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Doras Feasa Fiafraí: Exploring Special Educational Needs Provision and Practices across Gaelscoileanna and Gaeltacht Primary Schools in the Republic of Ireland

**By**

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**Abstract**

With more than half of the world's population at least bilingual (Baker,2007), and with the benefits of bilingualism widely documented, it comes as no surprise that numbers of Gaelscoileanna in the Republic of Ireland rose by 900% from 1977 to 2007 (Gaelscoileanna Teo.,2007). Given this expansion, little research in the sector regarding Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision has been undertaken. The present study examined SEN provisions and practices in Gaelscoileanna and Gaeltacht primary schools, or Irish-medium education (IME) primary schools, in the Republic of Ireland, by exploring patterns in SEN provision and practice, examining the training and knowledge of staff, investigating the benefits and challenges of IME for students with SEN, and analysing the role of the psychologist in IME. Results indicated that Specific Learning Difficulties (SLD), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD) are the three most prevalent SEN presenting among students in the IME primary sector. Many strengths within the provision and practice of SEN in IME exist. School personnel believe that many benefits to IME exist for students with SEN, including the acquisition of bilingualism, though some students are faced with challenges in IME, particularly those with language difficulties.

### **Introduction**

Education through the medium of Irish language, or Irish-medium education (IME), is an expanding sector of primary education in Ireland. In the 2014/2015 academic year, 144 IME Gaelscoil<sup>1</sup> primary schools existed in the Republic of Ireland, with 126 IME Gaeltacht primary schools<sup>2</sup> and 35 Gaelscoileanna in Northern Ireland (Gaelscoileanna Teo., 2016). This revival of bilingualism and the Irish language is taking place in non-Gaeltacht regions, with numbers of Gaelscoileanna in the Republic of Ireland rising by over 900% from 1977 to 2007 (Gaelscoileanna Teo., 2007). One facet of IME that has been under-researched throughout this expansion, however, is that of Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision in these bilingual education schools.

Many definitions of bilingualism exist, though it fundamentally describes two languages accessible to an individual (Baker, 2000). Bilingual education comprises any of ten different forms (Baker, 2006). The present study focuses on a form of bilingual education known as “total immersion education”, which involves instruction through the students’ second language. The decline in native speakers, and the increase in English as the dominant language for many Gaeltacht school students, would suggest that immersion education is an appropriate term for both Gaeltacht schools and Gaelscoileanna (Shiel, Gilleece, Clerkin & Millar, 2011). Gaeltacht schools were traditionally regarded as heritage-language schools.

### **Theoretical Underpinnings of Bilingualism**

The Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) (see Figure 1) describes the bilingual construct in the brain (Cummins, 1980). Each iceberg represents communication of two separate languages. Beneath the surface, these icebergs function as one merged system, where languages are stored and accessed uniformly. Bilingualism can, therefore, be acquired without cognitive overload or cost to the dominant language (Ní Ríordáin, 2011). The level of proficiency achieved in the first language influences proficiency in the second language (Baker, 2001).

Bilingual students acquire language based on Cummins’ theory of language development (Cummins, 1984). Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this document, a Gaelscoil denotes an IME school located outside Gaeltacht regions.

<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this document, a Gaeltacht primary school is an IME school within Gaeltacht regions.

Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) are its two facets. BICS refers to aspects of language including pronunciation and basic vocabulary. CALP is decontextualized, academic language. BICS are essential for social communication but have little impact on academic achievement (May, Hill & Tiakiwai, 2004). Competent BICS in a second language are achieved within one to two years of beginning that language (Cummins, 2000). CALP demands higher order skills such as analysis and synthesis and acquisition takes five to seven years (Ní Ríordáin, 2011). According to Cummins (1979), for bilingual students to acquire proficient CALP, a well-developed CUP is required.

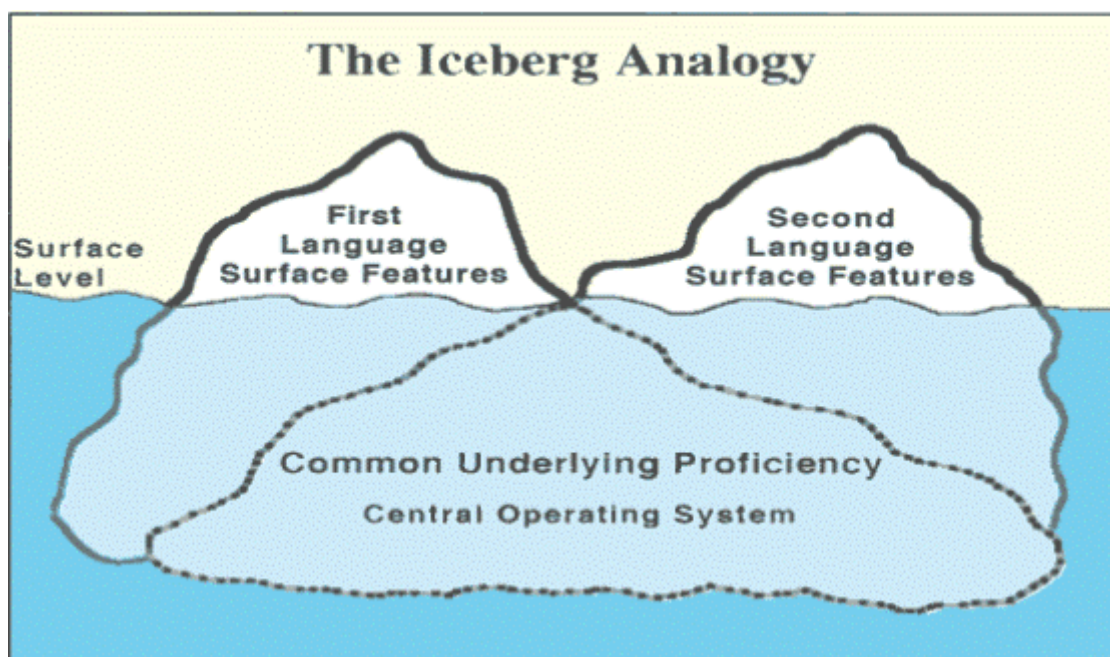


Figure 1. Cummins' (1980) Iceberg Analogy

### **Immersion Education**

Consistent outcomes emerge from international reviews of immersion education, (De Courcy, 2002; Johnstone, 2002) concerning transference of language and second language learning, as well as regarding curricular attainments. Most students in immersion education become competent in two languages, and gain greater proficiency in the second language than individuals not in immersion education (Johnstone, 2002; Swain & Johnson, 1997). This is rarely transferred to societal use, however, with Little (2003) suggesting that limited access to a community of regular Irish speakers exists for most students in IME.

Generally, children in immersion education do not initially progress academically in their first language to the same level as their monolingual peers, as instruction is delivered

through their second language in the early immersion years. This is largely temporary, with similar levels of attainment in the first language to peers noted after approximately six years of immersion (Baker, 2006). The second language is usually acquired without cost to curricular performance (Johnstone, 2002). Immersion education is believed to be the most effective formal educational method for promoting bilingualism (Edwards, 2010).

