

The Provision for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities in Irish-medium Education

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The Provision for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities in Irish-medium Education

Considering the ongoing initiatives by the Department of Education¹ and the Education Authority² to improve overarching SEND provision in Northern Ireland, this paper has been compiled to highlight the key issues in relation to SEND provision in Irish-medium Education (IME), along with proposed solutions to improve provision for pupils attending IM settings.

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) has participated in the EA SEND Transformation Programme since its inception in 2021. It is a matter of great concern that, to date, representations made on behalf of the IM sector in this forum have been ignored and initiatives for transformation commenced without any specific provision for IM pupils.

The current challenges identified in SEND provision across the wider education sector apply equally to IM pupils. These challenges, however, are heightened in the IM context as schools and pupils cannot always access support and intervention that is appropriate for pupils learning in an IM setting, namely, supports and interventions through the language of instruction of the school: Irish.

This paper aims to identify the areas, specific to IME, that require distinct consideration and planning to begin to ensure appropriate provision and equity for IM pupils. Currently, these areas have been

identified as overarching areas of need i.e. assessment, workforce, teacher professional learning etc... .

There is, however, a need to identify areas for development within the individual SEND categories themselves as those needs will vary in each category. To that end, a high-level overview has been presented in the appendices, however, this will require a more in-depth analysis in line with available research.

Whilst a dearth of research exists generally, both internationally in relation to SEND in bilingual/immersion contexts, and nationally in relation to the same in the IM setting, this paper draws upon all available research to corroborate the views posed.

The terminology used in the paper refers to **bilingual** pupils and **bilingualism** due to the linguistic profile of IM pupils as both Irish and English speakers, however it is recognised that pupils within the sector may speak additional languages and the same concepts apply to those multi-lingual pupils and multilingualism.

¹ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/end-end-review-special-educational-needs-sen>

² <https://www.eani.org.uk/parents/special-educational-needs-sen/special-educational-needs-and-disabilities-sen>

The Legislative Context

The legislative context in relation to overarching special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) provision is complex in Northern Ireland at present as the most recent update to SEND legislation³ has only been partially implemented. The new SEN Regulations and SEN Code of Practice remain in draft form and await ratification from the newly-formed Assembly. Therefore, education providers currently implement the regulations and practice as laid out in the previous pieces of legislation from 1998 and 2005.⁴

Internationally, inclusive education is underpinned by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights⁵. The worldwide belief in relation to inclusion is that all pupils have the right to access a standard of education equal to their peers.

Current legislation⁶ in Northern Ireland has emphasised the rights of students with special educational needs to be educated in a mainstream school environment with equal opportunities to their peers⁷. Additionally, the Disability Discrimination Code of Practice for Schools⁸, issued by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI), states that “...all pupils have a right to the same opportunities in the whole of their educational life.”

³ Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 (the 2016 Act)

⁴ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/special-educational-needs-legislation>

⁵ <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

⁶ The Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986, the Education (NI) Order 1996 and 2003

⁷ <https://advance.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.31124/advance.7610927.v1>

⁸

<https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Employers%20and%20Service%20Providers/SENDCoPforSchools2006.pdf>

Whilst current and draft legislation provides rights for all parents and children in Northern Ireland, including those attending Irish-medium (IM) settings, there are significant shortcomings in the legislation regarding the specific needs of IM pupils. This has led to inadequate and inappropriate provision for IM pupils.

At present, there is only one reference to Irish/Irish-medium in current legislation, contained within paragraph 3.35 of the 1998 Code of Practice⁹:

3.35 In cases of children whose first language is not English (for example, newcomer children), and/or Irish in the case of Irish-medium schools, a lack of competence in the language used in school must not be equated with, or allowed to mask, learning difficulties. The child's needs should be considered in the context of his or her home, language, culture and community ensuring that any use of interpreters and translators and assessment tools should, as far as possible, be culturally neutral and applicable to children from a range of home backgrounds. Schools may find it useful to seek guidance from the EA, see <https://www.eani.org.uk/> for inclusion of pupils and schools for children in specific circumstances.

Whilst the content of this paragraph is positive in relation to language provision, this provision evidently does not extend to pupils attending IM settings meaning that currently assessment, intervention and support is not available through the medium of Irish. Further protections for language support is also proposed in the new draft

⁹ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/special-educational-needs-code-practice>

Code of Practice¹⁰ but this is again limited to newcomer pupils. Despite the statutory duty on the Department of Education to “encourage and facilitate the development of IM Education,”¹¹ there is no planned provision for IM support in any of the pieces of draft SEND legislation.

Four IM schools, along with Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta¹², submitted responses to the proposed SEN Regulations and Code of Practice during the consultation period in late 2020/early 2021. It was a matter of great frustration that updates to the current draft documents did not reflect any of the feedback shared by the voices of the IM sector at that time and still fail to include any provision for appropriate support in the medium of instruction in IM schools.

Though not ideal in their iterations, references to language provision for pupils with SEND can be found in equivalent legislation in Scotland and Wales. Whilst both jurisdictions still have a long way to go in terms of adequate provision for SEND pupils learning through the medium of Scots Gaelic and Welsh, references in legislation have at least begun to translate into support and resources on the ground.

¹⁰ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/review-special-educational-needs-and-inclusion>

¹¹ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1998/1759/article/89?view=plain>

¹² <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/summary-report-consultation-responses-new-draft-sen-regulations-june-2021>

Bilingualism and Special Educational Needs

For many children and families worldwide, including those families who have children with special educational needs, bilingualism and plurilingualism is the norm. For many, bilingualism is simply a way of life¹³.

Whilst the area of SEND and bilingualism continues to be under-researched, more research is now forthcoming to inform approaches and provision in this area internationally.

The previously-held belief that pupils with special educational needs should be discouraged from language learning¹⁴ has now been refuted in numerous bodies of research and evidence to the contrary is now available to show how pupils with SEND can actually benefit from the advantages that being bilingual brings.

Research has found that bilingualism poses no risk for first language development. It does not slow down a child's development or confuse them as often thought. International studies on a range of additional educational needs have shown that students with a diagnosis of autism, specific language impairment, dyslexia, and Down Syndrome,

to name but a few, can attain a second language/bilingualism at varying levels¹⁵.

Unfortunately, generations of pupils have been denied the opportunity to become bilingual and avail of the benefits that bilingualism brings through IME.

Misinformation pertaining to the unsuitability of IME for pupils with SEND has manifested in many pupils being removed from those settings over the years as the language was deemed to be exacerbating the need¹⁶. Much anecdotal evidence is available relating to this discriminatory practice including;

- pupils being separated from other family members and recommended to attend a different setting as the IM setting was wrongly deemed inappropriate¹⁷;
- pupils denied access to assessment until they begin learning formal English, impeding access to early intervention;
- assessment, when completed, carried out in most instances through English, which does not accurately reflect/ determine the needs of the child who has carried out the majority of their learning up until that stage through Irish;

¹³

https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0021992416300661?casa_token=7KxgVIZSrykAAAAA:Q_uw5KoQQolakloC8wIjVLnkeukMbteL6DnKOHPZ1toie2ViqeWJpX2vvRGvi8n7Wwsh-NaN6g

¹⁴https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09500782.2021.1918707?casa_token=6mwzF_BLoEAAAAA:lf1BibMs7RnOnxe4wpAXv7ukFajbcG1LC332uMEp-6W1S_SfNtiOZlqV2tZMxgyHfuL5wTPQpRvRRQ9ZNg

¹⁵

https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0021992416300661?casa_token=8Jh2ngrqd-UAAAAA:05OBetzsgybOUAqzbBMBA29uHCp4u-US_LM1deMealOSwiEasLNePtZbAE8oKUoMzegGU4OFNw

¹⁶ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09297049.2023.2275331>

¹⁷

https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09500782.2021.1918707?casa_token=Am t-a_te5clAAAAA:UMCjxAHKc8XfB1aaW-A7YKLSHUTaldMpsp5AL2ewVRSW5SU13EsQa6xoh4H8cUOG4oCzczuEixRDSperlw

- in the most troubling examples, pupils denied access to intervention by medical professionals until removed from the IM setting as it was deemed to be exacerbating the need.

The practice of discouraging families from bilingualism, which happens worldwide, is one which may be viewed as negative due to the ethical and moral implications of withholding the benefits of second language learning/bilingualism from some students due to their learning differences. This also creates a narrative that languages are only for a certain group of people in society¹⁸.

Prevailing research highlights the advantages of bilingualism that can be particularly beneficial to pupils with SEND¹⁹:

- the development of linguistic awareness and knowledge of grammar, including the understanding of sentence structure and vocabulary building
- the development of speech skills such as stress, volume, pace and intonation
- enhanced executive control such as working memory, inhibition, switching and monitoring
- increased intercultural awareness
- the development of social skills and opportunities to interact with peers (particularly for those pupils on the autism spectrum)
- increased confidence and motivation to communicate with other people
- increased employment opportunities.

¹⁸ <https://nasenjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-9604.12325>

¹⁹ <https://nasenjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-9604.12449>

Interestingly, in the case of Irish, the Irish language has a shallow orthography, which means that it should be easier for pupils to learn when compared to English which has a deep orthography²⁰.

The research based on the suitability of IME for students with additional educational needs is growing, and the findings suggest that students with SEND can learn Irish when inclusive practices are in place in schools and via external support²¹.

Challenges in supporting pupils with SEND who are attending immersion settings do exist, however, and current provision is not meeting the needs of those pupils nor ensuring inclusion²². The current failings can be addressed by enhancing support and provision at a system-level which is localised appropriately to ensure support services and schools are enabled to meet the needs of these pupils and ensure they can avail of both IME and adequate SEND support going forward.

