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Educational psychological provision in Irish-medium primary schools in indigenous Irish language speaking communities (Gaeltacht): Views of teachers and educational psychologists

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Abstract

Background: Schools located in indigenous Irish-speaking areas collectively known as the *Gaeltacht* are unique in terms of their sociocultural and linguistic identity and important in the key role they play in the preservation of the language. Those situated in Category A Gaeltacht districts are Irish-medium schools in communities with the strongest use of Irish and are the focus of the present study. Educational psychologists (EPs) who work with these schools are challenged to provide culturally and linguistically sensitive services for these schools. The EPs' work is impacted by state policies in relation to language planning, Irish language education and inclusive education.

Aims: This qualitative research study aims to describe the views and experiences of EPs and teachers in relation to educational psychological services in primary schools in Category A districts in the Gaeltacht. It explores how the service meets the needs of schools and students and seeks to identify barriers in provision.

Method: The study is underpinned by Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theoretical framework and the bilingual education and sociocultural theories of Jim Cummins. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four EPs and

eleven teachers working in Category A schools. The transcribed interview data were analysed using thematic analysis.

Results: The findings are presented under identified themes using relevant transcript extracts in original and translated form and the findings are interpreted in the light of the theoretical frameworks adopted and relevant literature. Key findings indicate that both EPs and teachers were happy with the new models of special education support and consultation in operation in the schools and were also positively disposed towards Irish-medium education. However, the findings also reveal that the quality of educational psychological and special education services is adversely impacted by factors such as inadequate translation services, the lack of suitable assessment tools and assessors who were not fully proficient in Irish.

Conclusion: The findings highlight the urgent need for macro-level policies relating to children's education in indigenous Irish-speaking communities to be matched by practices that ensure educational psychological services such as consultation, interventions and assessments can be provided in a timely fashion through the medium of Irish. Recommendations include improved translation services, assessment through the medium of Irish, professional training for psychologists working with this cultural and linguistic minority and recruitment of psychologists who are competent Irish speakers.

INTRODUCTION

The last three decades in Ireland have seen major advances in the quality of educational provision for primary school children, most notably in the terms of its policies relating to the inclusion of children frequently marginalized due to disability, social class, poverty or migrant status. Having signed up to the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly, 1989) and through the enactment of inclusive legislation in the field of education [e.g., Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (Government of Ireland, 2004)], the Irish State is working towards a model of education in which all children can be educated in mainstream schools, where linguistic and cultural diversity is welcomed and additional learning needs supported. Since the foundation of the State, Ireland has had a bilingual education policy as Irish and English are its official languages.

Today most primary school children are educated in English-medium schools where Irish is taught as a subject only, while a small minority (7.7%) are educated in Irish-medium schools (Department of Education & Skills [DES], 2020). A distinction must be made here between Irish medium schools in traditional Irish-speaking areas known as the *Gaeltacht* (*n* = 105), which are the focus of this study, and Irish medium schools outside the Gaeltacht (*n* = 150) referred to as Gaelscoileanna (Gaeloideachas, 2021). The *Gaeltacht* is defined as "areas in Ireland where the Irish language is, or was until the recent past, the main spoken language of a substantial number of the local population" (Údarás na Gaeltachta, 2019). The main Gaeltacht areas are found in small rural communities on the western seaboard. The population of the Gaeltacht is 96,090, approximately 2% of the total population of Ireland. Census data show a steady decline in the proportion of persons aged 3 years and over in Gaeltacht areas with an ability to speak Irish in the last 50 years (from 86.6% in 1961 to 66% in 2016). In the most recent census (CSO, 2016), only 22% of those able to speak Irish in the Gaeltacht report they are daily speakers of the language outside of education, down 11% from Census 2011. Ó Giollagáin and Charlton (2015) examined Irish language use in 155 *Gaeltacht* communities and found that only 21 had two-thirds or more (67%) daily speakers of Irish. The authors attributed the decline in Irish language use to the failure of agencies to support the needs of Gaeltacht communities and the failure of the education system to support the development of Irish speakers and learners.

Gaeltacht children have the right to be taught all subjects, other than English, through the medium of Irish. This situation compares favourably to most indigenous minorities worldwide who do not have the possibility of being educated through the mother tongue (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2014). The Education Act (1998) placed responsibility on Gaeltacht schools "to contribute to the maintenance of Irish as the primary community language in Gaeltacht areas" and "to promote the language and cultural needs of students" (Department of Education & Science, 1999, Section 6). Given their mainly rural location, most Gaeltacht schools are small, having 1–3 teachers (Mac Donnacha et al., 2005). Mac Donnacha et al. (2005) classified Gaeltacht schools according to the percentage of daily Irish speakers in the district in which each school was situated. Using this metric, 30% of schools were classified as Category A: in districts where Irish is spoken daily by 67% or more of the population. Sixteen per cent were classified as Category B: in districts where Irish is spoken by 44%–66% of the population while the remainder (53%) were in Category C districts: where Irish is spoken by less than 44% of the population. Given the key role which Category A schools play in the preservation of the language, culture and economic life of the Gaeltacht, it is important that these schools receive the supports needed to ensure their students can learn and communicate through the medium of Irish.