### **SEN and Immersion Education**

Cummins (2001) contends that immersion education is not the most suitable educational route for all children, but that neither are monolingual programmes. He posits that children of relatively low I.Q. can develop fluency in a second language, provided they have reached proficient language thresholds in their dominant language. Consequently, most children should be capable of acquiring second language verbal communication skills. Further research proposes that bilingualism is not the foundation of any SEN (Baker, 2006; Cline & Frederickson, 1999; Li Wei, Miller & Dodd, 1997). Ware, Lye and Kyffin (2015) suggest evidence exists that children with mild intellectual disabilities can perform to corresponding levels in immersion or monolingual programmes.

### **SEN in the Irish Primary Education Context**

#### **SEN and general primary education.**

Analysing SEN within the general primary education sector in Ireland provides an insight into overall trends in SEN provision and practices. This context provides a platform from which SEN provision in IME can be compared. Two recent, large-scale studies have been undertaken by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) involving SEN provision in Ireland, through Kinsella, Murtagh and Senior (2014), and through Rose, Shevlin, Winter and O' Raw (2015). Main findings from Rose et al. (2015), indicated that 91% of Irish primary schools have developed SEN policies. Both reports, together with Travers (2010), determined that withdrawal from class for individual/small group support was the dominant delivery method of Learning Support (LS)/Resource teaching (RT). Rose et al. (2015) concluded that 82% of primary schools were creating Individual Education Plans (IEPs), while many schools expressed frustration in accessing the services of the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). All primary schools in the Rose et al. (2015) case study were delivering standardised assessments, with more schools administering the Drumcondra Primary Reading Test than the MICRA-T reading test and more administering the SIGMA-T mathematics test than the Drumcondra Primary Maths Test.

**SEN and primary IME.**

A paucity of research regarding SEN provision in IME exists. Of the studies conducted, several are unrepresentative. One large-scale, all-island review has been published (COGG, 2010), with one review also published for IME in Northern Ireland only (Ní Chinnéide, 2009). No known, published reviews of SEN in general IME for the Republic of Ireland exist. According to An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG, 2010) (all-island study), English was the subject most frequently supported in RT<sup>3</sup> specifically, in Gaelscoileanna in Ireland, with 86% of RT teachers supporting English or a combination of English and mathematics during this time. Ten percent of teachers in SEN provided support in Irish, with 2% providing emotional/behavioural support. Fifty four percent of schools provided mathematical support through a combination of English and Irish, 36% through Irish exclusively and 10% through English exclusively. As no SEN guidelines exist for the IME sector, policies and guidelines have been developed by individual schools. Similar to the NCSE findings, a study of 60 Gaelscoileanna and 60 Gaeltacht schools in the Republic of Ireland reported the most common delivery of LS/RT as small-group withdrawal (Shiel et al., 2011). Within the COGG (2010) report, recommendations included the need for further training for teachers in SEN, together with a need for further research.

**SEN and IME Gaeltacht schools.**

A report on educational trends in Gaeltacht regions was undertaken by Mac Donnacha, Ní Chualáin, Ní Shéaghdha and Ní Mhainín (2005). Similar to COGG (2010), Mac Donnacha et al. (2005) indicated that English was the most regularly supported subject in LS/RT, with Irish the least regularly supported. Mathematics support was delivered through the medium of English in 49% of schools during RT and in 42% of schools during LS, with remaining schools delivering mathematics through Irish or a combination of Irish and English. The study reported differing perceptions across Gaeltacht schools regarding EPs' knowledge of IME. Though insightful, these findings may now be outdated. In a separate study by NEPS of 139 psychologists, it was found that 12 psychologists from NEPS reported that their level of oral Irish was "high", 60 said theirs was "medium"/average and 67 said theirs was "low" (Marshall et al., 2014). NEPS have agreed, under the government's 20-Year Strategy for The Irish Language, to deploy

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<sup>3</sup> Resource Teaching refers to additional support provided for students presenting with diagnosed low-incidence SEN. Low-incidence SEN in the Irish context consist of all SEN other than SLD, Borderline GLD and Mild GLD.

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bilingual psychologists to certain regional locations. NEPS are also reported to be providing training for psychologists in Irish language and IME (DES, 2015).

### **Prevalence of SEN in IME.**

Though research is limited, it is useful to attempt to approximate figures of SEN prevalence in IME schools. Table 1 presents the three most prevalent SEN as percentages of the total recognised SEN presenting among students in IME across the Republic of Ireland. As would be expected, and as would be the case in primary schools in general, the most prevalent SEN all consisted of high-incidence<sup>4</sup> SEN.

Table 1

*Most Prevalent SEN as a Percentage of Total SEN Presenting among Students in IME Primary Schools in the Republic of Ireland (Mac Donnacha et al., 2005; Nic Gabhann, 2008)*

Gaelscoileanna in Republic of Ire.		Gaeltacht Schools in Republic of Ire.	
SLD	30%	Mild GLD	21%
Borderline GLD	17%	SLD	20%
Mild GLD	16%	Borderline GLD	19%

As evident from Table 1, Specific Learning Difficulty (SLD), Mild General Learning Disability (GLD) and Borderline GLD presented as the three most prevalent areas of SEN within IME in the Republic of Ireland. The study of Gaelscoileanna in the Republic of Ireland was undertaken by Nic Gabhann (2008) and the study of Gaeltacht schools was conducted by Mac Donnacha et al. (2005).

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<sup>4</sup> High-incidence SEN refer to the presentation of SEN that entitle students to LS teaching, namely SLD, Borderline GLD and Mild GLD.



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Table 2 ranks the three most prevalent low-incidence<sup>5</sup> SEN across Gaelscoileanna and Gaeltacht primary schools in the Republic of Ireland, as well as across the general primary education sector. The general primary sector includes findings from EME and may also include findings from IME.

Table 2

*Most Prevalent Low-Incidence SEN within IME schools and within the General Primary Education Sector in the Republic of Ireland (Banks & McCoy, 2011; Mac Donnacha et al., 2005; Nic Gabhann, 2008)*

Prevalence of Low-Incidence SEN	Gaelscoileanna in Republic of Ire.	Gaeltacht Schools in Republic of Ire.	General Primary Sector in Republic of Ire.
Most Prevalent	Moderate GLD	Specific SLI	EBD (including ADHD)
2 <sup>nd</sup> Most Prevalent	Specific SLI	EBD (including ADHD)	Specific SLI
3 <sup>rd</sup> Most Prevalent	DCD	Moderate GLD	ASD

As highlighted in Table 2, the most prevalent low-incidence SEN differ across Gaelscoileanna and Gaeltacht schools in the Republic of Ireland, and across the overall, general primary sector. Specific Speech and Language Impairment (SLI) is one of the three most prevalent low-incidence SEN across all three contexts, with Moderate GLD and Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (EBD) (including ADHD) both prevalent across two of the three sectors. The findings for Gaelscoileanna were derived from Nic Gabhann's (2008) study. The results for Gaeltacht schools were derived from the Mac Donnacha et al. (2005) report, with those for the overall education sector (Banks and McCoy, 2011) taken from the Special Education Administrative System (SEAS) database. The current study aims, *inter alia*, to provide up-to-date data on the prevalence of various types of SEN within IME schools in the Republic of Ireland.