²⁰ <https://researchrepository.ucd.ie/server/api/core/bitstreams/a4fd0d57-289f-4091-9b65-7c0bd8d6fbd6/content>

²¹

https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13670050.2024.2320306?casa_token=LnPD_K18HwUAAAAA:XQaW_GqOqH7DD3DP--GnBTg_oYllrkmsWGbwIh7qPTSBCs6dl8QG4EWGTXWlp_4OQKVztoKRbhQh3AaJQ

²² <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/13/7/671>

IM Education

In the last 10 years, the IM primary sector (between both free-standing schools and units) has grown by 43.22%, from 3,594 pupils in 2013/14 to 5,147 pupils today (this includes some nursery pupils in those schools which have a statutory nursery school).

The post-primary sector has also grown by 123.35% in that period (831 to 1,856 pupils). Overall, the primary and post-primary IM sector has grown by 58.28% since 2013/14.

To appreciate the specific needs of IM pupils, the learning journey of those pupils through IME must be understood.

In NI, the majority of pupils start out on this pathway at pre-school stage, attending both IM statutory and voluntary pre-school settings. It is not unheard of, however, for a pupil to attend English-medium (EM) pre-school provision and then transfer to IM for primary schooling.

Upon entering primary level education, pupils enter into a period of total immersion in the Irish language from Primary 1 to Primary 3. This means that all curricular areas are taught through the medium of Irish. English is not introduced as a curricular subject at this stage. Immersion pedagogies are employed to enable pupils to develop subject knowledge, skills and language competence concurrently²³.

This period of total immersion is undertaken in immersion education schools internationally and is recognised as best practice. In this way, all aspects of the language surround the pupil, helping them to quickly

²³ <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780429459443-3/multilingualism-diversity-northern-ireland-schools-teacher-education-eugene-mckendry-mair%C3%A9ad-mckendry>

understand and acquire the language²⁴. Immersion schools offer additive bilingualism for students meaning they learn an additional language in school without any negative impacts on their first language abilities.

At the end of Primary 3/beginning of Primary 4, English is introduced for the first time as a timetabled curricular area. Whilst pupils are already fluent English speakers through exposure to the language outside school i.e. conversations with family, television/ media etc, this initiates the formal learning of English via lessons on typical areas of the curriculum i.e. reading in English, spelling, and grammar etc.

Although assessment data has not been gathered and compared formally for a number of years in Northern Ireland, the general trajectory of IM pupils indicates that their competence in English may be slightly lower at the Early Key Stage 2 stage than their English-medium peers. However, by the end of Primary 7, IM pupils leave primary school with equivalent competence in English and with the additional advantage of bilingualism. Similar patterns have been seen in IM schools in the south with similar demographics and this trajectory has also been captured in international research.^{25 26 27}

²⁴ https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1473-4192.2005.00086.x?casa_token=MyfvHmkj88sAAAAA:mkZNI23z5qowY4hNwa-uARM5qkz8tQFWusPkhA_81XBwalFGrl4BNU4KGKZ-WymmC3oFBqeShFjEjZ5E

²⁵ https://www.cogg.ie/wp-content/uploads/Taighde_Sealbh%C3%BA-1.pdf

²⁶ <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2008-07437-010>

²⁷ Lindholm-Leary, K., and Borsato, G. (2018). The efficacy of two-way bilingual immersion programs: A meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 88(3), 346-384. doi: 10.3102/0034654317751910

Pupil Profile in IM Schools

In addition to understanding the learning trajectory of IM pupils, their background must also be taken into consideration when planning for appropriate support and provision.

Demographic

It is firstly important to consider that the majority of IM schools are located in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. One third of IM schools are located in the top 100 Super Output Areas in relation to Multiple Deprivation Measures. In the 23/24 school year 34.2% of pupils in IME, across all phases, were entitled to Free School Meals. This compares to 27.2% in the EM sector.

Language Profile

Whilst the first IM school was established in 1971 to provide IME for pupils who came from Irish-speaking families, the growth in the sector was bolstered by those families who chose to send their children to IM schools having no Irish in the home.

Historically, over 90% of pupils attending IME came from households with no Irish, meaning neither parent or carer spoke the language and the school setting was the only source for language acquisition²⁸. Pupils attending IME with this profile are known as emergent bilinguals, those who are proficient in English as the home language and developing Irish language proficiency via the school setting.

²⁸https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/01434632.2014.969273?casa_token=VH V7jiVVVmkAAAAA:Oobvo_uGONy93LwLWUNyW2BnOW2riZdsXic5Z9HYKwqqDzZ2bvXW22-Udpla6oPShCrZjK1s1BwE8Mw6cg

Pupils attending immersion education schools in other countries such as Canada and the U.S. also have limited proficiency in the language of instruction of the school when they enrol in the school²⁹.

We are now, however, seeing a growing number of pupils attending IME from homes where one or both parents/carers is fluent in the language. Additionally, a rising number of pupils are attending IME with Irish as a first language i.e. Irish is the home language and they conduct their daily lives through the medium of Irish with family, friends and in their social lives. This cohort is of particular significance in relation to SEND provision as assessment, support and intervention is currently severely limited in their home language.

School Profile in the IM Sector

When considering current provision in the IM sector, it is important to note that 60% of IM schools are housed in accommodation that is not fit-for-purpose, with many housed in mobile classrooms lacking in basic resources and accessibility features. Currently, only one school outside of Belfast is located within purpose-built accommodation.

This has implications for those pupils with special educational needs and in particular disabilities as many IM schools cannot cater for the needs of these pupils within the current confines of their school estate.

Many schools lack fundamental spaces such as canteens, library areas and sports halls. A number of schools report the need for dedicated

²⁹https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13670050.2013.866624?casa_token=ajx vbj2vBSsAAAAA:EQV59XLxkqfyGMeJNlHrcuF3t453hPaFKnGj_Cjr6oFtlgWXL0vIAM5UM7gOhAnycY7TaXRUVjx9zy4z2A

areas for one-one/small group withdrawal resorting to using hallways and staff rooms at present.

Additionally, many schools have reached capacity and are struggling to meet the demand for IME in their areas and cater to large pupil numbers.

As schools are currently being audited for capacity to establish specialist provisions, the vast majority of IM schools are unable to establish such provision despite a strong desire within schools to do so.

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities in the IM Sector

The areas for development in relation to SEND provision for IM pupils have been documented as far back as 1999³⁰, with subsequent reports in 2008³¹ and 2009³² reiterating the lack of appropriate provision. The most recent report³³ was published in 2016 in partnership with IM school leaders, ETI and EA, and its recommendations were broadly accepted by the education minister at the time, including those around SEND provision.

To date, very few of the recommendations made in any of these reports have been progressed and disparity and inequality between IM and English medium schools in the area of special education provision have been compounded rather than alleviated.

Disappointingly, none of the recent reviews^{34 35 36 37 38} of SEND provision in the education system reference the specific needs of IM

³⁰ <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/7873/1/survey-of-provision-for-special-educational-needs-in-IM-primary-schools-1999.pdf>

³¹ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/review-IM-education-report>

³² <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/research-reports-2009-special-educational-needs-bilingual-irish-english-children>

³³ <https://www.comhairle.org/english/about/publications/>

³⁴ <https://www.niccy.org/review-of-sen-provision-too-little-too-late>

³⁵ <https://www.ccmsschools.com/Documents/SEN-A-Call-for-Change/mobile/index.html>

³⁶ <https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/publications/impact-review-special-educational-needs>

³⁷ <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/committees/2017-2022/pac/reports/special-educational-needs/report-on-impact-review-on-special-educational-needs.pdf>

³⁸ <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/independent-review-special-educational-needs-service-and-processes-northern-ireland>

pupils in regards to SEND services transformation and the sector continues to be left behind in the planning for improvement.

Clear areas for development have been identified, specifically the need for linguistically appropriate assessment tools, the establishment of pupil support services cognisant of support required by IM pupils and adequate human resource i.e. educational psychologists, peripatetic teachers and allied health professionals such as speech and language therapists with knowledge and expertise in supporting pupils learning in IM schools³⁹.

Most recently, the *Independent Review of Education* made a number of recommendations in relation to IME including specific SEND recommendations citing the need for an increase in Stage 1 and Stage 2 support and improved Education Psychology services for IM pupils.⁴⁰

³⁹ <https://www.mdpi.com/2226-471X/6/2/62>

⁴⁰ <https://www.independentreviewofeducation.org.uk/key-documents/investing-better-future>

Data in the IM Sector

According to the latest DE figures for the 2023/24 school year, **22.5%** of pupils in the IM sector are recorded as having special educational needs (5.6% in voluntary/private preschool settings, 21.1% in primary settings and 30.1% in post-primary settings) .

This compares to an overall figure of **19.1%** in the EM sector (9.5% in voluntary/private preschool settings, 18.5% in primary and 18.2% in post-primary).

The higher instance of SEND in the IM sector can be contributed to the location of the concentration of IM schools in areas of socio-economic disadvantage, which typically have a greater percentage of SEND pupils generally.

Whilst the higher instance of SEND in IM post-primary can also, in some part, be contributed to demographics, there are other factors which warrant investigation into this significantly higher figure. These include availability of appropriate assessment and timely identification, access to early intervention and access to appropriate support.

Furthermore, it is notable that only 4% of pupils in the IM sector have received a statement of special educational needs comparing to 7.6% in the EM sector. This again warrants interrogation, particularly in regards to the lack of appropriate assessment tools for IM pupils.

Needs presenting in the IM Sector

To give an accurate profile of the types of special educational needs within the IM sector, reliable data is required. This has been challenging for a number of reasons:

- It appears that current data collection takes place on a system-wide basis and is not disaggregated into an Irish-medium/English-medium breakdown.
- There are 35 Primary schools and 5 Post-primary schools offering IM provision.
 - 28 of the primary schools are stand-alone provisions, 7 are IM units housed within Catholic-maintained EM schools.
 - There are 2 stand-alone post-primary schools and 3 IM streams housed within EM post-primary provisions.
- Data collected by DE from the 10 provisions within EM schools is again not disaggregated to show IM vs EM needs.
- Due to Action Short of Strike, a significant number of schools across the education system returned paper copies of DE Census information which did not contain SEN information.
- Current data collection processes do not provide breakdowns of specific needs i.e. ASD, ADHD etc.. which creates difficulties when identifying populations of pupils requiring support in these areas;
- Additionally, there is crossover/duplication in current overarching categories of need i.e. the inclusion of both 'Social, Behavioural, Emotional and Wellbeing' and 'Emotional and Wellbeing Difficulties' as categories in current data collection exercises.

