of the growing confidence and ability to make friends and forge relationships the youth services of the club have provided for the young people; they have noticed the development of these schools transition to their ability to forge friendships in school:

The two things go hand in hand. We had one girl who was so anxious at school, crying at the school doors every day. But here, we focused on the social side, we gave her space, and she made friends. So she had a group of friends, and after a few months, she was much happier going into school—to the point now where she is excited about school. And because of that, learning follows. She made friends here, she built confidence here, and now she is happy at school' **Staff**

Even their personality—when I talk to students at school, other teachers often say, 'I didn't know he was so funny,' or 'I didn't know she was good at drawing or art.' You see those things, the people they really are. We get the chance to meet them as individuals. They are not just students—there is a person behind that' **Staff**

The Sólás na nÓg team also gave examples of how building a rapport with the young people outside of school has helped them with transitioning and coping with overwhelm and anxiety in school. They provide a familiar face for a lot of the young people and are able to trust the youth workers, who also implement interventions in order to make their time at school more positive and manageable:

The young people we have here—we've built relationships with them. Many of us also work in the school, so in mid-September, the young people here are saying, 'Hey, can you meet me at the door?' There was one student who broke down, and we were able to be there for them during the first few weeks as a safe presence to help them settle in. **Staff**

The staff team and parents also spoke of the close contact that they would have with each other and the rapport they have built in relation to continual communication in relation to the young people's development. Parents spoke of how they feel at ease knowing that they can contact staff members in relation to any challenges or difficulties their child may be experiencing which also helps to prepare staff members in order to implement appropriate interventions to help the young person cope. That said, youth workers also spoke of the importance of establishing boundaries in relation to the informal service output at Sólás na nÓg and the importance that the space remains an informal, youth work space:

'Even last week, I was on the phone with a parent who was saying that their child was going through a really tough time at school, and they were asking if we would be able to provide the teaching. I had to explain that we would love to do that - we have plenty of teachers - but it is an informal service' **Staff**

Despite this, the staff team affirmed that building collaborative relationships with schools and teachers would allow for opportunities to interlink both provisions and aid school year or setting transitions, for example children leaving primary school level and attending secondary school which tends to be daunting and overwhelming for young people, especially those who struggle socially or who have additional needs. The co-ordinator of the Sólás na nÓg team gave significant insight into how building rapport through an example of collaborative practice has helped a young person prepare for their transition to secondary level education.

'I am currently doing one-to-one work with a student in a local primary school, but I am a youth worker, so I am going in with that approach. There's fun in it, of course, but there's also learning. There are still some limitations, especially when I go into the school—we weren't allowed to leave the site, so that affects the relationship a bit. But now that school is finished for the summer, we're going to a local café tomorrow, so that will help build the relationship. The first goal I have with the student is relationship-building. For example, in the first session, we did a bit of art. It all depends on the needs of the student, but now that the parent is in contact with me personally, we can continue this practice over the summer because the young person is preparing to move on to secondary school. So, it bridges that gap, showing that you don't have to be here three nights a week to receive support' **Staff**

Although proving an extremely effective method of positive intervention for a young person through rapport and relationship building, the staff also acknowledged the shortcomings in resources to be able to provide this service on a wider basis with more schools as many of the youth workers of the service work on a full time basis throughout the day.

3. Assessment and Interventions

Participants gave insight in relation to the various methods of assessments and testing used to gain additional needs statements for young people with additional needs. A parent described the various plans and intervention strategies that have been implemented for their child which includes both academic and emotional goals for them to work towards. The parent praised the school for including interventions to assist the child in regulating and managing emotions as they explained when their child is feeling overwhelmed or anxious, this in turn has a deep impact on their child's ability to achieve academically.

> ***'My son is in primary 6, and he has three diagnoses along with many assessments and reports done on him. He has had an IEP (Individualized Education Plan) since primary 1. Those are his personal goals in relation to school. Usually, there would be an emotional aspect, like using strategies to manage emotions and things like that, and there would also be an academic aspect. He has made incredible progress at school'*** **Parent 2**

The parent also spoke of how the school will check in and prioritise the child's emotional wellbeing and state over implementing academic expectations in order to allow them to be in an optimal position to achieve their full potential.