Studies highlight inconsistent practices in the use of Irish as the language of instruction in Gaeltacht schools and attribute declining levels of Irish-medium instruction to the decline in Irish language use in the local community (Ó Giollagáin & Charlton, 2015; hIfearnáin, 2007; Parsons & Lyddy, 2009). Official statistics from 2016 report that only 76% of Gaeltacht schools function through the medium of Irish (DES, 2016a). Research also indicates a fall in the use of Irish as a medium of communication in Gaeltacht schools (Ó Duibhir et al. (2015, p. 9). This shift to the majority language for communication is also attributed to the decline in the use of Irish as a community language (CSO, 2016; Giollagáin et al., 2007; Ó Giollagáin & Charlton, 2015; Péterváry et al., 2014). Given the falling levels of Irish use in Gaeltacht communities and in schools, it is not surprising that levels of proficiency in oral Irish among Gaeltacht pupils are reported as having fallen in the last two decades (Harris et al., 2006; Mac Donnacha et al., 2005; Ó Duibhir et al., 2015; Péterváry et al., 2014).

In an effort to identify strategies to help stem the decline in the use of Irish among pupils in Gaeltacht schools, a review was conducted by Ó Duibhir et al. (2015) examining heritage language primary education settings abroad which resemble Irish-medium education (IME) in Category A Gaeltacht schools. A number of examples of effective practices were identified which were linked with good outcomes. For example, in the case of the Basque, key factors which had a positive impact on language use within the school context included a high number of native speakers in the school, the school located in a community with a large number of native speakers, a high standard of Basque spoken among teachers and access to events and activities where Basque is used (Ó Duibhir et al., 2015, p. 35). The provision

of funding for training teachers of Basque to organize and promote cultural activities in the school was also identified as important. A key factor identified in the case of Catalan schools was the ready availability of (published) teaching materials in the language. In the case of French-medium schools in Canada, practices highlighted included dedicated committees that source material specific to the needs of the schools and the opportunity for teachers to access online support, to share knowledge with one another, obtain teaching materials and access good practice videos.

A new 5-year policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017–2022 has responded to concerns regarding the status of IME in the Gaeltacht (DES, 2017a). It aims to ensure that Irish medium instruction is the first choice of parents in each of the Gaeltacht areas and to enhance the capacity of professional staff to deliver their services through Irish. Schools in all Gaeltacht areas have been invited to "seek recognition as a Gaeltacht school" (DES, 2017b, p. 2) by committing to a staged process, over a period of 5 years. This commitment involves the school engaging in a self-evaluation process and they are required to develop an action plan to fulfil requirements set out in the policy. Building ties with local communities as a way of promoting the use of Irish is a central aspect of the recognition process.

Educational psychological services in Gaeltacht schools

The first psychological service to primary schools in Ireland was established on a pilot basis by the Department of Education in 1990. The years that followed saw the service extended and, in 1999, the National Educational Psychological Services (NEPS) was established as a dedicated agency of the Department of Education and Science (Parkinson, 2004). In these early days of the service, much of the work of the educational psychologist (EP) centred on pupil assessment. However, in 2004, a working group recommended a model of service that would "provide all its services, whether in relation to individual case work or support and development work, by way of a collaborative problem-solving approach" (NEPS, 2004, p. 3), reducing expectations that assessment alone would solve the problem. Thus, consultation entered the discourse of EP practice in Ireland and is now becoming the norm for EP practice in Irish schools. Wagner (2000) described consultation as "a voluntary, collaborative, non-supervisory approach, established to aid the functioning of a system and its inter-related systems" (p. 11). Its aim is to bring about change by engaging in a recursive process at an individual, group or organizational level (Leadbetter, 2000; Wagner, 2000).

In 2002, NEPS introduced a staged model in relation to casework. This evolved into the continuum of support framework (Department of Education & Science, 2007) which encompassed early intervention, assessment over time and, in context, the matching of need with support. Consultation is expected to take place at each of the three stages of the continuum of support: (1) classroom support for all, (2) school support for some and (3) school support plus. In the case of the latter, the focus is on engaging with support staff, parents and other relevant professionals in a detailed problem-solving process to help students with complex needs and/or severe difficulties and often involves a psychological assessment by the EP. While there is some evidence showing the positive contribution of consultation to inclusive practices in Irish schools (Nugent et al., 2014), the implementation of the approach has been hindered over the years due to different systems of resource allocation and the focus on assessment (O'Farrell & Kinsella, 2018). The model of allocation of resources in primary schools has gone from a system based on assessed need through a formal psychological diagnosis (Shevlin et al., 2013) to a General Allocation Model (Department of Education & Science, 2005) where resources were sanctioned based on school's demographic needs, to the current special education teaching (SET) allocation model (DES, 2017b) where resources are allocated on a needs basis by schools. Key aims of this current SET model are as follows: to provide immediate support for children rather than having to wait for individual psycho-educational assessments; use a response to intervention (RTI) approach; remove pressure to label children; support schools by employing educational psychologists (EPs) in the identification and support of students with additional learning and behavioural needs and support EPs to be more involved in consultation at a casework level (DES, 2018). Such a consultative model of practice for EPs working

with linguistically and culturally diverse minorities has been advocated in the literature owing to its flexibility to adapt to the needs of different groups (Olvera & Olvera, 2015).