SEND in Primary

In an attempt to give some insight into types of SEND in the IM primary sector, CnaG undertook a scoping exercise with schools in the 23/24 school year to ascertain the needs presenting amongst IM pupils.

- The data set available to CnaG contains information from 29 Primary settings (83%).
- Of the 29 primary school responses shared, 16 came from DE Census information and 13 from CnaG data collection exercises. Information is missing from 6 primary schools.

The overall population at primary level for the 2023/24 school year is **4,632** pupils. This includes nursery pupils in those schools with nursery provision.

The gaps in available data mean the figures shown are based on a population of **3,723**.

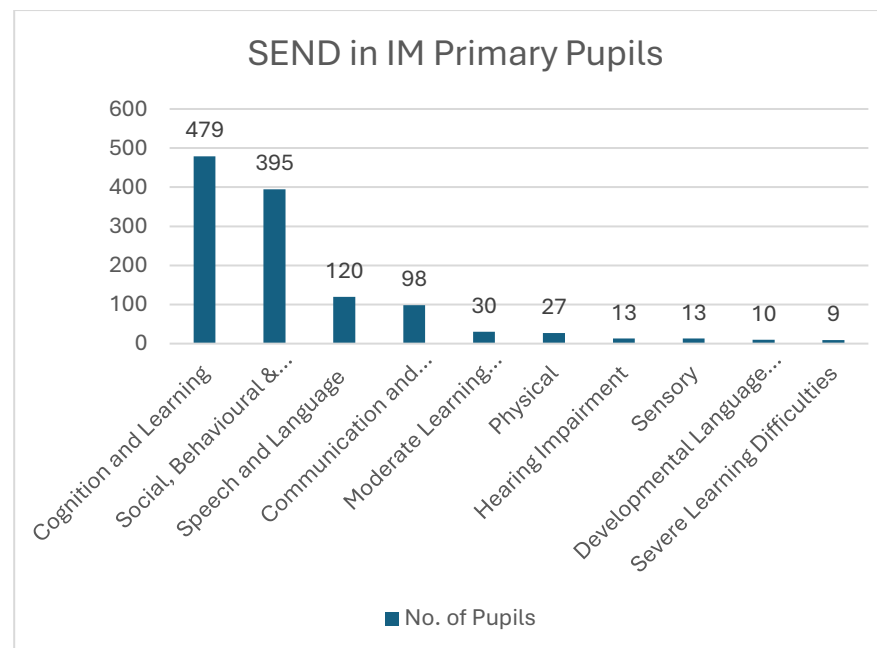


Figure 1. The number of primary IME pupils with each category of SEND (N=3,723)

Whilst aforementioned caveats should be taken into consideration when scrutinising the data above, the information gathered does provide key insights into needs presenting in the sector:

- Cognition and learning difficulties are the most significant amongst IM pupils. Currently there are no dedicated supports available to this group of students in the language of their education, Irish.
- This is followed by SBEW needs which will include autistic pupils and pupils with ADHD and ADD. Again, current support, aside from a very small number of staff who speak Irish, is

delivered monolingually. This goes against internationally recognised best practice for bilingual children⁴¹.

- Communication, speech and language difficulties also account for a substantial number of pupils, highlighting the need for support services and personnel that are trained to support bilingual pupils as recognised by the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists and other international bodies⁴²

⁴¹ https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Emily-Lund-3/publication/308763719_Bilingual_and_Home_Language_Interventions_With_Young_Dual_Language_Learners_A_Research_Synthesis/links/57f2031408ae886b89791cb1/Bilingual-and-Home-Language-Interventions-With-Young-Dual-Language-Learners-A-Research-Synthesis.pdf

⁴² <https://research.manchester.ac.uk/en/publications/providing-equitable-access-for-bilingual-children-adaptation-of-l>

SEND in Post-primary

CnaG carried out a similar data collection exercise at post-primary level.

- Information is only available for the two stand-alone post-primary provisions.

The overall population at post-primary level for the 2023/24 school year is **1,856** pupils. This includes pupils attending IM streams housed within English-medium provisions.

The gaps in available data mean the figures shown are based on a population of **1,265**.

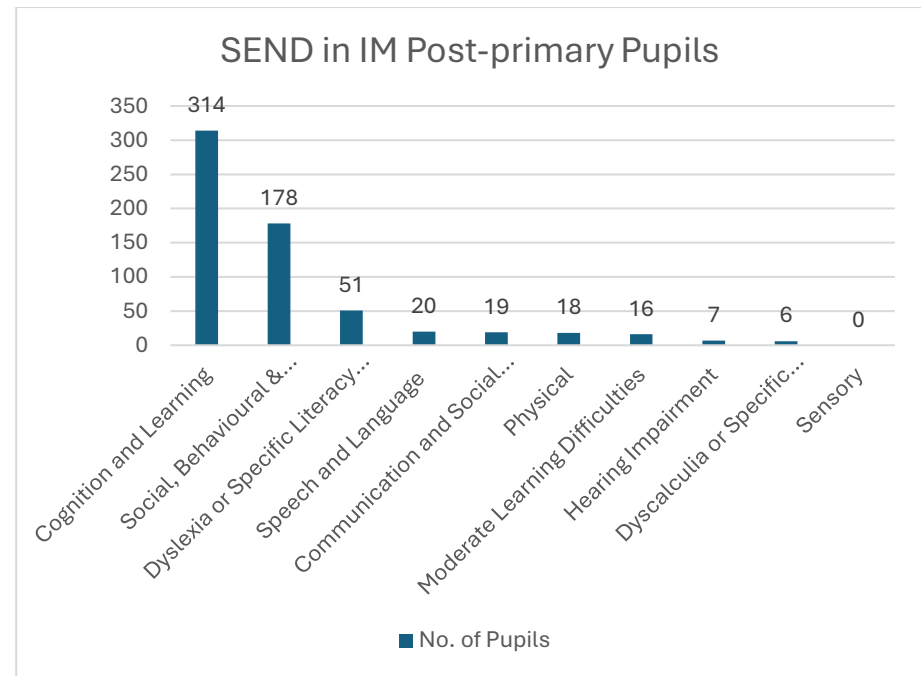


Figure 2: The number of post-primary IME pupils with SEND (N=1,265).

Whilst the findings presented in Figure 2 are limited due to the lack of representation from IM units attached to EM schools the cohort sampled does reflect nearly 70% IM post-primary pupils. Similar to the primary cohort studied, a significant number of pupils present with needs such as cognition and learning and SBEW. Yet again, these students do not have access to tailored support through the medium of Irish, outside of what is provided in school.

Key Challenges

Whilst the following areas are all essential in addressing current disparities in SEND provision for IM pupils, there is an urgency pertaining to certain elements that requires addressing before other areas can be progressed.

For example, the availability of a suitably-qualified IM workforce is key to ensuring capacity exists within EA support services and enhancing TPL provision. Therefore, workforce planning should be a priority area for development.

Other areas can and should be progressed concurrently. Expertise exists within 3rd Level institutions to make linguistically appropriate assessment tools available. This could also take place on a north/south basis and draw on tools already available in Scotland and Wales to ensure cost effectiveness. The training and recruitment of IM educational psychologists⁴³ and speech and language therapists⁴⁴ should also be commenced to ensure that the workforce necessary for the delivery of such assessments is in place when the time comes.

⁴³ <https://bpspsychub.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdfdirect/10.1111/bjep.12499>

⁴⁴ https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13670050.2016.1179256?casa_token=U5yeX8arvmEAAAAA:v57wKneOoH8qTIEJoloeSKmOmBbmJcSv3ywe2_uxbEWV7NEzT8MUh-L2tihoPhouRiEJnrL1fsk_dYSKQ

Workforce

It must be acknowledged from the outset that a dearth of Irish-speaking personnel exists within our current workforce. Whilst the following recommendations seek an increase in people employed to support IM pupils with SEND, this must be underpinned by initiatives to increase the supply of said personnel.

The identified gaps will not be filled for a number of years but work must be initiated to begin to address current gaps and ensure supply for future years.

Within IM Schools

The staff shortages currently experienced by the IM sector are now well-documented (see Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta paper on *Ensuring Effective Teacher Supply in the IM Sector*⁴⁵).

The lack of available teaching and non-teaching staff is now the most pressing challenge hindering the development of IME. All schools now report difficulties in recruiting appropriately qualified staff to fill vacancies, cover absences and deliver support initiatives such as SEN release etc...

In terms of the impact on SEND provision, the following is an ongoing reality for IM schools:

- high volume of SEN classroom assistant vacancies;
- absence of SENCo release time;
- absence of principal release time for teaching principals (one third of principals within the sector are teaching principals);

⁴⁵ <https://www.comhairle.org/gaeilge/faoi/publications/>

- difficulty in recruiting for positions within specialist provisions;
- inability to attend SEND TPL initiatives due to lack of supply cover;
- role of resource teacher utilised for supply cover rather than intended purpose of providing additional support to those pupils requiring.

Within External Support Services

Few support services exist which offer peripatetic support for pupils with SEND through the medium of Irish. Those that do exist tend to be available in urban areas and are limited in their scope.

Despite the growth in IME, the EA continue to deliver services through the medium of English only. Up until September 2024, only one IM School Improvement Professional role existed within EA. This has now increased to two personnel, however, these are general education positions and do not provide direct support for pupils with SEND. There are no dedicated IM staff within any of the services in EA Pupil Support Services.