> ***'It depends. At a time when my son is very unsettled, the main goal would be his emotions and social development, to the point where he is safe. But now that he is settled, the teachers are able to push him a little bit, and I'm happy about that because I understand that needs to happen for him to reach his potential'*** **Parent 2**

Participants also gave insight to the contents of the assessments carried out in school, with teaching staff in agreement that the formal assessment heavily consists of implementing interventions and strategies to attend to the academic development of students:

> ***Talking about assessment, the one at school wouldn't be about their social progress, of course, we would be measuring scores and so on, so it would be focused on academic progress... Do I feel that too much school assessment is focused on academic progress? Yeah, I do, and it would be a huge win for this child to come into school for a week without worrying about anything. But how could we measure that? Whereas at the start of the year, he could spell 70 words, now it's 122 - you can see the progress that way'*** **SENCO 1**

A common discussion point in relation to the assessment of young people's social development was in relation to how this progress would be measured. Research participants spoke of the challenges in relation to how to quantify social and emotional development, and that metrics used to measure academic success or development would not suffice in this instance, as demonstrated in the above quotation. A parental participant gave insight into the kinds of evaluative strategies implemented for their child who attends nursery school and how visual and graphic evidence is collected in order to track progress and development; perhaps a strategy which could be implemented in the Sólás na nÓg service.

> ***'In nursery schools, the workers have to take videos and pictures and use them as evidence that the child has achieved that goal'*** **Parent 2**

> ***'I think we will be able to find an approach where both types of assessment are intertwined. Parents are very willing to accept any help available and are open to any support they can get. But of course, permission will be needed—there is definitely a gap'*** **Staff**

Participants also gave insight to the less formal approach of development evaluation taken by the youth club and how parents are involved in the planning of effective interventions in relation to their own child's social and emotional development.

> ***'We had a form recently, you know, about the points we would like them to work on, what difficulties they have, and all that stuff. So, I know that they are gathering all that information and that they use it to develop their plans'*** **Parent 2**

> ***There are three parts to it: the plan is sent to parents to get their input, the plan is discussed with the young people to get their opinion, and as a team, that is the only part that hasn't been done yet. They feel that they are involved in it'*** **Staff**

In relation to interventions which have been adopted by the youth service to attend to the needs of young people, parents spoke of the open lines of communication which have been developed with the staff members and spoke of the less formal approach to sharing information about their children in order for staff to implement necessary and offer support for youth club attendees when required.

> ***With the review of the IEP at school, that would happen every term, and we would go in for feedback. But it's not as formal here, like there wouldn't be a parent meeting involved—maybe just that the youth staff would send us a text... When my son was really struggling with school, I was able to say that he was struggling at that moment. 'Can you let us know if he's settled or whatever?' So, I suppose there would just be informal contact'*** **Parent 2**

Sólás na nÓg staff members also spoke of the kinds of interventions they have developed in order to make the experiences of young people who attend the youth service both in and outside of school more comfortable and to make transitioning from schools for example, less daunting. The staff spoke of how they have made adaptations to the times of which the junior cohort of Sólás na nÓg are able to stay at the youth club for those who are transitioning to the senior sessions. They mentioned how this can be an uncertain and unnerving experience for young people who are used to attending the youth service from 6-8pm and are now transitioning to the later sessions.

'We made the decision as a team last year. In the usual youth services, when you're in first year, you move on to the later sessions for older people. But we decided not to do that with our young people because they weren't ready. The change in school was hard enough for them without that happening in the youth club as well. So, they stayed with us for another year, and now that they've made that transition, we use the summer scheme to do that—just to slowly integrate them with the teenagers' **Staff**

4. Sharing Practice

Following on from discussions on interventions and assessment methodologies, research participants also made recommendations towards developing opportunities for collaborative practice and strategies which could link both formal and informal education settings and could create interdisciplinary communicative networks not only to enhance practice but also to improve the experiences of young people with additional needs attending Irish-medium schools and youth services. Parents recommended enhanced lines of communication between school and youth club in order to share key information about young people which may influence their experiences both in and outside of school:

'The thing that I sort of feel though with the school which would be good, would be if in the school that they haven't had a great day for, then for that night, if he's going to SOLAS for there to be like, you know, he wasn't good today with X, Y and Z and he's coming in the night for sometimes he will clash with other kids that come here. So if this works, if that line of communication works, then you know they aren't telling tales, He's just and he's had a maybe a bad day and whatever else. And could you know, maybe give him time to come round himself before he's maybe playing with everybody?' **Parent 1**

'I am working and dealing with the same pupils who are coming here, and it would be really useful for us to have the full picture. I suppose that would have to go through parents as well, to share the information. But I know that most of the time, when they are struggling in school, they are struggling overall at home too. So, it would be useful if we were all in more regular contact'. **Parent 2**

Participants spoke of the possibilities which may arise through creating opportunities for sharing practice and strategies in relation to interventions; that teachers and youth work practitioners alike could be working towards the same goal with a child and could share strategies and methods which are supportive of the young person's needs:

'We could be working towards the same goal but in different settings, implementing different strategies, and even just learning from each other as well. It would be better to have a strategy in place to share that practice.' **SENCO 2**

Participants spoke of the kinds of methods which could be implemented in order to create collaborative and participatory networks for sharing practice and information with all stakeholders of Sólás na nÓg. There was an emphasis on keeping the strategy informal, in order to encourage participation in particular from parents, but one which allows effective communicative input. The idea of a communication forum was proposed alongside a quarterly MS Teams or Zoom meeting between teachers and youth workers at different periods throughout the school term in order to discuss progress and potential opportunities for development.