<sup>5</sup> Low-incidence SEN refer to the presentation and diagnosis of diagnosed SEN that entitle students to RT hours.

### **Research Aims**

It is evident that guidelines regarding practices and provisions of SEN in IME are lacking, and that comprehensive research is required, as reliable, empirical evidence in SEN and IME is limited. Given the paucity of research, the present study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What current patterns in SEN provision are evident in IME primary schools across the Republic of Ireland?
2. Do any benefits and disadvantages exist in IME for students with SEN?
3. What is the current and potential role of the educational psychologist in IME primary schools?
4. Are similar patterns of SEN provision, support and practice evident across Gaelscoileanna and Gaeltacht primary schools?

### **Methods**

#### **Design**

Surveys were used as a quantitative method of gathering data in the current study. These were developed by the researcher, in Irish, and were self-completed by participants. A total of 32 questions were developed, including 12 multiple-choice items, eight dichotomous items, six numeric-input items, two 5-point Likert rating scale items, two 3-point matrix rating scale items and two open-ended items. Nineteen of these questions provided an opportunity to include additional qualitative comments. The survey included questions relating to SEN provision, knowledge and training of staff, and the role of the psychologist in the school. The survey was piloted on four LS/RT teachers in Gaelscoil primary schools. Discussions relating to survey development were undertaken with a fellow researcher associated with Gaelscoileanna Teoranta and with an affiliate of COGG, both of which are Irish-language research support bodies. These consultations and piloting were undertaken to gain feedback on the clarity and validity of the survey, on the operationalisation of the construct, and to eliminate ambiguities and wording difficulties.

#### **Sample**

Surveys were distributed nationwide to all IME primary schools in the Republic of Ireland. Access to the sample was gained through Gaelscoileanna Teoranta, who e-mailed the information letter and online survey link to all 270 schools. Of these, 144 were Gaelscoileanna and 126 were Gaeltacht schools. Surveys were completed by the

principal, vice-principal or the Special Educational Needs' Co-ordinator (SENCO) from 93 Gaelscoileanna and Gaeltacht schools, a 34.4% response rate. Seventy six Gaelscoileanna (52.8% response rate) and 16 Gaeltacht schools (12.7% response rate) completed the survey. One school did not complete the initial demographic item, and was subsequently excluded. Of the remaining 92 respondents, 63 completed more than 75%. Fifty of these 63 respondents completed 100% of the survey.

### **Procedure**

The survey was developed, and the sample was recruited in collaboration with a fellow researcher, and with assistance from Gaelscoileanna Teoranta. It was uploaded to the commercial survey website "Survey Monkey" ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)). E-mails were sent by an employee of Gaelscoileanna Teoranta, in February 2016, to relevant schools. Social media networks, the Gaelscoileanna Teoranta website and the Education Posts website were availed of to share details of the study. A reminder e-mail and telephone calls were made to principals in March 2016. The Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) and the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) shared the details of the study in their "e-Scéal" online magazine and the "INTouch" magazine, respectively.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 20.0. Quantitative responses were analysed using descriptive statistical analyses, exploring frequencies and descriptive information, as well as bivariate cross-tabulations. Inferential statistical analyses through *t*-tests were used for parametric variables. Bivariate associations were explored using Chi-Square analyses, or Fisher's Exact Probability Tests where small numbers of responses were evident. Only statistically significant results from these statistical analyses were reported. Preliminary analyses were performed to investigate violations of the assumptions of normality. Histograms were checked for skewness, which was observed for numerous variables. Where skewed, variables were deemed to violate assumptions of normality, and were analysed non-parametrically. Surveys were edited to identify and eliminate implausible responses and errors. Several implausible responses were assumed for items relating to the prevalence of Borderline GLD (five implausible responses<sup>6</sup>), Mild GLD (ten implausible responses), Moderate GLD (four implausible responses) and Severe/Profound GLD (three

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<sup>6</sup> It is assumed that implausible responses arose as a consequence of misinterpretations from translating certain terms for categories of SEN into Irish.

implausible responses), as well as recording errors noted for the item relating to number of LS posts and RT hours (eight response errors). These responses were coded as “invalid” during analyses.

Spelling and grammar from open-ended questions were corrected, as necessary, upon reporting. The qualitative information was analysed and common themes were extracted. All qualitative comments written in Irish by respondents were translated to English.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical protocols of the Taught Masters Research Ethics Committee (TMREC) in University College Dublin (UCD) and best practice guidelines of the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) were adhered to, and ethical approval and exemption were granted by TMREC. Correspondences with all personnel, other than the research supervisor, were conducted through Irish, in keeping with the ethos of IME schools. Participants were notified of the anonymity of the study, that their participation was voluntary and that all answers would be treated confidentially.

## **Results**

### **Demographic Analyses**

Basic analyses of demographics are summarised in Table 3. Information was gathered from 76 Gaelscoileanna (82.6% of total responses) and 16 Gaeltacht schools (17.4% of total responses). Schools’ profiles varied in size and status, with 72.8% of respondent schools (n=67) being co-educational Gaelscoileanna without a Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) status. No single-sex Gaelscoileanna or Gaeltacht schools existed within the sample. Of the 16 Gaeltacht schools, 15 (93.8%) reported a student population of less than 120. Twenty Gaelscoileanna (26.3%) reported similar numbers. In total, 21 schools (22.8%), had under 70 students, with 24 schools having between 71 and 200 (26.1%) students, 24 schools with between 201 and 300 students (26.1%), and 23 schools having more than 300 students (25%). Forty six Gaelscoileanna (60.5%) reported a student population of more than 200. Of three ASD units reported, two existed in Gaelscoileanna (2.2%) and one in a Gaeltacht school (1.1%). There were two reading units reported within IME schools (2.2%), and both were in Gaelscoileanna.