EPs are expected to possess certain competencies for working with linguistic minorities such as (i) having a clear understanding of bilingualism within the context of an assessment, (ii) using assessment instruments that are sensitive to linguistic and cultural differences, (iii) the ability to speak the native language with the student and in consulting with parents and (iv) writing psychological reports in a culturally sensitive manner and using appropriate comparison groups (Rogers & Lopez, 2002). A survey by Marshall et al. (2014) of EPs working in Irish schools, however, reported that only 9% rated their oral Irish proficiency as 'high' while 47% rated it as 'average'. Although there are no specific guidelines for EPs working with children in Gaeltacht schools or Irish-medium schools, the 20 Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010–2030 (Government of Ireland, 2010) recommended all services in Irish medium schools be available through Irish and a recent progress report (Department for Education, 2015) stated that NEPS "indicated that they would require bilingual educational psychologists in certain regional locations and have provided training for their psychologists." The Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) also recognizes cultural and linguistic competence as a defining feature of ethical practice among psychologists and regarding standards for professional doctoral training in educational psychology it states that: "competence in Irish should be considered an additional positive criterion to address the needs of Gaelscoileanna/Gaeltacht schools and Irish speaking clients" (PSI, 2017, p. 14).

Theoretical frameworks

The bioecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) is seen as an applicable theoretical framework for our research. Bronfenbrenner in his early ecological approach saw the child's environment as characterized by four core systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem. The most direct influences, closest to the child (e.g., family and friends), were envisaged as being embedded or nested within those located more remotely from the individual (e.g., political systems and cultural contexts). The model is often represented visually as a series of concentric circles with the child at the centre of these systems. The *microsystem* includes aspects of the environment impacting on the daily life of the child (family, teacher and friends). The *mesosystem* represents the interconnections between two or more settings (such as school, peer group and family) and their impact on the child. More distant influences are found in the *exosystem* such as school policies, school ethos or culture. The outer *macrosystem* includes environmental influences which take place at a societal or political level, for example, legislation and sociocultural practices. A later model introduced the *chronosystem*, which represents change or continuity across time and which influences each of the other systems. Bronfenbrenner adapted his theory for the bioecological model placing greater emphasis on the processes (objective behaviours and psychological states such as attitudes) that translate these contextual experiences into development, thereby acknowledging child agency in managing their environment (Hayes et al., 2017, pp. 13–27).

The present research is also underpinned by the bilingual education theories and conceptual perspectives of Jim Cummins. These include his Interdependence Principle which states that

> To the extent that instruction in Lx is effective in promoting proficiency in Lx, transfer of this proficiency to Ly will occur provided there is adequate exposure to Ly (either in school or environment) and adequate motivation to learn Ly (Cummins, 1981, p. 29).

This theory implies the existence of a Common Underlying Proficiency whereby having a strong foundation in one language will facilitate language development in the other. This proficiency involves cognitive abilities and skills (e.g., memory and auditory discrimination) and specific conceptual and linguistic knowledge derived from experience and learning (e.g., vocabulary). All these skills can take up to 7 years to acquire and are referred to as Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency,

deemed necessary for academic advancement. In contrast, Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) can be attained quite easily in a second language (<2 years) but students possessing BICS alone would struggle academically (Cummins, 2000, 2001). Cummins's threshold hypothesis holds that there are threshold levels of proficiency which bilinguals must attain in both languages to maximize their cognitive academic and linguistic skills (Cummins, 2000, p. 37). Evidence from bilingual and heritage language programmes worldwide shows support for this theory (e.g., Swain & Lapkin, 1991). Later, Cummins proposed a theoretical framework for the inclusion of culturally and linguistically diverse pupils. In this framework, macro-level coercive language/educational policies are seen as undermining or discriminating against linguistic minorities in various ways, for example, through the use of culturally and linguistically biased ability testing, teachers who have minimal information on the patterns of language and social development of pupils and the absence of professionals capable of communicating in the language of culturally diverse students and their parents. Such coercive policies can, according to Cummins, be challenged and negotiated at a local level through micro-interactions among educators, students and communities thereby empowering students in their learning and affirming their identities (Cummins, 2001, pp. 315–323).

Aims and objectives

The present study sets out to investigate educational psychological provision in Gaeltacht schools in strong speaking Irish communities from the perspectives of EPs and teachers working in these schools. The study was guided by the following research objectives:

1. To describe the experiences of EPs and teachers in relation to educational psychological services in primary schools in Category A districts in the Gaeltacht.
2. To explore how educational psychological services meet the needs of these schools and their students.
3. To identify barriers in the provision of educational psychological services to these Gaeltacht schools.

METHODS

A qualitative research paradigm was adopted for the design which facilitated access to the subjective world of the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee in University College Dublin (December 2018) and NEPS Research Advisory Committee.

The research team

The research team included a final year doctoral student in educational psychology (second author) who is also a native Irish speaker from the Gaeltacht and a researcher with expertise in bilingual education (first author).