Considering the aforementioned learning journey of IM pupils, dedicated support staff within the various services are required to ensure support and intervention being provided is linguistically appropriate and cognisant of the learning experienced by IM pupils. These staff should also be allocated equitably on a geographical basis to ensure parity in support for all pupils, both urban and rural.

CnaG has previously advocated for a change in recruitment practices to ensure that new recruitment drives include the recruitment of dedicated roles for IM staff. For example, if EA were to recruit 20 personnel to delivery literacy support, two officers should be

recruited within that cohort to support IM schools. Whilst these officers should be dedicated IM officers, they would also hold the capability to support EM schools. It is also time for the active recruitment of dedicated IM staff within services to address current gaps in the various support roles.

The new model for Stage 2 support being initiated by EA in the 2024/25 school year does not currently include dedicated staff for IM schools within its new local-integrated teams. This is despite ongoing representation and advocacy from CnaG on the SEND Transformation Programme that devised the new model for provision. It is now imperative that IM provision is retrospectively incorporated into these delivery plans.

Educational Psychologists

There are currently no dedicated IM educational psychologists. A small number of psychologists are employed by EA who have proficiency in Irish, however, they do not have access to the appropriate tools and resources to provide the necessary support and intervention to IM pupils (see Assessment section on Pg.18).

The training and recruitment of dedicated IM educational psychologists is essential to ensure that IM pupil needs are identified accurately and at the earliest stage.

The current DECAP programme, facilitated by QUB and supported by DE, could be utilised to recruit at least one IM entrant each year to begin to develop this capacity within the system.

Allied Health Professionals

Whilst beyond the scope of DE alone, there is a need for the training and recruitment of trained professionals such as speech and language therapists who have a working knowledge and understanding of bilingualism and supporting bilingual pupils with speech and language needs.

The concept of multi-disciplinary schools has been discussed in a number of fora and should the education sector begin to develop this type of provision, IM schools would require professionals with the expertise to support pupils attending IM settings.

Active recruitment of students with Irish-language proficiency on to university courses such as Speech and Language would begin to develop this workforce and the Children's Services Cooperation Act (2015) provides the scope for the necessary departments to come together to allow this to happen.

Priority Areas for Development

- **Implementation of initiatives to ensure uplift in available teaching and non-teaching staff within the IM sector.**
- **Revision of EA recruitment practices to ensure dedicated IM staff are recruited to all relevant roles including active recruitment to fill current gaps.**
- **Allocation of at least one IM place on DECAP programme to begin to build Education Psychology capacity. All educational psychologists employed in EA should also have a sound understanding of bilingualism and supporting and identifying SEN in bilingual pupils.**

- **Active recruitment of entrants with Irish-language competence onto allied health programmes such as Speech and Language to equip IM sector with multi-disciplinary support.**

Assessment

The need for linguistically appropriate assessment tools for use in the IM sector has been cited for nearly 30 years.

As far back as the 1999 ETI report on SEN provision in IME, the lack of standardised tools was cited as a 'significant deficiency'.⁴⁶ This was again raised in the *Review of IM Education* report in 2008 which stated the need to develop high-level diagnostic tools and the potential to do this on an all-island basis.⁴⁷ The subsequent 2009 DE-commissioned report on *The special educational needs of bilingual (Irish-English) children*⁴⁸ further highlighted the failings in relation to assessment provision, stating that educational psychologists are unable to assess pupils' literacy progress in Irish owing to the lack of assessment materials in Irish which may result in a delay in intervention.

Recent studies, have identified that this is still a significant challenge for educational psychologists and speech and language therapists working in IM schools.

Local reports (cited on Pg.10) have, to date, focused on the need for linguistically-appropriate assessment tools for use within schools to determine progress in literacy and numeracy and to identify those pupils who may have difficulties within these areas. It is also acknowledged, however, that more specific assessment/diagnostic

⁴⁶ <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/7873/1/survey-of-provision-for-special-educational-needs-in-IM-primary-schools-1999.pdf>

⁴⁷ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/review-IM-education-report>

⁴⁸ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/research-reports-2009-special-educational-needs-bilingual-irish-english-children>

tools are required to identify needs amongst bilingual pupils in areas such as speech and language and dyslexia.

Emanating from the aforementioned 2008 & 2009 reports, DE commissioned RSM McClure Watters in 2012 to undertake a needs assessment and feasibility study for the development of high-level diagnostic tools for the IM sector. The report considered the need for high-level tools, those administered by educational psychologists, and low-level tools, administered by practitioners in schools and used, in some cases, for referral to access additional support or statutory assessment.

Astonishingly, and despite clear indications to the contrary, the outcome of the study proposed that the status quo (unavailability of any assessment tools) should remain but some additional interventions be put in place to enhance support, including capacity building of staff in the IM sector and awareness raising amongst education psychologists around immersion and bilingualism.

This recommendation is against all internationally recognised best practice, which states that for pupils to be accurately assessed, they need to be assessed in all of their languages⁴⁹.

Reasons given for this outcome included the small nature of the IM pupil population in terms of overall need for such tools, value for money, and the ability to accurately standardise potential high-level diagnostic tools with a small pool of pupils.

⁴⁹ <https://www.mdpi.com/2226-471X/6/2/62>

Since this study was undertaken, the number of pupils attending IME has continued to grow⁵⁰ and this in turn reiterates the demand and need for these tests to be developed.

The feasibility study also cited the fact that the majority of IM pupils have English as a first language and can be assessed using EM tools. However, the practice of assessing students through English alone is not appropriate as their total language and cognitive abilities will not be assessed. This is due to the fact that bilinguals have a vocabulary in both of their languages and may not have the same vocabulary in each of their languages (i.e. may know 'tractor' in Irish but not in English). Therefore, to appropriately assess these pupils they need to be assessed through the language of instruction of the school: Irish.

The study also drew upon the views expressed by educational psychologists tasked with assessing IM pupils presenting with special educational needs. Most educational psychologists at that time believed that the assessment, through English, of cognitive ability and numeracy amongst pupils whose first language was English, was appropriate, even if they were learning in an IM environment. They did, however, acknowledge that the assessment of children whose first language is Irish as less straightforward and that care must be taken when assessing bilingual children using assessment tools designed for monolingual English-speaking pupils.

The Pobal research of 2009, shows a significant majority (81%) of the educational psychologists consulted indicated that they had a full or general understanding of bilingualism but just over half claimed that they had a full or general understanding of the IM sector . Only 31%

had received training in bilingualism, and only 5% had minimal training on the IM sector. This raises the validity, therefore, of their assertion that current assessment practices provide an accurate profile of pupils whose first language is English.

Responding to the report's findings, Dr. Emily Barnes, an Assistant Professor in Language Education in Trinity College Dublin stated:

"The Department of Education in Northern Ireland (2011) commissioned RSM McClure Watters (a tax, audit and consulting company) to undertake a needs assessment and feasibility study on the development of high level diagnostic tools in Irish for children with SEN in IME. The report examined a number of options and concluded that the development of diagnostic tests is not feasible due to the costs involved, the value for money (in light of the small population), and technical reasons such as the need for EPs to be fluent in Irish. The option they recommended was to keep the current practice, and in addition to this promote awareness of "issues for children in IM" so that "children being tested are supported by EPs who would have a greater awareness of the issues for children in IM" (pp.57). The report also states that this option "seeks to build capacity amongst teacher staff" (pp.57). The report stated that current practice is reliable and effective at addressing the needs of IM pupils with SEN as EPs can use non-verbal tests; "the range of non-verbal tests is recognised as a valid and reliable way to test children for SEN" (pp.56). This is not the case for dyslexia assessments; verbal tests and language-specific literacy tests are crucial to providing an accurate diagnosis. This

⁵⁰ <https://www.iejee.com/index.php/IEJEE/article/view/107>

report demonstrates poor awareness on the part of the authors of the complexity of testing for SEN.”⁵¹

The limited improvements proposed in relation to educational psychology provision and capacity building of staff remain unimplemented. The status quo, therefore, has very much remained.

Over ten years on from these findings, schools continue to report the challenges posed by the lack of assessment tools, citing the ‘unfairness’ of using English language assessments or the translation of the same, when the learning of formal English does not begin until Primary 3. Recent research carried out by QUB highlighted assessment practices as:

“...a particularly underdeveloped high-stakes area. The impact of this underdevelopment is that it adds a considerable burden to teachers, not just in having to attempt to create their own assessments, or work with non-standardized tests, but also a challenge to their sense of professional identity where they find themselves having to, in the face of no alternative, use potentially invalid measures of assessment.”⁵²

As mentioned, there is also a growing population of pupils for whom Irish is their home and first language. A study on *Educational psychological provision in IM primary schools in indigenous Irish language speaking communities*⁵³ again states the need for assessment tools to be available in Irish for those pupils, as using English, although

⁵¹ <https://www.cogg.ie/wp-content/uploads/Trachtas-WEB-VERSION.pdf>

⁵² <https://www.qub.ac.uk/research-centres/CentreforLanguageEducationResearch/News/FairSharedSupported.html>

⁵³ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35342927/>

flawed regardless, cannot be relied upon during the assessment process.

Both national and international research shows a clear need for linguistically appropriate assessment tools across the spectrum of special educational needs. Regarding speech and language assessments, for example, research in 2013⁵⁴ found that most speech and language therapists and educational psychologists working with Irish-English bilingual children in ROI had to translate standardised assessments from English to Irish, whilst still using the norms of the English tests to score children. In international research⁵⁵, this practice has been deemed ineffective due to the differences in normative populations, linguistic differences between languages, and the sequences of language acquisition, questioning the reliability of translated tests and validity of subsequent results.