Table 3

*Demographic Profiles of Respondent Schools*

<b>Demographic</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>No. of Schools</b>	<b>% of Schools (Total=100%)</b>
<b>School Type (n=92)</b>	Co-Ed. Gaelscoil (non-DEIS)	67	72.8
	Co-Ed. DEIS Gaelscoil	9	9.8
	Gaeltacht school (non-DEIS)	10	10.9
	Gaeltacht DEIS school	6	6.5
<b>Number of Students (n=92)</b>	≤30	7	7.6
	31-70	14	15.2
	71-120	14	15.2
	121-200	10	10.9
	201-300	24	26.1
	301-400	4	4.3
	401-500	17	18.5
	501 +	2	2.2
<b>ASD Unit (n=91)</b>	Yes (Gaelscoil)	2	2.2
	Yes (Gaeltacht)	1	1.1
	No	88	96.7
<b>Reading Unit (n=91)</b>	Yes (Gaelscoil)	2	2.2
	No	89	97.8

**Prevalence of SEN in IME**

The most frequently presenting SEN in IME was SLD (n=407), which accounted for 30.4% of the total SEN presenting, with a median of 2 students per school (range 0-35). This was followed by Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), with 13.1% of the total, and a median of 1 student per school (n=175; range 0-14). Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD) was reported as the third most prevalent SEN, accounting for 10.9% of the total SEN, and a median of 1 student per school (n=146; range 0-10). Table 4 outlines further prevalence rates in the Gaelscoileanna and Gaeltacht schools, as well within overall IME<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Some students may have been recorded/counted twice within Table 4 under two or more SEN categories.

Table 4

*Prevalence of Particular SEN in Gaelscoileanna, Gaeltacht Schools and the General IME Primary Sector*

SEN Category	Gaelscoileanna (n=72)		Gaeltacht Schools (n=15)		Total IME schools (n=87)	
	No. of students with named SEN (Total=1,217)	% of total SEN	No. of students with named SEN (Total= 121)	% of total SEN	No. of students with named SEN (Total= 1,338)	% of total SEN
SLD	376	30.9	31	25.6	407	30.4
ASD	164	13.5	11	9.1	175	13.1
DCD	135	11.1	11	9.1	146	10.9
Specific SLI	105	8.6	21	17.4	126	9.4
EBD	114	9.4	9	7.4	123	9.2
ADHD	100	8.2	6	4.8	106	7.9
Mild GLD	71	5.8	22	18.2	93	7
Physical Disability	70	5.8	3	2.5	73	5.5
Hearing Impairment	32	2.6	4	3.3	36	2.7
Borderline GLD	13	1.1	1	0.8	14	1
Other	12	1	0	0	12	0.9
Moderate GLD	10	0.8	1	0.8	11	0.8
Visual Impairment	10	0.8	0	0	10	0.7
Severe/Prof. GLD	5	0.4	1	0.8	6	0.4

### General SEN Provision

#### Specific subject support.

Of 90 responses to this item, English was the subject most frequently supported in LS/RT across IME (n=87; 96.7% of schools). Irish was the least frequently supported (n=44; 48.9% of schools). Responses to open-ended questions highlighted grievances of IME schools regarding the lack of opportunities to support Irish in LS/RT, claiming that time-restrictions and lack of guidelines in IME limited opportunities to provide this support:

**Irish:** Ba bhreá linn Tacaíocht Foghlama sa léitheoireacht/labhairt na Gaeilge a ofráil sa scoil- ach níl sé ar fáil go hoigifiúil ón Roinn - Amaideach!

**English Translation:** We would love to offer Learning Support in the school for reading/oral language in Irish- but it is not officially available from the Department - Stupid! (Respondent 83)

Support in Irish and the number of students in a school were significantly associated, with Irish more regularly supported during LS/RT in larger schools ( $\chi^2(3, N=90) = 9.64, p = .022$ ). Table 5 outlines support given to specific subjects, with the table suggesting that 3 schools did not support English during LS/RT, though support was provided in other subject areas by these schools. All respondent schools for this item (n=90), provided support in at least one subject area. Ten respondents reported providing support for physical, motor and sensory needs, under “Other”.

Table 5

*Frequencies and Percentages of Gaelscoileanna and Gaeltacht Schools supporting Specific Subjects in Learning Support/Resource Teaching*

Subject Area Supported in LS/RT	Gaelscoileanna (n=74)		Gaeltacht Schools (n=16)		Total (n=90)	
	No. of Schools	% of Schools	No. of Schools	% of Schools	No. of Schools	% of Schools
English	72	97.3	15	93.8	87	96.7
Mathematics	70	94.6	16	100	86	95.6
Social Skills	55	74.3	5	31.2	60	66.7
Emotional/ Behavioural Support	50	67.6	5	31.2	55	61.1
Irish	37	50	7	43.8	44	48.9

#### **Assessment methods for SEN.**

The most common methods of assessment for identifying and supporting SEN in IME are outlined in Table 6. Observations (n=86; 94.5% of schools), the MIST (n=85; 93.4%) and the Drumcondra Gaeilge test (n=80; 87.9%) were the three most frequently used assessment tools. Twenty seven “Other” assessment methods were reported, with the Belfield Infant Assessment Profile (BIAP) the most popular of these (n=16). Results found that 5 schools (5.5%) did not undertake observation as a method of assessment, though 87 schools (95.6%) reported utilising at least 5 different assessment tools. Two schools utilise 3 different assessment tools and 1 school used only the Middle Infant Screening Test (MIST). This schools reported being a newly-established Gaelscoil that is currently made up exclusively of Infant classes.

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Table 6

*Frequencies and Percentages of Gaelscoileanna and Gaeltacht Schools using Specific Assessment Measures in SEN Identification and Support*

Method of Assessment	Gaelscoileanna (n=75)		Gaeltacht Schools (n=16)		Total (n=91)	
	No. schools	% schools	No. schools	% schools	No. schools	% schools
Observation	70	93.3	16	100	86	94.5
Middle Infant Screening Test (MIST)	70	93.3	15	93.8	85	93.4
Drumcondra Gaeilge	64	85.3	16	100	80	87.9
Non-Reading Intelligence Test (NRIT)	61	81.3	11	68.8	72	79.1
SIGMA-T	53	70.7	11	68.8	64	70.3
MICRA-T	46	61.3	13	81.3	59	64.8
School-Developed Tests	47	63.5	12	75	59	64.8
Drumcondra Primary Reading Test	50	66.7	9	56.3	59	64.8
Dyslexia Screeners	47	62.7	11	68.8	58	63.7
Drumcondra Primary Maths Test	35	46.7	9	56.3	44	48.4
Other Tests	30	40	3	18.8	33	36.3
WRAT-IV	13	17.3	3	18.8	16	17.6
WIAT-II	9	12	3	18.8	12	13.2

**General provision.**

Irish was the language through which mathematics was most frequently supported in LS/RT (n=67; 73.6% of schools), while 21 Gaelscoileanna (28% of Gaelscoileanna) and 2 Gaeltacht schools (12.5% of Gaeltacht schools) taught it through a combination of Irish and English. The median number of teachers on SEN teams was 3, with a range of 0.4 to 12 (Mode=2). Small-group withdrawal was reported as the most common delivery of LS/RT (n=90; 97.8%), followed by individual withdrawal (n=81; 88%). A significant association existed between certain delivery methods of LS/RT and the



number of students in schools. This was evident for team-teaching ( $\chi^2 (N = 92) = 12.14, p = .005$ ), and station teaching ( $\chi^2 (N = 92) = 8.26, p = .036$ ), both of which were more frequently implemented as methods of LS/RT in larger schools, with schools with more than 300 students most frequently utilising these methods. Most Gaelscoileanna and Gaeltacht schools (73%) reported delivering commercial programmes. Analyses of open-ended responses revealed that Mata sa Rang (30 schools) and FRIENDS programmes (26 schools) were the most frequently delivered. Of 89 respondents, 88 (98.9%) reported that their school monitored and reviewed the needs of students with SEN, while 63 out of 65 respondents (96.9%) stated that their school had an SEN policy. Of 91 respondent schools, 96.7% (n=88) developed IEPs.