Participants

Purposeful sampling methods (Cohen et al., 2011) were employed to identify teachers and EPs who worked in category A Gaeltacht primary schools in the three different *Gaeltachtaí* (referred to as Gaeltacht 1, 2 or 3). EPs from NEPS who provide services to these schools were contacted by their regional directors and invited to participate. Four agreed and they in turn recruited a total of 11 teachers from schools in which they provide services. Table 1 provides details of participants and the school location;

TABLE 1 Participants by role and school location

Participant	Role	School location
EP 1	Educational Psychologist	Gaeltacht 1
EP 2	Educational Psychologist	Gaeltacht 1
EP 3	Educational Psychologist	Gaeltacht 2
EP 4	Educational Psychologist	Gaeltacht 3
T 1	Teaching Principal	Gaeltacht 1
T 2	Special Education Teacher	Gaeltacht 1
T 3	Special Education Teacher	Gaeltacht 1
T 4	Class Teacher	Gaeltacht 1
T 5	Teaching Principal	Gaeltacht 1
T 6	Teaching Principal	Gaeltacht 1
T 7	Special Education Teacher	Gaeltacht 1
T 8	Special Education Teacher	Gaeltacht 3
T 9	Principal/ Special Education Teacher	Gaeltacht 3
T 10	Principal/ Special Education Teacher	Gaeltacht 2
T 11	Special Education Teacher	Gaeltacht 2

Abbreviations: EP, Educational Psychologist; T, Teacher.

to protect identities, the geographical location of the Gaeltacht involved is not given. The abbreviations EP and T are used when referring to the Educational Psychologist and Teacher respectively.

Interviews

Separate semi-structured interview schedules (Irish and English versions) were developed for the psychologists and teachers. Initial questions were designed to build a positive rapport with the participants (Robson & McCartan, 2016). The subsequent questions were clustered into topic-based sections that reflected the research aims. The topics included the EP's and the teacher's experience of working in Gaeltacht schools, the sociolinguistic factors that impact on their work there, the cultural and linguistic competencies necessary for completing their work, the impact of relevant policies and action plans and the ways in which the specific needs of Gaeltacht schools are met with regards to consultation, assessment and intervention. Follow-up questions and prompts were used to develop responses, elicit descriptive information and gain a detailed insight into the participants' own experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Face-to-face interviews were conducted by the second author with 13 participants in their workplaces between February and June 2019. EP 3 and T 9 were unable to participate in person and so these two interviews were conducted over the phone. Thirteen interviews were conducted through the medium of Irish and two through English.

Analysis

The EP and teacher interviews, consisting of 538 min of audio recording, were transcribed and analysed using an inductive approach to generate subthemes and themes. Thematic analysis was chosen as a systematic method to organize and analyse the data sets because it provides a structure for detecting themes and patterns of shared meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Quality criteria

We followed guidance specific to qualitative research to ensure the quality of the project (Levitt, 2018). Threats to internal and external validity were addressed using a range of strategies. Neutrality was ensured by selecting schools in three different Gaeltacht areas and employing two different participant perspectives (Crotty, 1998; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Reflexivity was applied to address researcher positionality and to scrutinize any tensions that arose when interpreting the data (Willig & Stainton Rogers, 2017). Validation of coded transcripts by participants was offered to establish the credibility of data and this was accepted by five participants (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In addition, approximately 30% of transcripts were coded separately by the first author and second author and results were discussed until agreement on codes and themes was reached. Finally, extensive use of participant quotes ensured transparency of the coding process used in the analysis of data.

RESULTS

Figure 1 shows the list of themes and subthemes generated for both sets of participants.

Findings of the EP thematic analysis will be presented first, followed by the analysis of teacher interviews while the final section will look at common themes across the two sets of data. For ease of reading, extracts in Irish are italicized and are followed by English language translations in square brackets, that is, []. Double parentheses, that is, (()) within the transcriptions, indicate the researchers' own descriptions, and underscoring indicates a form of stress in the interviewees pitch (Silverman, 2014).

Section 1 EP interviews

A major theme in EP transcripts related to the impact of the *IME* on their work and this theme is further subdivided into four subthemes. One of these subthemes, *Positive attitude to Irish* captures EPs' goodwill towards the language and its culture. All four EPs were parents themselves and either wished to raise their children through Irish or enrol their children in an Irish medium school for various reasons. One explained:
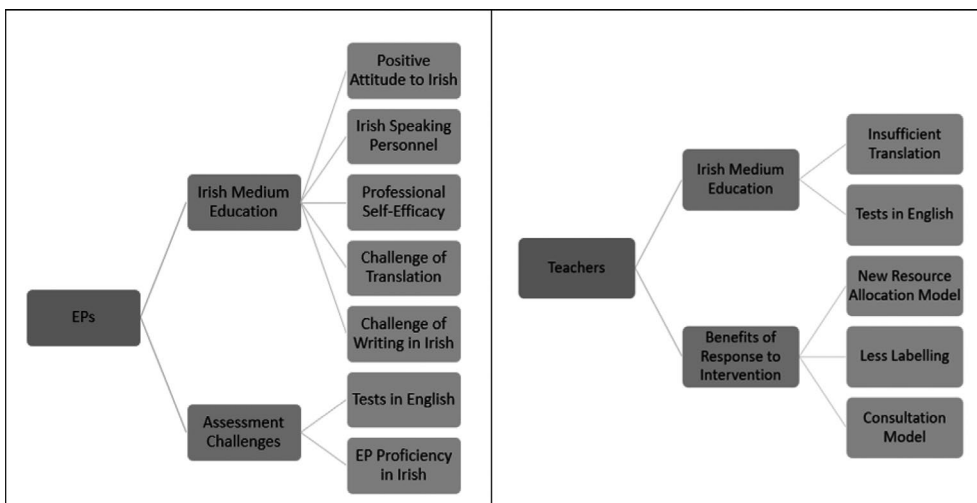