'I think it would be great to have more communication for sure. I don't know if a small app would work, like a kind of communication forum, where you could log in and see them engaging in all the activities - something like an app' **Staff**

I would suggest, with parental permission of course, that maybe we share the IEPs with each other and meet to discuss them. You know, these are things we are dealing with. Maybe I could take certain aspects and incorporate them into my PLP—not the learning-related ones, but perhaps those related to social goals.' **Staff**

'A Teams meeting to explore: what strategies did you implement? Did it work? What worked and what didn't? Design the plan in mid-September—that's when we create our PLPs—then review it at the end of January when parent meetings take place, and then a final review at the end of the year to set out a plan for moving forward.' **Staff**

In addition to these recommendations, the staff of Sólás na nÓg also proposed that teachers and SENCOs of local schools should visit the youth club to meet with the staff and experience the kind of work that goes on with the young people outside of school which could also operate as an opportunity for sharing best practice.

'The SENCOs in all schools should have the opportunity to come and see the facility and the project. Our children attend different schools; they are not all in the same one. We could bring them together here and give them a presentation to show them the feedback from parents and young people. It would also be a chance to share interventions.' **Staff**

Summing Up

The data collected as part of this evaluative research paper unearthed rich, diverse and insightful accounts from various stakeholders of the Sólás na nÓg's project's second year of service provision under a new funding specification and strategic direction. The following themes were noted as common points of discussion amongst parents, staff team members and teaching staff from local Irish-medium schools;

- **Space**
- **Relationships**
- **Assessment and Interventions**
- **Sharing Practice**

The overall findings of this research report offers resounding support and recognition for the youth services at Sólás na nÓg as a bespoke, unique and vital resource which supports young people with additional needs and their families by fostering their social, emotional and personal development during the formative years of their educational journey. The research data has emphasised the crucial role of the creation and facilitation of social spaces like Sólás na nÓg in the development of young people, particularly those vulnerable young people with additional learning needs. The creation of such spaces offers a rare and invaluable opportunity for these individuals to socialise, express their personalities and individuality freely, and develop their interests and commonalities in a supportive, nurturing, accepting and non-judgemental environment. The data has also highlighted the importance of creating safe and accepting spaces where the individual needs of young people are central to service provision and are dealt with on an individualised basis which would undoubtedly prove challenging in formal educational spaces with additional pressures such as student to teacher ratio, restricted resources and expected academic outcomes. Parents and educators alike praised the positive impact these spaces have on the children's social skills, confidence, and overall well-being, with notable improvements observed in their school behaviour and ability to form friendships with peers, most of which were formed through the services and engagement with other young people at Sólás na nÓg.

Feedback through the data collected from participants also highlights the differences between formal educational settings and the informal, supportive atmosphere of youth clubs. Formal educational provision through schools often come with high expectations and pressures that can prove overwhelming and over stimulating, particularly for children with additional needs. Participants provided insight into the relaxed and nurturing environment of the youth services where young people feel seen, heard, and supported.

The research also gives prominence and highlights the importance of building and forging relationships in the success of social and emotional development of young people with additional needs, and even more significant that young people from the Sólás na nÓg project are

able to do so through the medium of Irish with their peers and youth workers in an extension of their Irish medium schooling experience. Participants provided significant insight into how the familiarity of youth work staff, in either helping them to transition to secondary school or through offering individualised support for them, makes the experience of being at school more manageable for young people. Parents also commended the staff in how they have offered ongoing support to them and how the youth service has provided a lifeline of respite for families, through creating a space where their children are happy and feel like they belong. The rapport and core relationships between youth workers, parents and teachers is pivotal as is highlighted in the aforementioned theoretical conceptualisation of collaborative practice, with ongoing communication and tailored interventions playing key roles in the progress of young people. The close contact between staff and families allows for a nuanced yet informed understanding of each child's needs, leading to more effective support both in informal and formal educational settings.

In light of the suggestions and examples of collaborative practice and developing networks between all stakeholders which were outlined in the data, further opportunities and methodologies were recommended for exploration and future implementation in order to further enhance the youth service and the experiences of young people and their families. Below, the recommendations arising from the research and suggested interventions will be outlined for consideration and implementation.

Recommendations

- Establish and develop more effective channels of communication between schools and youth services, such as an distinctive app, to share important information about young people's day to day experiences allowing for the implementation of tailored support strategies and provide consistent effective care and support strategies in different educational environments.