**Role of the Psychologist**

Figure 2 highlights assessment as the most common service delivered by psychologists in IME, according to respondents (n=69; 78.4% of schools). Policy development was the least common area of assistance given by psychologists (n=8; 9.1% of schools). A significant association existed between provision of in-service training by the psychologist and the type of school ( $\chi^2 (1, N = 88) = 8.15, p = .004$ ). A greater percentage of Gaelscoileanna (44.4%) than Gaeltacht schools (6.3%), received in-service training from the psychologist. Similarly, a significant association existed between the provision of in-service training and the size of the school ( $\chi^2 (3, N = 88) = 15.97, p = .001$ ), with in-service training more regularly provided in larger schools.

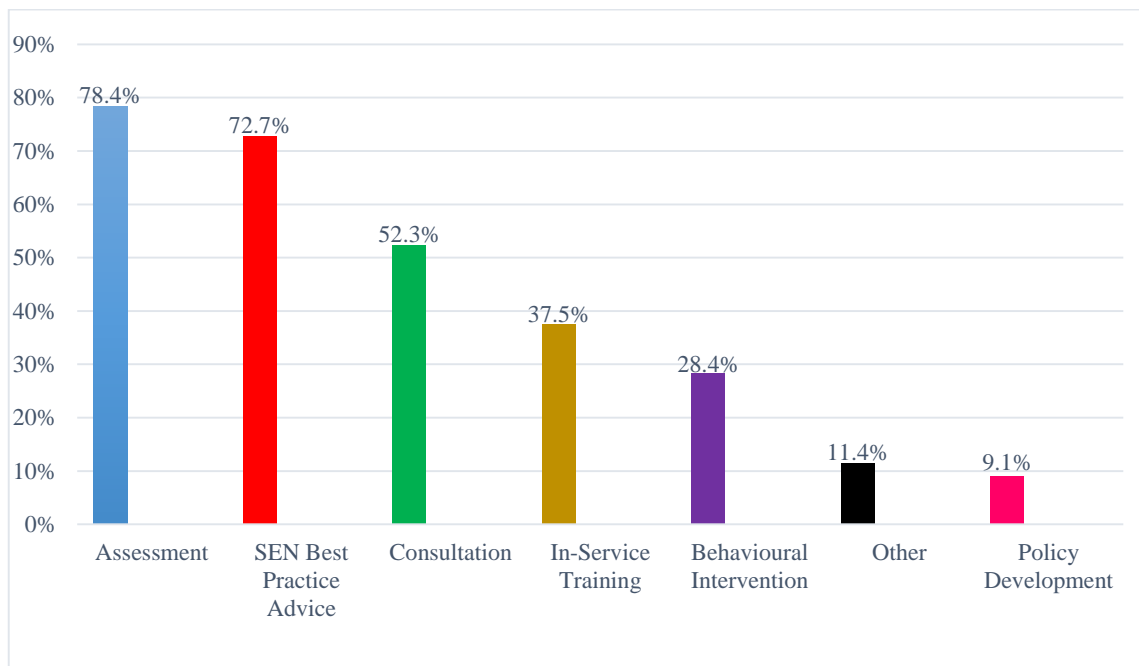


Figure 2. Schools’ perceptions of roles fulfilled by psychologists in IME

**Psychologists’ levels of Irish fluency.**

As highlighted in Figure 3, 76.1% (n=67) of respondents believed that it was important for psychologists to speak fluent Irish, with 42% (n=37) stating that it was “very important” and 34.1% (n=30) reporting that it was “somewhat important”.

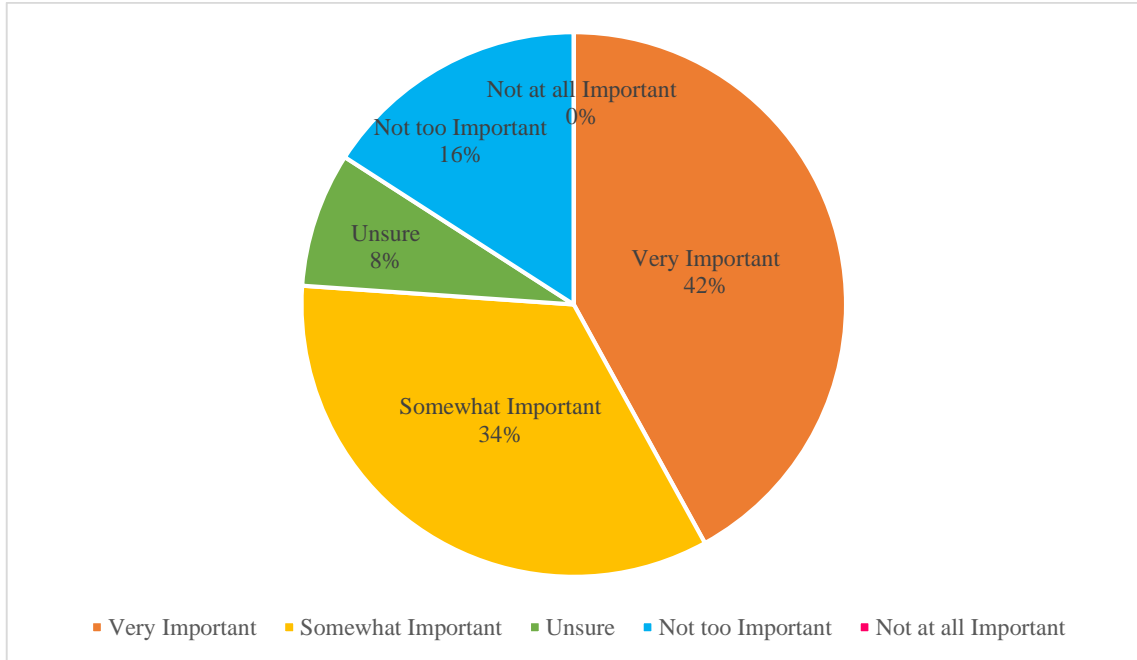


Figure 3. Schools’ perceptions of the importance for the psychologist to have fluent Irish

Eighty four respondents (95.5%) reported that it was important for psychologists within IME to have an understanding of the IME system. One respondent commented on the need to improve the understanding of IME for external professionals generally.