FIGURE 1   Thematic map of EP and Teacher transcript analysis

> Tá mise á thógaint mo pháistí trí Ghaeilge…muna thugaim aon rud eile dóibh ba bhreá liom go mbeadh siad in ann an teanga dúchais a bhí ag an tír seo a labhairt.

> [I am raising my children through Irish…if I give them anything, I want them to be able to speak our country's native language.] **EP 4**

The subtheme *Irish Speaking Personnel* relates to the perceived disconnect between Irish language education policy and its implementation. There was criticism of visiting professionals to the school who cannot speak Irish. For example,

> Tá difríocht mór idir polasaí agus cur i bhfeidhm… Ní féidir leat é a dhéanamh gan acmhainní agus is é an bunacmhainn a theastaíonn anseo ná Gaeilgeoirí

> [There is a big difference between policy and implementation… You cannot do it without resources and the primary resource is Irish speakers.] **EP 1**

EP 2 also criticized the failure to recruit Irish-speaking professionals to work in the Gaeltacht "But the educational psychological service don't recruit for Irish… Psychologists need to be actively recruited who want to go and work there."

Professional Self-Efficacy is a sub-theme capturing EPs' feelings of self-competence working in IME settings. All EPs were knowledgeable about bilingual language acquisition theory and, in particular, the work of Jim Cummins. EP 1 noted the difference between Gaeltacht and Canadian immersion contexts, particularly the fact that Irish is an endangered minority language.

> Tá an Fhraincís agus an Béarla thar a bheith láidir i gCeanada. Anois, ní mar a chéile é in Éirinn. Tá an Béarla ag brú isteach chuile lá ar an miontheanga, an Ghaeilge.

> [There is a strong use of French and English in Canada. Now, this is not the case in Ireland. Every day English is threatening the minority language, Irish.] **EP 1**

A related subtheme was **Challenge of Translation**. The delay in providing an Irish version of a key document meant that EP 4 had to translate it themselves for an upcoming presentation to Gaeltacht teachers.

> So nuair a théann tú ar ár suíomh anseo, tá sean-leagan ar fáil as Gaeilge ach níl an leagan is déanaí ar fáil. Ansin nuair atá ort…cur i láthair a dhéanamh leis na múinteoirí bhí orm é sin a dhéanamh…é a aistriú ó Bhéarla go Gaeilge.

> [So when you go on the website, there is the older version in Irish but the most recent version is not available. Then when I had to…present this to teachers I had to do it…translate it from English to Irish.] **EP 4**

EP 1 acknowledged that translated versions are often provided but the delay in providing them was frustrating.

> …Ní fheicimse cén fáth nach féidir na rudaí seo a dhéanamh i bhfad níos sciopta.

> […I don't understand why these things cannot be done sooner.] **EP 1**

The same psychologist also acknowledged the pressure on Gaeltacht teachers to translate documents such as intervention resources.

The final IME sub-theme is *Challenge of Writing in Irish*. Notwithstanding EPs' high levels of Irish-speaking proficiency, they lacked confidence in their ability to write Irish for professional purposes and would appreciate training in the area. EP 3 remarked "I personally never wrote reports in Irish because I would feel you either need to be a native speaker or have Irish to degree - masters level… the language is a very different type of language. It's a technical language." EP 4 would like to be sure of her accuracy:

> … ba bhreá liom dá mbeinn cinnte go mbeadh an Ghaeilge cruinn istigh ansan so ba bhreá liom mé fhéin go mbeadh an scríobh níos fearr agam.

> [I, myself, would like to be sure that the Irish is accurate so I would like to improve my writing skills]. **EP 4**

It is worth noting that EP 1 had requested support and training in the area and had received it.

Another main theme is *Assessment Challenges* and has two subthemes (i) *Tests in English* and (ii) *EP proficiency in Irish*. In the case of the former, EPs were unhappy with the situation where tests are only available in English. As EP 1 explains

> Má tá muid ag cur, ag déanamh tástáil ar pháistí sa Bhéarla, tá sé iomlán mícheart…má tá tú le freastal agus le deis a thabhairt don pháiste sin an pictiúir a tharraingt, caithfidh tú an deis a thabhairt dóibh iad fhéin a chur in iúl ina theanga féin.

> [If we are administering tests in English, it is entirely unfair…if you are to fully understand the child, you have to give them the opportunity to present themselves in their native language].