- Develop an information system or database, potentially through a digital platform or through scheduling of quarterly meetings, through which regular updates between teachers and youth workers can allow for sharing of practice and support in relation to planning interventions and aligning goals for young people. This interface could also be shared with parents in order to allow for progress updates and could act as an additional line of communication.

- Expand the capacity for implementing collaborative practice through developing interdisciplinary networks that allow for the sharing of best practices between educators and youth workers. This could include joint training sessions, observation opportunities, and collaborative planning for students with additional needs.

- Encourage practice and observation visits from school teachers and SENCOs to the youth clubs to gain insight into the informal support methods that are effective in these settings.

- Development of holistic assessment tools and strategies which integrate more qualitative assessment methods to provide visual and graphic evidence in order to track social and emotional development of young people. Efforts should be made to include young people in their own assessment of their progress.

- Continue to extend and provide support during critical transition periods for young people, such as moving from primary to secondary education, transitioning within youth service levels, or planning for the post-school environment for those young adults who may not be ready for university or employment. This could also include the development of joint strategies between youth workers and SENCOs to help prepare anxious students for periods of transition.

- Development of collective and collaborative advocacy strategies, in conjuction with parents, for additional resources to enable youth workers to provide more personalised support on a wider scale and increase opportunities for one to one interventions.

Along with the recommendations arising from this research, opportunities for further research output could comprise of the conduction of a longitudinal study which tracks the long-term social emotional and academic impacts and development on young people with additional needs who attend programmes like Sólás na nÓg. This research has highlighted also the importance of parental involvement in their children's participation and progress which could also be explored further with the development of collaborative rights-based advocacy strategies where Sólás na nÓg could support and advise parents in this regard. These findings and recommendations provide a solid foundation for enhancing the support provided to the young people of Sólás na nÓg, ensuring that their educational and social development are addressed using a cohesive and comprehensive approach which looks to create a more holistic and compassionate view of overall development of young people with additional needs.

Conclusion

This research report has acted as a follow on piece from the initial scoping paper and evaluation of youth services completed in the first year of the newly funded Sólás na nÓg informal youth education programme. This report specifically examined the potential for the development and implementation of collaborative practice and the creation of interdisciplinary networks involving youth work staff, Irish-medium teaching staff, special educational needs co-ordinators and parents in order to better inform each other, communicate, share strategies and interventions to help improve the educational, both informal and formal, experiences of young people whose needs shape the Sólás na nÓg project.

This commitment to continuous research, learning and improvement, which has been the hallmark of the Sólás na nÓg project from its inception, was again highlighted during the writing up period of this research report. Having developed and launched a new community café in June of 2024, Glór na Móna, endeavoured to use Anam- Caifé na Carraige[6] as a youth-led social enterprise that could enhance training and employment opportunities for young people. The teenage cohort from Sólás na nÓg were central to these efforts and one of the young people, Una Nic Gabhann, excelled in the café and was subsequently awarded the Young Entrepreneur award at Glór na nGael's national business awards in Croke Park in November 2024[7].

Similarly, this willingness to break new ground in furthering the therapeutic development of Sólás na nÓg's young people was highlighted in recent months when Sólás na nÓg collaborated with prominent disability charity, Kids Together in training its youth staff to deliver Lego Based Therapy, which had never been delivered in Irish before, to Sólás's na nÓg's young people for the first time[8]. This therapeutic play-based intervention, which aims to support young people develop communication, problem-solving, listening and team-work skills, has already been reported to have had positive impact with both youth work staff and Irish medium school teachers attesting to the marked influence on the young people. The fact that Glór na Móna and the Sólás na nÓg youth team intend to fluidly develop new interventions and continue using their participatory action research model to gather evidence and data throughout the duration of the project is a wholly positive development in terms of fostering shared learning and potentially ground-breaking policy interventions. This research report underscores the huge advantages and benefits of tailored informal youth programmes for those young people who struggle to access mainstream youth provision because of additional learning needs. Therefore, there is undoubtedly a need for continuous research on the unique and positive socio-psychological and socio-cultural benefits of immersive, indigenous youth programmes for young neurodiverse Irish speakers.Thus, in following recommendations for future practice and implications for future research within the project, the youth service at Sólás na nÓg will undoubtedly continue to flourish and provide a bespoke and essential service for young people, who without this space and service, would be indisputably hindered in their capacity to develop socially and holistically in the journey to achieve their full potential.

[6] See Belfast live piece on the Caifé: https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/news/belfast-news/west-belfast-cafe-vision-community-29629605
[7] https://belfastmedia.com/recognition-for-glor-na-mona-youngster-una
[8] See video coverage from Meon Eile on the programme: https://meoneile.ie/oideachas/teiripe-legobhunaithe-le-solas-na-og

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