**Knowledge and Training of School Personnel**

Thirty two Gaelscoileanna (59.3%) and 7 Gaeltacht schools (63.6%), reported having adequate expertise and knowledge in SEN provision and practices, while 21 Gaelscoileanna (40.7%) and 4 Gaeltacht schools (36.4%) reported not having enough expertise and knowledge. Of 61 respondent schools, 91.8% (n=56) contained teachers who had completed formal training in SEN, with a median of 2 teachers per school (range 0-11; Mode=1). Table 7 outlines the areas of SEN training most frequently requested by school personnel, with training in RT the most requested (n=62; 96.9%). It is important to note, however, that one-third of participants did not respond to all sub-sections of this item. One respondent stated:

**Irish:** Bheadh traenáil bhreise an-úsáideach dúinn agus sinn ag iarraidh feabhas a chur ar ár gcóras Tacaíochta Foghlama

**English Translation:** Further training would be very useful for us as we attempt to improve our Learning Support system. (Respondent 55)

Table 7

*Frequencies and Percentages of Gaelscoileanna and Gaeltacht Schools requesting Additional Training*

<b>Training Domain Required by Teachers</b>	<b>No. of Schools Requesting Training</b>	<b>% of Schools Requesting Training</b>
Specific Training for Resource Teachers	62	96.9
Specific Training for Learning Support Teachers	60	93.8
Training in Specific Programmes	58	89.2
Training in Assessment Tests	56	87.5
Input on Research around Bilingual Education	49	79
Training in Liaising with Parents	36	58.1

#### **Transferring to English-Medium Education.**

Sixty percent of respondents to this item (n=54) believed that students with SEN should not transfer to EME schools, while 40% (n=36) answered neither “Yes” nor “No” to this, but instead chose the “Other” option. Of the respondents who chose “Other”, 30 (83.3% of “Other” responses; 33.3% of total) commented that the need to transfer depended on the specific needs of the student, with 16 respondents mentioning the need only for students with language difficulties to transfer due to challenges arising from language difficulties:

**Irish:** ...Teipeann go hiomlán orthu iad féin a chur in iúl, foclóir a shealbhú agus uaireanta is fearr dóibh freastal ar scoil a dhéanann teagasc trí mheán an Bhéarla.

**English Translation:** ...They completely fail to express themselves, to acquire vocabulary, and sometimes it is best for them to attend a school that teaches through the medium of English. (Respondent 48)

**Irish:**...Ní ceart dúshlán teanga nach í an mháthair-teanga a chur anuas orthu chomh maith.

**English Translation:**...Additional challenges from a language other than their mother tongue should not be placed on them. (Respondent 40)

Five respondents believed that there was a greater tendency to recommend the transfer of students with SEN to EME from private practitioners than from schools' psychologists.

**Irish:** Bíonn tuiscint áirithe ag ár síceolaí ó NEPS ach níl aon tuiscint ag síceolaithe...a dhéanann measúnú príobháideach... Tá siad ag déanamh damáiste don chóras.

**English Translation:** Our NEPS psychologist has a certain understanding but not the psychologists...who do private assessment...They are damaging the system. (Respondent 17)

There was a significant association between the transfer of students with SEN to EME and the type of school ( $\chi^2 (1, N = 90) = 17.3, p < .001$ ), with a greater tendency for students in Gaelscoileanna than from Gaeltacht schools to have transferred to EME schools in the last five years. A significant relationship also existed with larger schools ( $\chi^2 (3, N = 90) = 33.32, p < .001$ ), with these more likely to have experienced the transfer of students with SEN than smaller schools. As smaller schools and Gaeltacht schools are more likely than larger schools or Gaelscoileanna to be situated rurally, with fewer alternative school options likely, these results would be expected.

### **Use of Irish in IME**

The median percentage of students' families who were reported to speak primarily Irish at home was 1%, with a range of 0% to 75%. A significant difference between the mean percentage of families who spoke primarily Irish at home for Gaelscoileanna (Mean=2.33; SD=3.14; N=71) and Gaeltacht schools (Mean=35.36; SD=26.78; N=14) existed ( $t (-4.61), df =13.07, p < .001$ ). Gaeltacht schools contained a much higher percentage of Irish-speaking families than Gaelscoileanna, as would be expected.

### **Advantages and Challenges of IME for Students with SEN**

The IME primary sector was perceived by 59 of 64 respondents (92.2%) to benefit pupils with SEN, by helping them to attain proficiency in Irish, which would be beneficial for second-level. Of 65 respondents, 90.8% (n=59) believed that students with SEN become bilingual, which they reported as advantageous:

**Irish:** Ó mo thaithí, níl an Ghaeilge mar bhac don pháiste le RSO, is a mhalairt a bhíonn sé. Tá go leor buntáistí ag baint leis an dara teanga a bheith ag an bpáiste.

**English Translation:** From my experience, Irish is not a hindrance to students with SEN, the opposite is the case. There are many advantages linked to the student having the second language. (Respondent 71)

**Irish:** Tá go leor taighde ar fáil ag léiriú buntáistí an tumoideachais, fiú le haghaidh páistí le RSO. Má ghlacann tú go bhfuil ‘Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency’, nó buninniúlacht choitinn idir teangacha, caithfidh tú na buntáistí a ghlacadh.

**English Translation:** Plenty of research is available that outlines the benefits of immersion education, even for children with SEN. If you accept that there is a ‘Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency’, or common underlying proficiency between languages, you have to admit the advantages. (Respondent 45)

Further advantages for students with SEN, as perceived by respondents, are outlined in Figure 4, with results highlighting that the large majority of respondents report several advantages associated with attending IME for students with SEN.

The most prevalent difficulty for students with SEN (see Figure 5), according to respondents, involved parents’ difficulties assisting with academic work at home, due to their (parents’) limited Irish (62.5%; n=40 viewed this as a challenge). Eleven respondents mentioned, however, that difficulties exist only for specific students with SEN and cannot be generalised to all students with SEN.