In a comprehensive 2019 research piece on *The Additional Supports Required by Pupils with Special Educational Needs in IM Schools*⁵⁶, Dr. Sinéad Nic Aindriú highlights the impact that the lack of appropriate assessment tools is having on early identification/intervention. Figures from this study show a higher distribution of pupils with SEN in the senior classes, 65.53% compared to 12.05% in junior classes. With the advantages of early intervention well-known at this stage, it is now a

⁵⁴ <https://researchrepository.ucd.ie/entities/publication/7655219f-1aae-4744-81e7-aeed9da4a380/details>

⁵⁵ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/238436717_Developing_an_expressive_language_assessment_for_children_in_Rochdale_with_a_Pakistani_heritage_background

⁵⁶ <https://www.cogg.ie/wp-content/uploads/The-Additional-Supports-Required-by-Pupils-with-Special-Educational-Needs-in-IM-Schools.pdf>

matter of urgency that appropriate tools are developed to identify needs amongst IM pupils at the earliest possible stage.

Priority Areas for Development

- **The development of linguistically appropriate early literacy and early numeracy assessments for use in schools to determine pupil progress in these areas and identify potential challenges/difficulties amongst pupils.**
- **The creation of linguistically appropriate assessments/diagnostic tools for specific needs i.e. speech and language, dyslexia prioritised by needs presenting in the sector. These tools should be developed in conjunction with relevant health professionals if necessary. There is scope to carry out this work on an all-island basis and to build on work already carried out in other jurisdictions where immersion/bilingual education exists.**

Support Services

Internationally, the research states that students should be receiving support bilingually, in the language of instruction of the school and also in the majority language of the community. An importance should be placed on providing provision in the language of instruction of the school as this is the language that pupils learn through on a day to day basis, and a level of cognitive academic language proficiency is required by them to access the curriculum appropriately.

Hence pupils in IM schools are disadvantaged due to the lack of IM provision in this area, which goes against the internationally recognised importance of early intervention for literacy and numeracy difficulties.

As previously stated, EA support services are currently offered through the medium of English only. Whilst IM pupils can avail of the same support as their EM counterparts, it is often not fit-for-purpose due to the fact that it is not provided through the language of instruction of the school, particularly in relation to literacy support.

Current criteria to access literacy support is not fit for purpose in both EM and IM due to the flaws in the current discrepancy model. Furthermore, the lack of standardised assessment tools in IME puts pupils at a disadvantage and reduces the likelihood of accessing support earlier therefore missing out on early intervention.

A pupil presenting with literacy difficulties, for example, will often wait until they have started learning formal English in Primary 4 to access peripatetic support. Intervention is currently not provided in Irish to allow pupils to be supported using the language in which they are developing literacy skills in the Foundation/Key Stage 1 stages.

A review is required into interventions that are appropriate for pupils learning in an IM context and evidence-based interventions and practices developed as a result.

The incoming changes to SEND services within EA, with the move towards local-integrated teams, presents particular challenges for IME as the needs of the sector have been ignored in planning. The teams currently do not have any dedicated IM support staff and therefore the required improvements in SEND provision for IM pupils will not be addressed via the current SEND transformation plans.

Priority Areas for Development

- **Recruitment of dedicated IM support staff within EA services/local-integrated teams and in other DE funded bodies (i.e. Middletown) to support pupil needs within the sector.**
- **Commitment by EA to utilise interventions that are linguistically appropriate for IM pupils.**

Area Planning

Whilst Area Planning extends beyond SEND provision, the ongoing need for appropriate placements for pupils has placed significant importance on this process to ensure appropriate provision is available.

CnaG's main concern in this area centres on the collection of data to inform area planning for current and future need within IME. We currently do not have assurances that pupil-level data collection takes cognisance of parental preference in relation to school setting i.e. parent/carer wishing to choose IME for their child. Therefore, planning is currently taking place on an EM-only basis.

As a result, parents/carers have been placed in a situation where no IME provision exists for their child and they have had to move to an EM setting, denying their right to IME. In many cases, this has led to the separation of siblings or loss of whole families to other sectors.

Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools (SPiMS)

Currently, three SPiMS exist in the IM sector. Two at primary level in Scoil na Fuiseoige and Bunscoil Phobal Feirste and one at post-primary level in Coláiste Feirste. All provisions are located in Belfast creating clear geographical disparity.

Current primary provisions offer placements for pupils with Social and Communication needs at Foundation/Key Stage 1 and Learning needs at Key Stage 2. Provision for the same is available for Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 pupils in the post-primary provision.

There are currently no provisions for other SEND needs such as speech and language and behaviour.

The Special Education Strategic Area Plan 2022-27⁵⁷ committed to address “*geographical, sectoral and linguistic sector inconsistencies which currently exist in Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools to provide equity for pupils with a Statement of Special Educational Needs,*” however very little progress has been seen in this area.

Recent figures show that 4.8% of the pupil population in the north are now availing of specialist provision in mainstream schools across the education sector. In the IM sector, only 0.7% of pupils have access to the same.

Special School Provision

As the IM pupil population continues to grow, consideration must also be given to the demand for IM special school provision. Whilst this would be a longer term initiative, data collection to inform future planning is essential.

Priority Areas for Development

- **Review of data collection processes to ensure cognisance given to parental preference regarding school setting to ensure current and future demand for IME SEND places is included in area planning initiatives going forward;**
- **Establishment of additional specialist provision to address geographical disparity and gaps in current types of provision, as informed by need.**

⁵⁷ https://www.eani.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Special%20Education%20Strategic%20Area%20Plan%202022-27%20-%20Planning%20for%20Special%20Education%20Provision_o.pdf

Teacher Professional Learning

All available research shows that IM practitioners require professional development in the area of SEND provision for pupils learning through Irish⁵⁸. Currently, the majority of TPL available is based on meeting the needs of children in EM schools, with very limited offerings for teachers of pupils attending IM schools.

It is now well-known that effective teachers promote higher levels of attainment for students with SEN. Research also suggests that in the absence of appropriate teacher education, support and guidance, teachers teaching in immersion settings are not being enabled to correctly identify pupil needs leading to under or over-referral for additional support.⁵⁹

Current offerings from dedicated services such as EA, for example, are focused on EM only. Any available TPL aimed at supporting pupils with SEND in the IM sector is currently delivered on an ad-hoc basis.

The findings of recent studies⁶⁰ identified that teachers in IM schools find the following elements challenging in relation to SEN provision;

- assessment through Irish;
- having realistic expectations for their students;

⁵⁸

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/366206857_The_CPD_Needs_of_IM_Primary_and_Post-Primary_Teachers_in_Special_Education

⁵⁹https://www.researchgate.net/publication/299417329_Trends_in_bilingual_special_education_teacher_preparation_A_literature_review

⁶⁰

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/366206857_The_CPD_Needs_of_IM_Primary_and_Post-Primary_Teachers_in_Special_Education

- differentiation or adaptive teaching;⁶¹
- implementing appropriate inclusive teaching pedagogies;
- and accessing appropriate resources.

Teachers from IM schools also reported how they often attended TPL in this area and that little reference was made to meeting the needs of students with SEN learning through Irish.

Initial Teacher Education (ITE)

The development of teacher capacity begins at ITE stage and it is noted that the minimum SEND content on 3rd level programmes is an ongoing discussion. In the 2019 study on *The Additional Supports Required by Pupils with Special Educational Needs in IM Schools*, IM practitioners across the island of Ireland stated that they were not adequately prepared to support pupils with SEND via undergraduate and post-graduate pathways, particularly in relation to literacy development⁶².

When asked what types of TPL teachers desired, the following formats were put forward⁶³:

- resources that will help them meet the needs of all their students;
- an understanding of inclusive teaching strategies;

⁶¹ [EEF blog: Moving from 'differentiation' to 'adaptive teaching' | EEF \(educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk\)](https://www.eef.org.uk/blog/moving-from-differentiation-to-adaptive-teaching)

⁶² <https://www.cogg.ie/wp-content/uploads/The-Additional-Supports-Required-by-Pupils-with-Special-Educational-Needs-in-IM-Schools.pdf>

⁶³

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/366206857_The_CPD_Needs_of_IM_Primary_and_Post-Primary_Teachers_in_Special_Education

- the opportunity to learn from others teaching in the sector;
- the opportunity to learn from others working in immersion education internationally (videos, simulations, etc.) and;
- time to think and discuss issues with others.

Therefore, a programme of TPL, beginning at ITE stage and extending through the career of the IM teacher is long overdue.

Priority Areas for Development

- **Review of SEND minimum content in IM ITE programmes to enable teachers to begin to build capacity to support pupils with SEND.**
- **Provision of comprehensive IM TPL offering, building on content covered at ITE stage, via EA services.**

Resources

The dearth of IM resources transcends all subject areas in IME. It is a particularly underdeveloped area in relation to SEND resources due to the aforementioned issues in relation to overall SEND provision.

This issue is apparent in immersion contexts around the world with teachers reporting difficulties in accessing appropriate teaching resources and assessments, especially in minority language contexts.

Research carried out in 2022 analysed the current resources available in IM to support pupils with SEND.⁶⁴ This research surveyed IM teachers and asked them to identify priority areas of need. In order of urgency these were:

- Irish-language graded readers
- Language and communication resources in Irish
- Evidence-based interventions and a programme of social and emotional development in Irish
- Evidence-based mathematical interventions in Irish
- Mathematical resources
- Social stories

ICT resources were also listed as a priority area including text to language resources, audio books, applications in Irish including those to promote phonological development, applications to develop the student's cognitive abilities/working memory, spelling programmes and mathematical assessments.

⁶⁴ https://gaeloideachas.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/GD_Executive_Summary_English_Digital.pdf

The research, although carried out in the south, corresponds with the asks of practitioners in this jurisdiction. This presents the opportunity for all-island collaboration in relation to resource provision to maximise funding and avoid duplication.

Whilst some of these resources could be progressed relatively quickly if sufficient funding were to be made available, others, particularly those requiring an evidence base, require additional time and investment. Therefore, it is essential that research is also commissioned to provide the evidence base required to formulate interventions and make them available for use.

Priority Areas for Development

- **Progression of priority areas of resource need, via all-island collaboration if possible.**
- **Cognisance given to IM ICT resource needs in delivery of EdIS provision.**
- **Initiation of research to provide evidence base for required interventions and creation of required resources as a result.**

Conclusion

It is clear from the discussion and empirical evidence presented above that many areas need to be addressed to ensure parity in provision for IM pupils with SEND.