EP 3 thought that all EPs should to be proficient in Irish to be able to recognize when a child is struggling because of working through his/her weaker language (English). They gives an example of a child using knowledge of the Irish phoneme, instead of the expected English phoneme in a non-word reading test: "If they read the pseudoword 'rith' as 'ri' then you give them the point" (this is because the Irish word for 'run' is 'rith' and pronounced /ri/). The different dialects of Irish can also pose a challenge for testing even when the EP is proficient in Irish, EP 1 pointed out the difficulty in the case of vocabulary items:

> *Sa* WISC-IV *na* 'Similarities' (subtest) *, abair,* 'oighear' *agus* 'gal', 'ice' *agus* 'steam', *right? Dúirt mise "An bhfuil aon chosúlachtaí idir 'gal' agus 'oighear?" Agus dúirt sé liom 'gal, b'shin a chaitheann tú". Samhlaigh!…..*

> [In the WISC-V, 'Similarities (subtest)', say, ice and steam right? I said "How are *oighear* ((ice)) and *gal* ((steam)) alike?' And he said 'gal' ((cigarette)), is that what you smoke. Imagine!.] **EP 1**

Section 2: Teacher interviews

The general theme of *IME* was also generated in the analysis of teacher data but with fewer subthemes. Under the subtheme *Insufficient Translation*, teachers pointed to a general lack of materials, tests and evidence-based interventions in Irish. There was praise, however, for the development of Irish literacy resources (specifically Irish phonics programmes). Like EPs, teachers feel under pressure to translate texts and particularly as under the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme (DES, 2017a) their schools are required to operate fully through the medium of Irish. T 3 and T 1 highlighted these additional demands:

> Mar mhúinteoirí nuair atá tú faoi dhualgas i dtaobh rudaí a mhúineadh trí Ghaeilge ach níl do chuid acmhainní ar fáil i nGaeilge, cuireann sé brú ort
>
> [As teachers who have a duty to teach through the medium of Irish but who do not have the resources in Irish, it puts pressure on you] **T 3**
>
> Tá múinteoirí Gaeltachta ag aistriú an t-am ar fad agus tá sé ag tógáil suas an t-uafás ama orainn.
>
> [Gaeltacht teachers are translating the whole time and it is taking up a lot of our time.] **T 1**

One teacher (T 9) felt there was too much work involved in translating a specific social and emotional learning intervention and so opted not to implement it, despite having completed the relevant training for delivering it. Teacher 6 also reported how their school felt obliged to translate a screening test in order to document students' learning progress.

> Fiú amháin an scrúdú mar shampla, an bhfuil a fhios agat an MIST ((Middle Infant Screening Test))…aistríonn muid é sin chomh maith is atá muid in ann, sa Ghaeilge
>
> [Even the assessment, you know the MIST ((Middle Infant Screening Test))…we translate that as well as we can to Irish.] **T 6**

More generally teachers reported having to access Irish translations of specific Special Educational Needs (SEN) terms. In this regard, T 3 suggested providing a glossary of SEN terms for teachers.

> Dá mbeadh sórt gluais curtha ar fáil ag an seirbhís síceolaíochta oideachas do mo leithéidse leis na téarmaí uilig i mBéarla agus i nGaeilge le foclóir nó nathanna.
>
> [I would like if the educational psychological service made a glossary available or terms] **T 3**

The subtheme *Tests in English* reflects teachers' concerns about the use of tests in English with native Irish-speaking children in the Gaeltacht. T 9 highlighted the unfairness of using a second-grade standardized reading test in English with second-grade children who have only had 2 years formal reading instruction.

> níl sé féaráilte ar bhealach a bheith ag cur scrúdú rang a dó ar ghasúir i scoil Gaeltachta atá ag foghlaim go hiomlán trí mheán na Gaeilge …nach bhfuil ach cineál dhá bhliain caite acu ag léamh go foirmeálta.
>
> [it is not fair in a way that children in second class in a Gaeltacht school who are learning solely through the medium of Irish… who have only been learning to read formally for two years.] **T 9**

The next main theme in teacher interviews is *Benefits of RTI*. Three subthemes were identified. The first of these, *New Resource Allocation Model*, captures teachers' positive response to how the new SET model (DES, 2017b) allows teachers to work more effectively and in a manner consistent with the NEPS continuum of support model (Department of Education & Science, 2007), for example, the way it empowers teachers to intervene earlier with pupils, as soon as a need becomes evident.

> Bíonn tú ag faire amach don dream óg atá tar éis theacht isteach, an féidir leat intervention a dhéanamh chomh luath agus is féidir..

[You are looking out for the younger students that have just started, seeing if you can respond to their needs as quickly as possible…] **T 8**

The subtheme *Less Labelling* also reflects the positive impact of the new model in eliminating labelling of children with additional support needs. T 5 described the stigma attached to labels and the damage they can do.

Má chuirtear lipéad ortsa ag aois an-óg tá sé in ann an-damáiste a dhéanamh…. Ní féidir dul siar air.

[If you are labelled at a young age it can cause a lot of damage… There is no going back.] **T 5**

The subtheme, *Consultation Model*, captures teacher's endorsement of the move to a consultative approach in delivering EP services in schools. Words such as 'advice', 'guidance' and 'monitoring' show that teachers feel supported in the staged approach to intervention.