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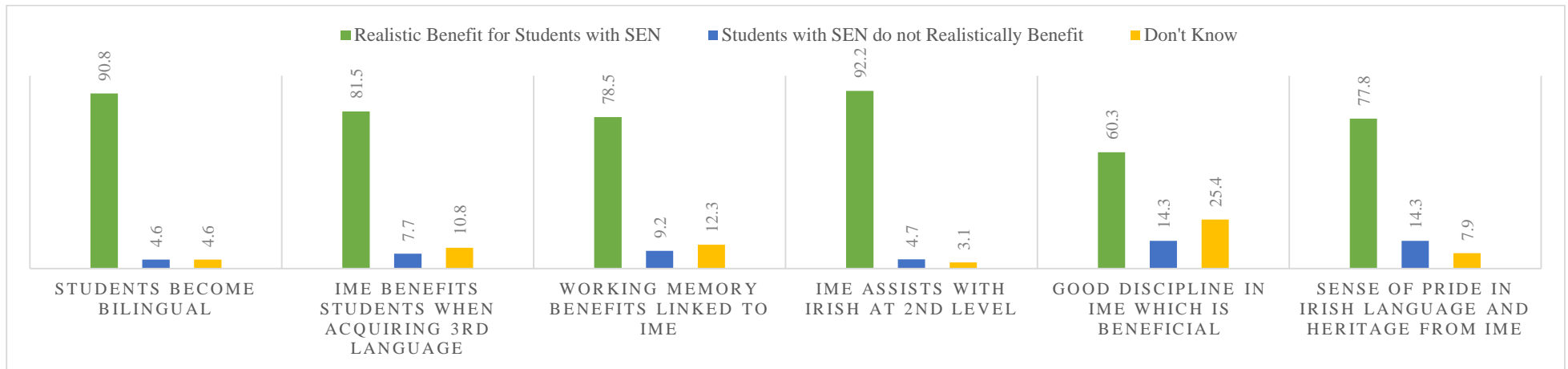


Figure 4. Perceived advantages of IME for students with SEN

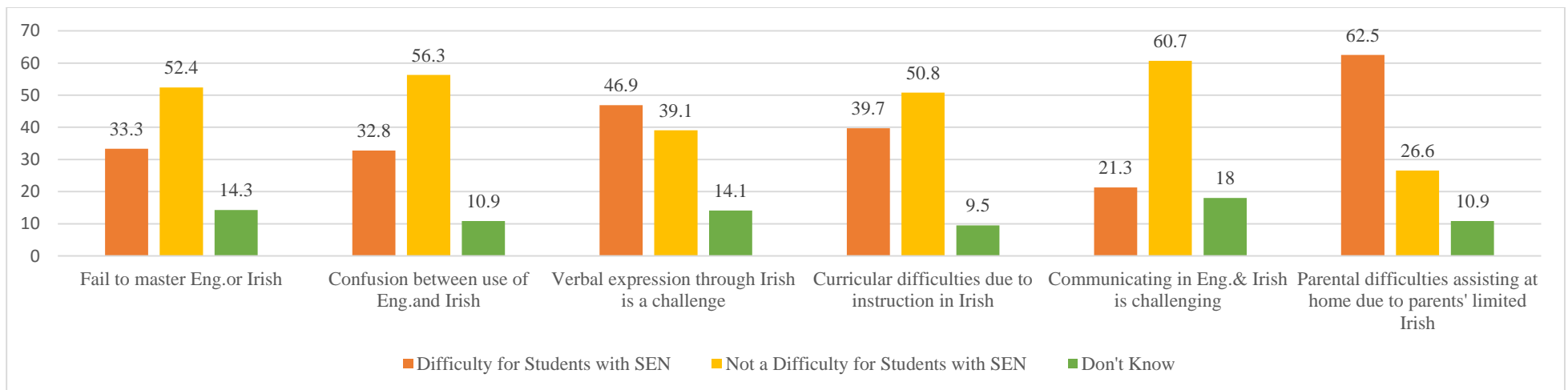


Figure 5. Perceived difficulties for students with SEN in IME

### **Discussion**

A number of interesting findings emerged from the present study, with main findings including the establishment of the prevalence of various SEN within IME. It was found that Irish was the least frequently supported subject in LS/RT. The majority of IME schools have constructed SEN policies and have IEPs for students with SEN. Most schools utilise numerous assessment tools in the identification and support of students with SEN.

### **SEN Provision and Practices**

An aim of the present study related to the exploration of patterns in SEN provision within IME schools in the Republic of Ireland, with several findings emerging. The most prevalent SEN across IME included SLD, ASD and DCD. In a previous study of Gaelscoileanna in the Republic of Ireland, the most prevalent SEN were SLD, Borderline GLD and Mild GLD (Nic Gabhann, 2008). The three most prevalent low-incidence SEN within the present study included ASD, DCD and Specific SLI. This compares to findings within the general education sector that EBD (including ADHD), Specific SLI and ASD were the most prevalent low-incidence SEN. Similarly, the present study found ASD, DCD and EBD to be the most prevalent low-incidence SEN within Gaelscoileanna specifically, which contrasts to Nic Gabhann's 2008 study, which found Moderate GLD, Specific SLI and DCD to be the most prevalent specifically across Gaelscoileanna. This study's findings suggest a potential change in trends within Gaelscoileanna regarding SEN prevalence, as well as a difference between the IME primary sector and the general primary sector. These differences may also, however, relate to methodological differences across research studies.

Small-group withdrawal, followed by individual withdrawal, were the most common approaches to delivery of LS/RT, similar to previous findings across the general primary education sector, as well as previous research of IME (Kinsella et al., 2014; Rose et al., 2015; Shiel et al., 2011; Travers, 2010). Team-teaching and station teaching were more commonly delivered within larger IME schools than smaller schools, suggesting, perhaps, that access to more resources within larger schools may allow, more readily, for team-teaching and station teaching to be undertaken.

Results of the present study indicated that a large majority of schools were engaging in practices outlined in the DES Learning Support Guidelines (DES, 2000). Over 90% of respondent schools developed IEPs and had an SEN policy, with similar proportions of schools having SEN policies within the general primary sector (Rose et al., 2015).

Monitoring and reviewing progress of students with SEN was common practice, as was the implementation of specific programmes, including FRIENDS and Mata sa Rang/Maths Recovery. All respondent schools were undertaking assessments in the identification and support of SEN, similar to findings of the general primary sector (Rose et al., 2015). The most common assessment tools included observations, the MIST, and the Drumcondra Gaeilge test, which is mandatory in IME schools. Results revealed, however, that the Drumcondra Gaeilge was not being administered in each respondent school, but in 88% of schools. Similar to findings from Rose et al. (2015), the SIGMA-T mathematics test was more frequently administered than the Drumcondra Primary Maths test across IME. The current study also suggested that many IME schools used both of these tests as well as both the MICRA-T and the Drumcondra Primary Reading Test as reading tests.

English was the subject most frequently supported during LS/RT in IME, according to the present study, with Irish the least commonly supported. These findings were similar to previous research (COGG, 2010; Mac Donnacha et al., 2005; Ní Fhoighil & Travers, 2012). COGG (2010) indicated, however, that support in Irish was delivered more frequently than emotional/behavioural support, which was not supported within this study. IME schools are granted no additional time to support Irish during LS/RT, and guidance for its delivery is not referred to in the Learning Support Guidelines (DES, 2000). These challenges were echoed within the present research by respondents.

Mathematics support during LS/RT in IME appears to be a nebulous area for schools, as no specific LS/RT guidelines exist for the sector. Research undertaken by COGG (2010), and by Mac Donnacha et al. (2005), found that LS/RT in mathematics was more regularly provided through English or a combination of English and Irish, rather than exclusively through Irish. This contrasts with the present research, which indicated that mathematics was primarily supported in LS/RT through Irish.

Overall, several findings within this study are in keeping with previous research from both the IME and the general primary sectors, though numerous findings also differ from previous research.