It 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.

As the research base grows around inclusion and diversity in immersion education internationally, it is clear that more tangible progress is needed in this area for IM schools to be able to implement internationally recognised best practice.

The ongoing reviews of SEND provision in NI present an opportunity to begin to address the disparity in provision for IM pupils. It is critical that these opportunities are not missed and that IM needs are considered and addressed in all relevant work going forward. This is something that we feel is possible through discussions, research, and funding.

It would be pertinent, therefore, to consider SEND transformation from both an EM and an IM perspective going forward to ensure that planned initiatives for improvement meet the needs of all pupils in the education sector.

Appendix 1

SEND Priority Areas for Development in the IM Sector

Assessment and Interventions
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The development of linguistically appropriate early literacy and early numeracy assessments through the medium of Irish for use in schools to determine pupil progress in these areas and identify potential challenges/difficulties amongst pupils.• The creation of linguistically appropriate assessments/diagnostic tools for specific needs i.e. speech and language, dyslexia... prioritised by needs presenting in the sector. These tools should be developed in conjunction with relevant health professionals if necessary. There is also scope to carry out this work on an all-island basis and to build on work already carried out in other jurisdictions where immersion/bilingual education exists.• The development of evidence based interventions for IM schools through the medium of Irish in the areas of Irish literacy, numeracy through Irish, and wellbeing.
Workforce
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Implementation of initiatives to ensure uplift in available teaching and non-teaching staff within the IM sector (see Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta paper on Ensuring Effective Teacher Supply in the IM Sector).• Revision of EA recruitment practices to ensure dedicated IM staff are recruited to all relevant roles including active recruitment to fill current gaps.• Allocation of at least one IM place on DECAP programme to begin to build Education Psychology capacity & upskilling of current and future educational psychologists in the area of SEN and bilingualism.• Active recruitment of entrants with Irish-language competence onto allied health programmes such as Speech and Language to equip IM sector with multi-disciplinary support.
Pupil Support Services
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Recruitment of dedicated IM support staff within EA services/local-integrated teams and in other DE funded bodies (i.e. Middletown) to support pupil needs within the sector.• Commitment by EA to utilise interventions that are linguistically appropriate for IM pupils.
Area Planning
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Review of data collection processes to ensure cognisance given to parental preference regarding school setting to ensure current and future demand for IME SEND places is included in area planning initiatives going forward.• Establishment of additional specialist provision to address geographical disparity and gaps in current types of provision, as informed by need.
Teacher Professional Learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Review of SEND minimum content in IM ITE programmes to enable teachers to begin to build capacity to support pupils with SEND.• Provision of comprehensive IM TPL offering, building on content covered at ITE stage, via EA services.
Resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Progression of priority areas of resource need, via all-island collaboration if possible.• Cognisance given to IM ICT resource needs in delivery of EdIS provision.• Initiation of research to provide evidence base for required interventions and creation of required resources as a result.

Appendix 2

Progression of IM SEND Actions

Short Term	Medium Term	Long Term
<i>Can be implemented immediately</i>	<i>Planning should be begin immediately with implementation in 25/26 school year</i>	<i>Scoping should begin as soon as possible with implementation in coming years</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revision of EA recruitment practices to ensure dedicated IM staff are recruited to all relevant roles including active recruitment to fill current gaps. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development of linguistically appropriate early literacy and early numeracy assessments through the medium of Irish (it is acknowledged that CCEA is currently undertaking work in this area, however, progress has been slow and constrained by budgetary issues).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruitment of dedicated IM support staff within EA services/local-integrated teams and in other DE funded bodies (i.e. Middletown) to support pupil needs within the sector. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creation of linguistically appropriate assessments/diagnostic tools for specific needs i.e. speech and language, dyslexia... prioritised by needs presenting in the sector.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development of evidence based interventions for IM schools through the medium of Irish in the areas of Irish literacy, numeracy through Irish, and wellbeing. 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allocation of at least one IM place on DECAP programme to begin to build Education Psychology capacity & upskilling of current and future educational psychologists in the area of SEN and bilingualism. 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Active recruitment of entrants with Irish-language competence onto allied health programmes such as Speech and Language to equip IM sector with multi-disciplinary support. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commitment by EA to utilise interventions that are linguistically appropriate for IM pupils. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review of data collection processes to ensure cognisance given to parental preference regarding school setting to ensure current and future demand for IME SEND places is included 		

in area planning initiatives going forward.		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishment of additional specialist provision to address geographical disparity and gaps in current types of provision, as informed by need. 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review of SEND minimum content in IM ITE programmes to enable teachers to begin to build capacity to support pupils with SEND. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provision of comprehensive IM TPL offering, building on content covered at ITE stage, via EA services. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Progression of priority areas of resource need, via all-island collaboration if possible. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cognisance given to IM ICT resource needs in delivery of EdIS provision. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initiation of research to provide evidence base for required interventions and creation of required resources as a result. 		

Appendix 3

SEND Categories – IME Needs

The main paper looks at SEND provision from an overarching perspective in terms of the key areas for development. It is necessary, however, to factor those areas into the individual SEND categories as each need will have its own priority areas for development.

The following have been grouped under the current DE SEN categories⁶⁵, however, due to the limitations of available research, it has not been possible to explore all categories at this stage. Additionally, it has not been possible to consider the needs of those pupils presenting with sensory or physical needs at this time but this will be addressed in future iterations.

⁶⁵ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/sen-and-medical-categories-guidance-schools>

COGNITION AND LEARNING – Language, Literacy, Mathematics and Numeracy

Dyslexia or Specific Learning Difficulty – Language and Literacy

Biliteracy

Biliteracy and SEND

Research suggests that children who struggle to read in immersion education settings do as well academically as their peers attending monolingual schools⁶⁶

However, the literature also concludes that there are challenges facing immersion schools when meeting the needs of their students i.e. assessment practices, access to intervention and dearth of appropriate resources.

⁶⁶https://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/jbp/jicb/2021/00000009/00000002/art00003?crawler=true&metadata=application/pdf&casa_token=03HMXUggW-lAAAAA:MtLpy5-iRfenrp4CSaRkb8SSonKPW5a5zKL3gZmgSuwFzl8eMtL1w-mjs-392viLfl_pPku6Cgcxq6E

Learning Trajectory

When considering literacy development for pupils attending IM provision, the pathway for pupils, and how that differs from EM must be understood.

This pathway is not currently acknowledged in the provision of the current NI Curriculum, which is essentially a translation of the EM equivalent, nor in the current external support and interventions available to IM pupils.

In the first instance, IM pupils undergo a period of full immersion in the Irish language from preschool (for those who attend IM preschool provision), until the end of Primary 3/beginning of Primary 4. This means that all areas of the curriculum are taught through Irish and immersion pedagogies are employed to develop both language proficiency in Irish and subject knowledge & understanding, simultaneously.

English is not introduced until the end of Primary 3/beginning of Primary 4 and upon introduction, is taught as a specific curricular area and timetabled into weekly planning accordingly. All other curricular

areas continue to be taught through the medium of Irish.

This approach influences the learning trajectory of pupils learning in IM settings. Whilst English is the dominant language in society and IM pupils are naturally fluent English speakers, the formal, academic development of English does not begin until age 7/8. Comparisons with EM peers show that competence in English amongst IM pupils is slightly lower at the Early Key Stage 2 stage, however, by the end of Primary 7, IM pupils leave primary school with equivalent competence in English and with the additional advantage of bilingualism.

Orthography of the Irish Language

Irish has a shallow orthography, which means that it should be easier for pupils to learn when compared to English that has a deep orthography.

This advantage is not being exploited in current literacy support.

Research suggests that pupils with literacy difficulties who are learning through languages with less complex orthographies can progress with greater ease, building a foundation in the less complex language (i.e.

Irish) that supports future development in the more complex language (i.e. English) variation that exists in the development of literacy acquisition in different languages.”⁶⁷

Current Provision

Aside from support and intervention offered by IM schools, assessment, support services and peripatetic support for literacy difficulties are currently only offered through the medium of English by external support bodies. This practice does not meet the internationally recommended practice of supporting pupils’ development in all of their languages.

Considering the aforementioned profiles and learning trajectory of IM pupils, current support is not meeting the needs of IM pupils presenting with literacy challenges.

Assessment

The suitability of assessments to identify special educational needs amongst IM pupils is a recurring theme in relation to the

⁶⁷ <https://www.cogg.ie/wp-content/uploads/Trachtas-WEB-VERSION.pdf>

identification of and intervention in a range of special educational needs.

In terms of assessing for literacy difficulties, particularly dyslexia, the aforementioned linguistic profile and learning trajectory of the pupil must be considered. The current practice of assessing IM pupils using English assessment measures provide results that are not representative of pupils’ ability and do not accurately identify need.

Considering IM pupils do not begin learning formal English until age 7/8, the use of early assessments in English is entirely flawed. In light of the importance of early intervention, the lack of appropriate early literacy assessments for IM pupils is particularly problematic.

Challenges in relation to the standardisation of assessments have been raised previously, however, this should not be viewed as a barrier to improving provision. Work has been carried out in Wales to create a range of normed linguistic tests, using a relatively small population, and this work could be

emulated in this context, perhaps on an all-island basis.⁶⁸

Additionally, in order to carry out accurate assessments on IM pupils, research indicates that professionals administering tests should be from the target population i.e. IM students should be assessed by fluent Irish speakers as they hold not only the linguistic competence to engage appropriately with the pupil, but also a good knowledge of the phonology and orthography of the language, and how the two relate.⁶⁹

Literacy Support

International research in relation to appropriate support for bilingual pupils clearly states that support should be provided in whichever language is the primary language of instruction.