Déanann sí cuid mhór comhairle, deireann sí right amharcfaimid cá bhfuil an bpáiste seo, má dhéanaim an measúnú b'féidir nach bhfuil muid chun rud ar bith a fháil, so b'féidir amharcfaimid cá bhfuil an bpáiste seo agus iarrfaimid comhairle ansin.

[She does a lot of consultation, she says "Right, we will see where this child is at. If we do an assessment, we might not find out anything, so, perhaps, we will monitor where the child is at and we can request consultation then…"] **T 11**.

Converging themes in EP and teacher interviews

From the findings, it is clear both groups of participants are very well disposed to the Irish language and IME generally and are committed to the implementation of current policies in relation to Gaeltacht education. However, one dominant common theme relates to challenges experienced due to *poor assessment policies* in Gaeltacht schools. As there are no psychological tests in Irish, EPs are obliged to use tests standardized on English-speaking populations to assess pupils. In this regard, an assessor's proficiency in Irish is seen by EPs and teachers as particularly important to know when a native Irish-speaking pupil is struggling for example, due to dialect confusion or lack of academic English terminology. The subtheme *Tests in English* found in multiple teacher extracts refers to the unsuitability of using standardized tests in English with Gaeltacht pupils. Teachers see a lack of equity and fairness when decisions are made based on these tests alone.

A second frequent theme found in EP and teacher interviews relates to *translation policy*. For EPs, an issue is the delay in getting key Irish language documents translated and the difficulties this creates for them as they try to communicate information in a timely manner to schools and teachers. For teachers, the main difficulty is the lack of Irish versions of educational materials, meaning they often end up having to translate documents into Irish themselves.

DISCUSSION

The in-depth analysis of EP and teacher interviews, facilitated by a thematic analytic approach, revealed a high degree of convergence between the views of both sets of participants. Bronfenbrenner's theoretical framework was helpful to place the study's findings in context (see Figure 2). It is evident that proximal processes such as mother tongue education can be both enabling and inhibiting for Gaeltacht
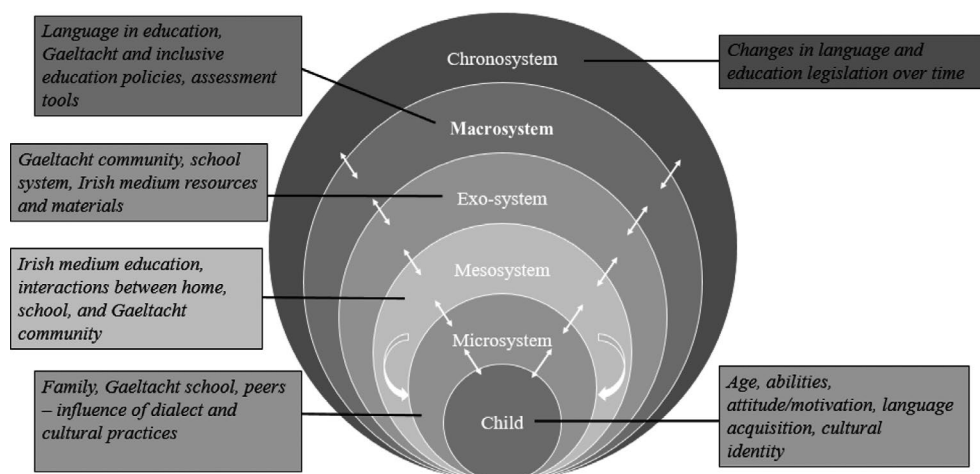
FIGURE 2 Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development

children. While acquisition of Irish via the community and Gaeltacht school is deemed effective by teachers as the language is acquired naturally through engagement and dialogue, the findings show inequity due to assessment in a weaker language and the use of culturally and linguistically biased assessment tools. The acknowledgement of a child's biopsychosocial characteristics (person factors) allowed EPs in the study to account for a child's linguistic and cognitive resources by drawing on theories of bilingual development and education of Cummins's, as described above.

In the *mesosystem*, the EPs in the present study were able to work with teachers and students through Irish and this was regarded as best practice by teacher and EP participants. As reported earlier, the DES with NEPS (DES, 2016b) are working to ensure that EPs working in the Gaeltacht are proficient users of Irish. Recent evidence supporting the use of the mother tongue by staff working with children from linguistic minorities is seen in the work of Garcia-Joslin et al. (2016) who praised the ability of EPs who speak Spanish to Latino students in the United States.

The thematic analysis identified deficiencies at the *exosystem* level: the processes that take place between two or more settings and which indirectly influence the child's microsystem (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). These involve the difficulties noted earlier around translation of Irish documents/resources in a timely and efficient manner, and the resulting expectations placed on teachers to translate materials themselves (e.g., well-being programmes). While teachers praised progress in the provision of resources specifically designed for IME, they noted that they are currently either delayed or prevented from delivering some programmes (e.g., social-emotional learning interventions) due to the time involved in translating the material into Irish. Teachers reported being under pressure to translate materials to satisfy the requirements of the Gaeltacht school recognition scheme (DES, 2017a). EPs pointed out that many materials required for support and development work are not available in Irish, and those that are available are frequently late in reaching Gaeltacht schools. Taken together, these findings suggest that, at the time of this study, the Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017–2022 (DES, 2017a) is not being implemented as intended with regards to the provision of "[extended] and [updated] Irish-medium materials for all aspects of the curriculum and in the SEN context" (DES, 2017a, p. 39).