### **Benefits and Challenges of SEN in IME**

The second aim of the present study was to investigate the benefits and challenges of IME for students with SEN. Numerous benefits existed, according to school personnel. Such benefits included the acquisition of a second language, and thus, bilingualism. Proficiency in Irish was found, as perceived by school personnel, to benefit students with SEN for



second-level education. The large majority of school personnel reported that numerous other benefits to attending IME schools existed for students with SEN. Support for these benefits was also reported by Baker (2006), Cummins (2001) and Edwards (2010). Conversely, a majority of respondents perceived a difficulty for students with SEN regarding parental assistance at home, due to limited levels of Irish proficiency among parents. One third of respondents believed that, in individual circumstances, some students should transfer to EME, particularly those with severe language difficulties. It is assumed anecdotally by many people that numerous challenges exist for students with SEN attending IME schools. School personnel within the present study reported, however, that few of these assumed challenges caused actual, realistic difficulty for these students. It is evident that schools perceive more benefits than challenges to exist for students with SEN attending IME.

### **Educational Psychology and IME**

The present study sought to investigate the role of the educational psychologist within the IME primary sector. Kinsella et al. (2014), in their research of the general primary education sector, established that school principals perceived the role of the psychologist primarily as assessment-based, while psychologists themselves perceived it as consultative. Results of this study suggested that school personnel believed assessment was the primary service delivered by psychologists in the sector. The majority of schools believed that it was important for psychologists to understand the IME system, and a number of schools commented that psychologists from NEPS had a greater understanding of the system than private practitioners did. The current study established that 76% of IME schools believed it was important for the psychologist to be fluent in Irish, though only 12 educational psychologists out of 139 (9%) surveyed in a previous study admitted having a “high” level of Irish (Marshall et al., 2014). This study indicated that in-service provision was more widely delivered by psychologists in larger IME primary schools and in Gaelscoileanna, than in Gaeltacht schools or smaller schools. This may be a result of greater time allocation from psychologists to these schools. It is suggested that in-service training relating to SEN in IME might best be provided in regional clusters by psychologists in the future, to provide training to a wide range of schools, irrespective of size or status.

### **Knowledge and Training of School Personnel**

Results of this study indicated that a number of challenges existed for school personnel regarding SEN provision and practice. Almost 40% of respondents reported that staff did not hold adequate knowledge or expertise of best practices in SEN provision. In keeping with this, it was reported within this study that training for IME teachers in SEN emerged as an area requiring development. These findings support previous studies conducted by Baker (2001), COGG (2010) and Ó Laoire and Harris (2006). Despite the delivery of training opportunities since the implementation of the 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language (DES, 2015), which aims to boost the number of Irish language speakers to 250,000 by 2030 and increase numbers of Gaelscoileanna, this study reported that school personnel sought further training in SEN provision, particularly in LS and RT. This is noteworthy given that Mac Donnacha et al. (2005) recommended, in their report, the implementation of a post-graduate course in LS for the IME sector in 2005.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

The present study provided a review of SEN provision and practices within IME in the Republic of Ireland, where a published, representative review was previously unavailable. This study will therefore strengthen the evidence-base that exists surrounding SEN and IME, where empirical research is extremely limited. The present study achieved a high response rate, particularly from Gaelscoileanna. The findings may therefore be generalisable, particularly to Gaelscoileanna in the Republic of Ireland. In adding to literature of SEN in IME, the study will also generate awareness of SEN provision, and of the strengths and needs of SEN within the sector, for governmental bodies, Irish-language organisations, and researchers. Furthermore, the findings provide useful insights for psychologists working in the sector, by informing them of the perceptions of school personnel regarding their service delivery, and their role within IME. A final strength of this study involves its exploration of strengths and needs within IME for students with SEN, as well as for school personnel. Such findings provide information that is applicable practically, and is assistive to schools and to national and governmental organisations.

A number of limitations were present within the current study. Firstly, findings should be treated with an element of caution as they may not fully represent the complexity of SEN provision across IME schools, nor the complexity of views of school personnel. Secondly, there was a low response rate from Gaeltacht schools. The sample was not representative of all Gaeltacht schools and results relating to Gaeltacht schools should be interpreted with caution. For this reason, the final research question relating to

the comparison of SEN provision across Gaelscoileanna and Gaeltacht schools could not be adequately answered. It is recommended that further research be undertaken to establish representative findings for Gaeltacht schools. The study was limited by response completeness, as 29 respondents completed less than three-quarters of the survey. Inclusion of surveys with substantial numbers of missing items can reduce the integrity of the data corpus. It is recommended that fewer items be included in similar, future surveys.

A further limitation related to the implausibility of numerous responses concerning “General Learning Disability” as translated to Irish (Míchumas Foghlama Ginearálta), and its associated SEN (namely Borderline GLD, Mild GLD, Moderate GLD and Severe/Profound GLD). Inaccurate responses may have resulted from a misinterpretation of the term “GLD” when translated to Irish. The English acronym for other SEN were included within the survey following translation to Irish, such as “Uathachas” (Autism) followed by “(ASD)”. No English acronym was included for GLD. Implausible responses reduced the validity of data. It is recommended for future research, that an English translation, or acronym, be provided for each SEN, in order to ensure that no confusion regarding SEN terminology would exist.

It was not possible to verify the validity of responses, as no identifying information was sought. Although one response was sought from each school, anonymity prevented the findings from being verified. Arguably, future research should consider implementing a system for coding respondent schools. It is unclear whether the data were impacted by social desirability bias, particularly for items relating to advantages and challenges for students with SEN. Similarly, it was not possible to verify the reasons for non-responses to items, and social desirability may have impacted upon some respondents’ decision not to answer particular questions. It is recommended that more objective means of gathering such information be considered for future research, by gathering data from parents and from students with SEN. Furthermore, documentary analysis of inspectorate reports of IME schools may provide additional insight.

Finally, although efforts were made to be objective, the researcher’s own experiences of supporting IME may have unintentionally impacted upon the research process, due to her own biases and expectations. Objectivity was sought by acknowledging these biases and applying professional standards through regular reflection, collaboration with a fellow researcher regarding survey development,

guidance from the research supervisor, and through consultations with affiliates of the Irish-language sector.

### **Conclusion**

It is evident from the present study that IME schools were found to engage in many best practices and provisions of SEN. These findings contribute to existing knowledge of SEN provision in IME schools and provide additional empirical evidence, previously unavailable, to the literature and landscape surrounding SEN in IME. Several patterns of SEN provision in Gaelscoileanna and Gaeltacht schools were found, within the study, to be similar to existing practice in the general primary sector. The study provides new insights regarding the benefits and challenges, for both students and staff, of SEN provision within the IME primary sector and adds to the awareness within schools, Irish-language organisations, governmental bodies and psychological services, of the current and potential role of the psychologist within this IME primary sector in the Republic of Ireland.

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