Professionals providing support for struggling readers should have an

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<https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.21832/9781783090105-004/html?lang=en>

⁶⁹ <https://www.cogg.ie/wp-content/uploads/Trachtas-WEB-VERSION.pdf>

understanding of the nature of bilingual development and have a knowledge of the similarities and differences in the conventions of the languages spoken by the pupil when they provide support.⁷⁰

In a 2019 study on *The Additional Supports Required by Pupils with Special Educational Needs in IM Schools*⁷¹, the researcher identified current provision for IM pupils in 4 schools, including one in NI.

The school in question did not have a fulltime SENCO to undertake additional teaching support with pupils and only had a peripatetic teacher coming to the school to give support to pupils in English literacy. This in turn meant that pupils with SEN had to wait until they started reading in English to get this intervention. Thus, these students were missing out on the essential period of early intervention which is recognised

internationally as an invaluable support for pupils learning to read⁷².

Without this period of early intervention, it has been found that pupils fail to achieve as well as their peers who have access to this support. This in turn means that pupils attending IM schools are at an automatic disadvantage due to the lack of provision available through the medium of Irish.

As identified, current Stage 2 support offered via the EA Literacy Service is available through the medium of English only. Pupils presenting with literacy challenges before having begun formal learning of English, have access to limited support outside of the school setting.

Proposed EA Stage 2 support, via a multi-disciplinary model of local integrated teams, shows no planning to date for IM provision meaning IM pupils will continue to be left behind in regards to support available.

Teacher Professional Learning (TPL)

TPL, from initial teacher education to ongoing professional development, is essential in ensuring practitioners are enabled to provide the most effective support possible to pupils. This is particularly important in the IM context, with emerging research on best practice being published regularly.

In the 2019 study on *The Additional Supports Required by Pupils with Special Educational Needs in IM Schools*, practitioners across the island of Ireland stated that they were not adequately prepared for teaching literacy in IM schools via ITE training⁷³.

Opportunities for ongoing professional development in relation to literacy development are further limited upon commencement of degree/postgraduate study with virtually no professional development available that focuses on literacy support in an IM context.

The EA Literacy Service does provide TPL opportunities on a number of literacy

⁷⁰ www.psychologytoday.com/ie/blog/life-bilingual/201903/dyslexia-bilingualism-and-learning-second-language?amp

⁷¹ <https://www.cogg.ie/wp-content/uploads/The-Additional-Supports-Required-by-Pupils-with-Special-Educational-Needs-in-IM-Schools.pdf>

⁷² <https://psycnet.apa.org/manuscript/2017-13234-001.pdf>

⁷³ <https://www.cogg.ie/wp-content/uploads/The-Additional-Supports-Required-by-Pupils-with-Special-Educational-Needs-in-IM-Schools.pdf>

elements, however, none of their current provision takes cognisance of the needs of bilingual pupils learning in IM schools. As can be seen from the outline above regarding the linguistic background of IM education the needs of the sector often differ to that of EME due to the fact that most pupils are learning through a second language.

Therefore, the professional development needs of teachers are more complex and should be considered further through the development of courses which focus only on the IM context⁷⁴.

Resources

The dearth of IM resources transcends all subject areas in IME. It is a particularly underdeveloped area in relation to SEND resources due to the aforementioned issues in relation to overall SEND provision.

Research⁷⁵ carried out in 2022 analysed the current resources available in IM to support pupils with SEND. This research surveyed

IM teachers and asked them to identify priority areas of need. In relation to literacy resources, these were:

- Irish-language graded readers
- language and communication resources in Irish
- text to language resources
- audio books
- applications in Irish including those to promote phonological development
- applications to develop the student's cognitive abilities / working memory
- spelling programmes

The creation of an Irish Language Framework for IM primary schools is a long-awaited and most-welcomed resource which should act as a springboard for the expeditious development of additional resources to support literacy development.

Priority Areas for Development:

- **Progression of linguistically appropriate literacy assessments to accurately assess IM pupils at all stages;**
- **Recruitment of dedicated IM literacy support personnel within EA Support Services and development of IME specific intervention;**
- **Enhancement of current ITE programmes to ensure IM teachers are adequately trained to support literacy development amongst IM pupils;**
- **Provision of ongoing TPL, via EA, which addresses needs of pupils learning in an immersion setting;**
- **Uplift in literacy resources, addressing identified priority areas, taking advantage of all-island opportunities if appropriate.**

⁷⁴ <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/12/12/909>

⁷⁵ https://gaeloideachas.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/GD_Executive_Summary_English_Digital.pdf

Dyscalculia or Specific Learning Difficulty – Mathematics/Numeracy

The current lack of external support for pupils presenting with numeracy difficulties is not an issue confined to the IM sector. Dedicated support in this area is currently not an offering available from EA support services on a sector-wide basis. Further support is required as pupils in IM schools are learning mathematical concepts through a second language, Irish. The importance of providing additional support to pupils around the development of maths language is noted internationally⁷⁶.

In regards to supporting IM pupils presenting with numeracy difficulties, research remains limited in this area however key challenges have been identified to date:⁷⁷

- Lack of awareness of effective pedagogies to promote numeracy development in an immersion setting;⁷⁸
- Lack of appropriate resources;
- Lack of available interventions, appropriate for pupils learning in immersion settings;
- Lack of professional development opportunities;
- At post-primary level, there is a significant dearth of qualified subject specialists, including Maths teachers who would bring expertise in this area.

Priority Areas for Development:

- **Further research into effective pedagogies for the development of numeracy amongst IM pupils;**
- **Development of appropriate interventions to support pupils presenting with numeracy difficulties in IM settings;**
- **Development of additional resources to promote numeracy development and support pupils presenting with numeracy difficulties in IM settings;**
- **Provision of TPL to enable IM teachers to appropriately support numeracy development through the medium of Irish;**
- **Creation of ITE pathways to allow IM ITE students to study Mathematics in conjunction with teaching qualification.**

⁷⁶ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13394-019-00302-0>

⁷⁷

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03323315.2022.2090985>

⁷⁸ [Exploiting the potential of bilingualism: IM primary mathematics teachers' self-reported practices in relation to utilising language-as-resource: Irish Educational Studies: Vol 37 , No 3 - Get Access \(tandfonline.com\)](#)

Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD)

When assessing for MLD, the current SEN Code of Practice recommends that the school should consult external specialists, including educational psychologists to monitor pupil progress and demonstrate that the pupil has not made significant progress and/or that the pupil's level of attainment is falling further behind that of the majority of pupils.⁷⁹

Pupils attending IM schools develop abilities in both English and in Irish. Research finds that the language knowledge of bilinguals is distributed across the two languages, and both languages interact with the cognitive and social development of the learners.⁸⁰

Therefore, it is essential that the Education Authority employ Educational Psychologists who have competence in both English and Irish so that they can appropriately detail the pupil's strengths in both languages and allow them to detail the impact of the pupil's learning difficulties across both languages.

⁷⁹ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/special-educational-needs-code-practice>

⁸⁰ *Struggling learners and the Language Immersion Classroom*, TW Fortune, 2011 (hard-copy publication)

A lack of understanding of typical bilingual development could lead to misdiagnosis of bilingual children.

The findings from Jean Ware's research on MLD⁸¹ in Welsh-medium education highlights the lack of research in relation to MLD and bilingualism.

Ware also highlighted the need to track language and literacy skills more longitudinally into secondary school, particularly in relation to pupils with MLD where their developmental age may affect the speed at which their language skills 'catch-up' with their monolingual peers.

Specific TPL opportunities which are aimed at equipping teachers with the necessary strategies to support pupils with MLD are required.

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[https://research.bangor.ac.uk/portal/en/researchoutputs/a-worthwhile-investment-assessing-and-valuing-educational-outcomes-for-children-and-young-people-with-send\(a045cc02-df84-49ee-891d-a7736b4b10b9\).html](https://research.bangor.ac.uk/portal/en/researchoutputs/a-worthwhile-investment-assessing-and-valuing-educational-outcomes-for-children-and-young-people-with-send(a045cc02-df84-49ee-891d-a7736b4b10b9).html)

Priority Areas for Development:

- **Recruitment within the EA of Educational Psychologists who have competence in both English and Irish so that they can appropriately detail the child's strengths in both languages and allow them to detail the impact of the child's MLD;**
- **Further research into MLD and bilingualism;**
- **Development of appropriate interventions to support pupils presenting with MLD in IM settings;**
- **Development of classroom strategies which support the linguistic needs of all children in the IM classroom with MLD;**
- **Provision of TPL to enable IM teachers to appropriately support the needs of children with MLD.**

Severe Learning Difficulties

Research is limited in the area of SLD and immersion education. CnaG is, however, aware of pupils within the IM sector with these needs and those who have had to leave the sector to avail of necessary support through the medium of English. There is currently no specialist support for these pupils.

Priority Areas for Development:

- ***Further research in relation to inclusion of pupils with SLD in immersion settings;***
- ***Scoping exercise into need for specialist provision for SLD and/or special school provision through the medium of Irish.***

SOCIAL, BEHAVIOURAL, EMOTIONAL AND WELL-BEING

Due to the nature of SBEW needs, identification, assessment and intervention will not differ between a monolingual and immersion setting. There is, however, a need to ensure that provision is available through the medium of Irish. This should include physical provision i.e. specialist provision, human resource as well as printed/digital resources in Irish to support pupil wellbeing.

Priority Areas for Development:

- ***Establishment of specialist provision to cater for IM pupils with SBEW needs;***
- ***Recruitment of support personnel with Irish language competence to support pupils attending IM settings;***
- ***Publication of SBEW resources in Irish (translated/adapted at a level appropriate for IM pupils).***

SPEECH, LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION NEEDS

Language and Communication

Pupil Profile in IM Context

The general linguistic profile and learning journey of pupils in IM schools differs from that of pupils learning in EM settings.

In relation to language and communication, it is important to note Francois Grosjean's assertion that a bilingual person is NOT the sum of two complete or incomplete monolinguals. Instead, people who are bilingual have a unique and specific linguistic configuration.⁸² When considering language and communication needs, therefore, a bilingual child's language ability across both/all their languages must be considered.