Weaknesses were identified too in the *macrosystem* which is concerned with the more distant influences on a child's life such as legislative and political factors. Ó Giollagáin and Charlton (2015) have criticized the poor efforts of the education system to support the development of Irish speakers and learners. The study findings reflect a disconnect between macrofeatures or *de facto policies* and the micro-interactions which occur among students, teachers and EPs in these Gaeltacht schools (Cummins, 2001). For example, the absence of a definitive policy on targeted recruitment of proficient Irish-speaking EPs was

identified by participants as a barrier to the full inclusion of Gaeltacht students, especially those who need additional support and intervention. Study participants regard current assessment policies as unsuitable for Gaeltacht schools. They question the equity of native Irish-speaking Gaeltacht students who are being educated through Irish being assessed through the medium of English only. Similar concerns are reported in the literature indicating that culturally and linguistically biased ability tests or assessments administered in a child's weaker language may result in misdiagnosis (Baker, 2011; Spinelli, 2008) and over or under identification of learning difficulties (Cummins, 2001, p. 320). The limitations of translated standardized assessment tools are mentioned by an EP in the present study. Bedore and Peña (2008) pointed out the mistaken assumption in the use of translated tests that language development in the mother tongue follows the same developmental trajectory as in the second language. Knowing the limitations of standardized tests in English makes it difficult for EPs to make recommendations based on the outcomes of these tests. Prevalence studies of special educational needs in Gaeltacht schools (Barrett et al., 2019) will also be compromised by issues of test reliability. Given all these limitations it is not surprising that the sole use of assessment tools in English with Irish-speaking Gaeltacht students has been raised as an issue of human rights by O'Toole and Hickey (2013, p. 104) and an issue of language rights by Ó Duibhir et al. (2015). To prevent Gaeltacht children being negatively impacted by the outcomes of biased tests, the provision of tests in Irish for Gaeltacht children should be a priority. Alternative forms of assessments could also be considered such as portfolios, teacher observations, descriptive reviews and dynamic assessment. Knoester and Meshulam (2020, p. 11) argue that "such forms of assessment as well as being more transparent and honest also have a have a tone of encouragement and cultural affirmation."

Recommendations for EP practice in Gaeltacht schools

The EPs and teachers in the current research study endorsed consultation as a successful method of service delivery in Gaeltacht schools. This method promotes a staged approach to SEN support whereby teachers implement early intervention and use consultation when they require collaborative problem solving. The new SET allocation model also facilitates a consultative approach as it gives more autonomy to teachers to monitor student RTI before involving the EP. Some useful suggestions from EP interviews are specific to their own practice. One general recommendation is that psychologists and other external professionals who work with Gaeltacht schools (particularly Category A schools) need to be cognisant of the unique sociolinguistic and educational contexts of these schools and respond appropriately. While participating EPs were proficient speakers of Irish, high level of Irish proficiency is currently not a specified requirement for working in Gaeltacht areas and so EPs recommended the targeted recruitment of Irish-speaking EPs in future recruitment rounds. Another recommendation by EPs is the use of alternative assessment approaches in the absence of tests in Irish standardized on Gaeltacht populations. As noted above, the use of informal methods of assessment such as observation and parental reports as well as dynamic assessment (Ebert & Kohnert, 2016; Pena et al., 2014) are worth exploring. In relation to their own professional development, participating EPs suggested CPD sessions to help improve their own Irish writing skills for administrative purposes in working with Gaeltacht schools. A practical step in this respect would be the provision of a glossary of SEN and psychological terms online or as a hardcopy booklet.

Limitations of study

One limitation of the study was the difficulty of locating similar studies of educational psychological provision in comparable minority language contexts (e.g., Wales, Scotland and the Basque Country) against which to benchmark our findings. Another is that the new SET allocation model (DES, 2017b) and the Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017–2022 (DES, 2017a) were not in place long enough for

participants to reliably assess their overall impact. However, teachers were generally positive about the autonomy afforded them by the SET allocation model (DES, 2017b) and the promotion of spoken Irish in their schools via the Gaeltacht Education strategy.

CONCLUSION

The present study provides valuable insights into the experiences of EPs and teachers working with children from indigenous Irish-speaking communities in Ireland. The qualitative design adopted was successful in generating rich descriptions from participants while the thematic analysis was a powerful tool in identifying not only the major priorities and challenges in current provision but also strategies for the way forward. The outcomes highlight the urgent need for recent educational policies related to Gaeltacht schools to be matched by decisive action in the provision of teaching resources/programmes and assessment tools in Irish and staff who are proficient in Irish and sensitive to its regional varieties. Action is required because as Ó Duibhir et al. (2015) points out the future of Irish depends on the total acquisition of Irish by children in Category A Gaeltacht schools.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION
Lelia Murtagh: Conceptualization; Formal analysis; Methodology; Supervision; Validation; Visualization; Writing – review & editing. **Ailsa Seoighe:** Data curation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Writing – original draft.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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