Current Provision

Currently, assessment, intervention and support is delivered monolingually in this

⁸²

https://www.francoisgrosjean.ch/bilin_bicult/3%20Grosjean.pdf

jurisdiction and, whilst some provision exists which takes cognisance of bilingualism and a bilingual pupil's profile, recommended practice has not been embedded on a system-wide, bilingually-appropriate basis.

Internationally it is recommended that bilingual assessment and interventions are provided for pupils with more than one language⁸³. The use of interpreters has also been suggested when professionals such as, speech and language therapists do not have the first language of the child. This is a practice used with those who have English as an additional language and this should be extended to those who are Irish/English bilinguals.

Referral

There are concerns about both under and over-referral of bilingual children to Speech & Language services.

Over-referral can occur when professionals do not take account of all the skills a

⁸³

<https://research.manchester.ac.uk/en/publications/providing-equitable-access-for-bilingual-children-adaptation-of-/>

bilingual child exhibits when all the languages they understand/speak are considered. Unfortunately, there is a practice of over referral of children with speech and language difficulties internationally when they cannot be assessed appropriately⁸⁴.

Under-referral has also been widely reported, the second language, for example, being mooted as a potential influence on first language development/exacerbating factor in relation to language and communication need. In these instances, cases have been reported where parents/carers have been advised to remove their child from the immersion setting and focus on single language development despite evidence showing that children with a language and communication disorder have the same type of disorder in both languages.

In the Scottish context, departments are encouraged to conduct audits of referrals to ensure that bilingual children are being

⁸⁴https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/8756870517707217?casa_token=hO8SuDByTmUAAAAA:QQW3tuKXEJyzYwBB7B2q5VoMH7o4tlwA34aA4kzYCoPO1QwRpkjhnwZTUa8JfFQGHbk6FqTV7KsQNA

referred in appropriate numbers (in relation to their representation in the local population) and to take remedial action when appropriate.

Assessment

Guidelines⁸⁵ from the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT), aimed at supporting pupils in Gàidhlig-medium settings in Scotland, provide insight into current flawed practices in assessing bilingual pupils presenting with language and communication difficulties:

- Often picture-based, essentially wordless/languageless, assessments are used to assess children's communication skills which would suggest a universality across languages. These assessments, however, seek monolingual responses and are compared with checklists, profiles or scoring systems that have been normed on the typically developing monolingual population.

⁸⁵ <https://www.rcslt.org/wp-content/uploads/media/Project/RCSLT/best-practice-cyp-bilingual-settings.pdf>

- Assessments are currently only available in English for areas such as verbal comprehension, expression, vocabulary development, articulation and phonology. The scores from such standardised assessments are often used to provide a clinical diagnosis and also as a referral pathway to access further support and intervention. Current practices, are to use translated versions of these assessments in the absence of bilingual equivalents, however translating assessment materials means that much is lost or altered by the act of translation. Languages do not work in the same way with varying grammar structures, syntaxes, phonologies etc.. and therefore scoring a translated assessment is meaningless.

The pitfalls of using such assessments to diagnose language and communication needs in a bilingual child is noted by the RCSLT:

- Incorrectly diagnosing insufficient additional language skills as a language and communication difficulty – often by considering each

of the pupil's languages in isolation rather than as a whole;

- Missing a core language and communication difficulty by assigning poor overall language development to bilingualism alone. Bilingualism does not cause or contribute to language and communication difficulties and cannot therefore explain overall insufficient language skills.

Specialist Provision

Currently no specialist provision for Language and Communication needs exists within IM and anecdotal evidence suggests a number of pupils have left the sector to avail of provision in EM.

Going forward

The following is based on best practice guidelines from the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists issued to professionals in Scotland who are working with children attending Gàidhlig-medium education settings.⁸⁶

As stated by the RCSLT:

“The overarching aim of intervention with any child with SLCD is to facilitate the child to use their speech, language and communication skills to their maximum potential. Bilingual children are no different. It is important to remember that typically developing bilingual children are on a trajectory that brings them to the endpoint of confident bilingualism. This is therefore the aim for bilingual children with SLCD. The evidence base on bilingualism clearly shows that for both typical learners and those with SLCD, those children who have ‘cracked the code’ for one language are very well equipped with the phonological and linguistic skills to acquire an additional language. For this reason, there is a strong

indication that home language is the best language to select for therapeutic input.”

- RCSLT guidelines state that the SLT should provide ‘...intervention in the individual’s mother tongue and support the family in their use of mother tongue when necessary/appropriate’. With a growing population of children for whom Irish is the home/first language, there is a pressing need to ensure interventions exist through that medium.
- In relation to pupils for whom English is the dominant home language, research shows that pupils with a well-developed home language are better at acquiring additional languages, and so therapy should be encouraged in the home language initially. It is also likely that the home language is the best language model for the pupil, as this is the language the parent knows best. This means that SLTs should support the development of the pupil’s first language (i.e. English). Therapy in the first language,

however, does not preclude the pupil from engaging in everyday lessons in Irish. If correctly supported, the bilingual child with language and communication needs should progress in both their home language and Irish as effectively and quickly as possible.

- The guidelines issued by the RCSLT state that in order to gain the most representative language sample, the child should be assessed by a bilingual professional who the child knows can speak their languages. Currently, SLTs in this jurisdiction are overwhelmingly monolingual English speakers and training and recruitment practices take place in this manner.
- Research into typical Irish-language development is in its infancy and therefore requires further commissioning. Regarding assessments, the RCSLT states that, “ultimately, the development of both monolingual and bilingual data sets for assessments developed in a culturally sensitive manner” should also be funded.

⁸⁶ <https://www.rcslt.org/wp-content/uploads/media/Project/RCSLT/best-practice-cyp-bilingual-settings.pdf>

Priority Areas for Development:

- **Active training/recruitment of speech and language therapists with competence in the Irish language to begin to build a workforce to meet the needs of bilingual pupils in IM settings;**
- **Commissioning of research into typical Irish-language development in relation to language and communication development;**
- **Development of linguistically appropriate assessment tools to accurately assess bilingual pupils learning in IM settings;**
- **Adaptation/creation of linguistically appropriate resources and interventions to support language and communication development amongst IM pupils.**

Autism Spectrum Disorder

In recent years, more research has been carried out into bilingualism and autism. Much of the contemporary research counters the previously-held belief that bilingualism, or learning in a bilingual/immersion setting, negatively impacts on an autistic person's development.

Research has shown that bilingualism does not cause additional difficulties in relation to language development for autistic children nor a delay in the development of thinking skills⁸⁷. With regards to the latter, bilingualism can help autistic children to further develop these skills.

Whilst little research exists in relation to children who are minimally speaking or non-speaking, what is available suggests that exposure to additional languages does not delay development – “not speaking” does not mean “not understanding” and these pupils have the right to engage in their

⁸⁷https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1362361320937845?utm_source=summon&utm_medium=disc_very-provider

community and in education through all languages.⁸⁸

Research also conveys the advantages bilingualism can have for autistic pupils including:

- the development of social and social-cognitive skills, particularly in relation to understanding other peoples' point of view
- increased self-esteem
- increased access to leisure, education and professional opportunities

Previously, parents/carers have been advised to remove their children from immersion education settings⁸⁹. Recommending a child is raised monolingually, however, should not be the default position, particularly in light of prevailing research. Rather, parents/carers should be made aware of current research in order to allow them to make informed

⁸⁸ <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/kz3c2>

⁸⁹ https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09500782.2021.1918707?casa_token=puZrdXYD3zoAAAAA%3AKQRqTQ8FqqzGhLCluhConJkYpj2ezUTpQ9lf6emxMHhKRHUNYIBXmOWleB6Ao6sazbPdKYZB7SuOPQVxVg

decisions about the language environment for their child. Appropriate support and provision should be in place to support autistic pupils who then choose a bilingual/immersion setting.

Support for Autistic Pupils

Currently, outside of the school setting, support for autistic pupils is delivered, in the most part, on a monolingual basis in NI. Limited resources are available in Irish but all training and support for educators is focused on monolingual practices and settings. There is a need for a better understanding of autism and bilingualism amongst all those tasked with providing support for autistic pupils. There is also a need for more early intervention supports to be made available to pupils learning through Irish. Early intervention is key to ensuring a pupil can meet their potential⁹⁰.

There is a dearth of research to identify effective practices to support additional language acquisition amongst autistic pupils

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<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9923898/>

and an ongoing misunderstanding of autistic people's abilities in this area. Therefore, further research is needed into effective pedagogies that support autistic pupils learning in bilingual/immersion settings to promote inclusion rather than exclusion.⁹¹

Additionally, linguistically appropriate resources are required to support pupils in accessing the curriculum in a manner that is supportive of their learning needs and strategies. At present, there is a lack of such resources through the medium of Irish for pupils learning in IM settings.⁹²

Priority Areas for Development:

- ***Commissioning of additional research on effectively supporting autistic pupils attending immersion settings;***
- ***Recruitment of support personnel with Irish language competence to support pupils attending IM settings i.e. IM personnel employed in DE-funded Middletown Centre for Autism;***
- ***Provision of TPL on effectively supporting autistic pupils attending immersion settings;***
- ***Increased availability of resources in Irish (translated/adapted at a level appropriate for IM pupils).***

⁹¹

<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.741182/full>

⁹² <https://schools.local-offer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/An-Evidence-Based-Guide-to-Autism-and-Bilingualism.pdf>

PHYSICAL

As identified, the schools' estate, particularly in the IM sector, is not adequately catering for pupils with disabilities.

60% of IM schools are housed in accommodation that is not fit-for-purpose, denying some pupils with disabilities access to IM provision. This means that there are physical barriers in place for these pupils when accessing IM education. However, this barrier is one that can only be removed by support and intervention from DE.

Priority Areas for Development:

- ***Capital investment to ensure access to IME for all pupils.***