

Immersion Education at Primary Level in Ireland

Insights from National Research

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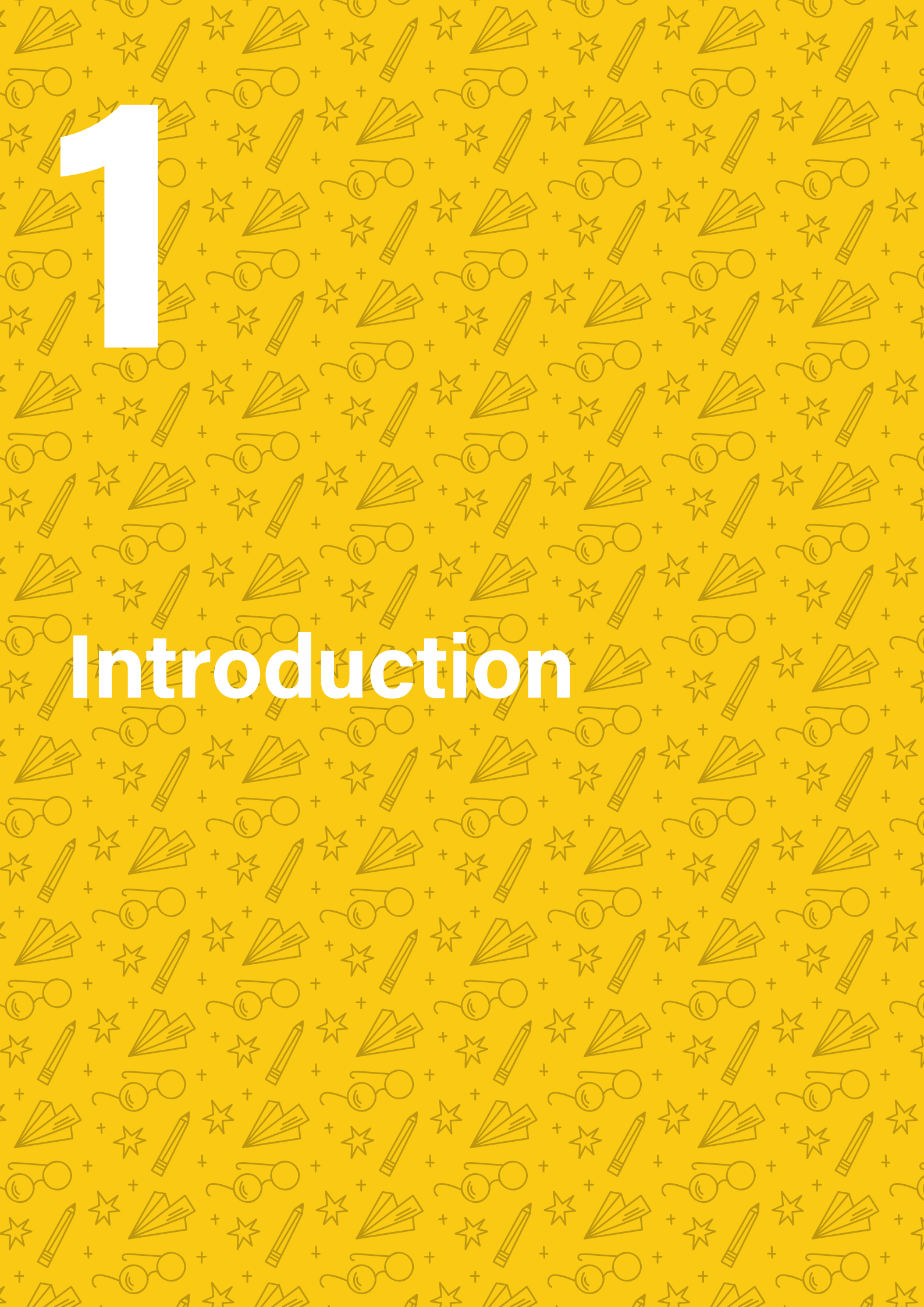
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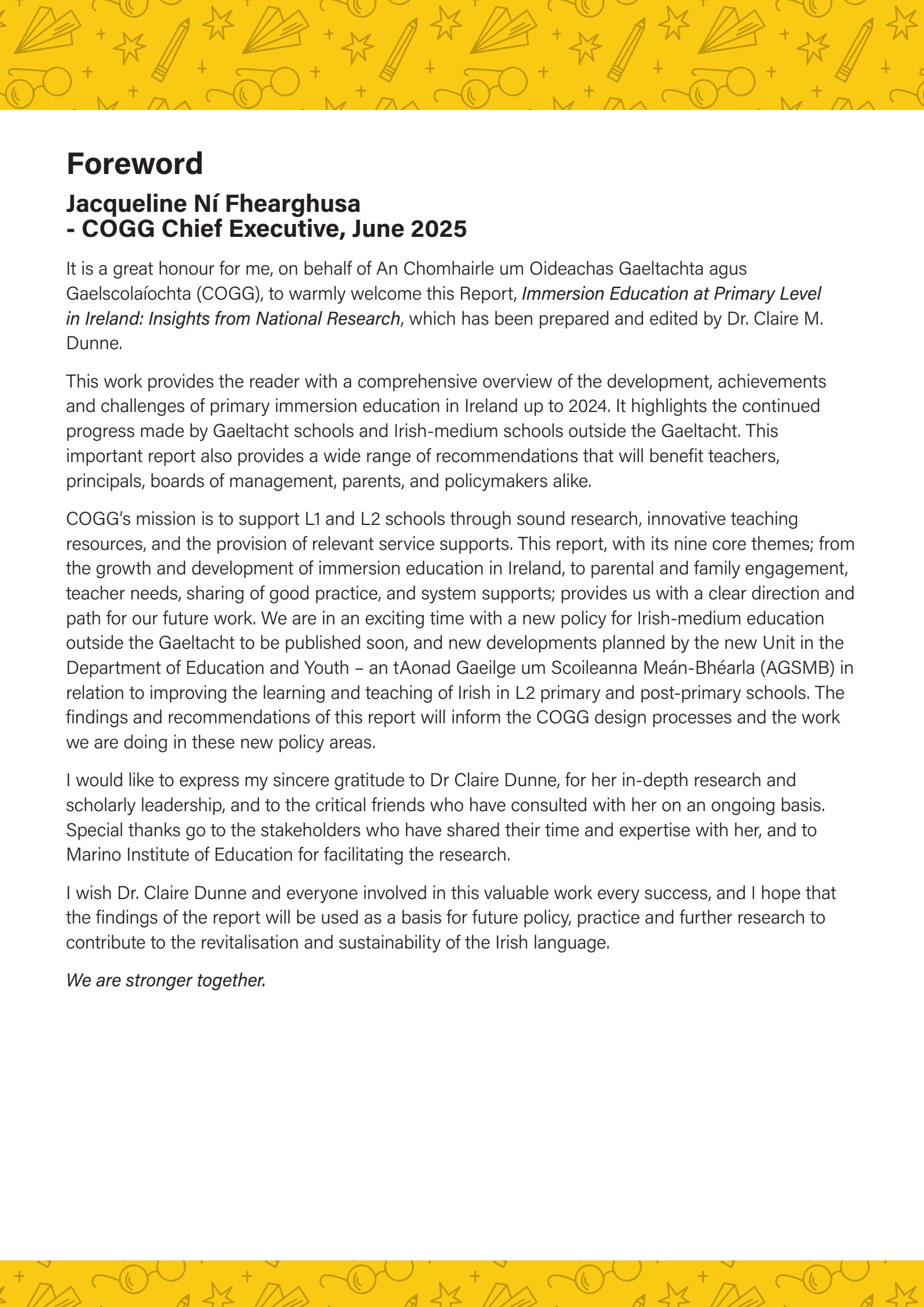
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Introduction



Foreword

Jacqueline Ní Fhearghusa
- COGG Chief Executive, June 2025

It is a great honour for me, on behalf of An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG), to warmly welcome this Report, *Immersion Education at Primary Level in Ireland: Insights from National Research*, which has been prepared and edited by Dr. Claire M. Dunne.

This work provides the reader with a comprehensive overview of the development, achievements and challenges of primary immersion education in Ireland up to 2024. It highlights the continued progress made by Gaeltacht schools and Irish-medium schools outside the Gaeltacht. This important report also provides a wide range of recommendations that will benefit teachers, principals, boards of management, parents, and policymakers alike.

COGG's mission is to support L1 and L2 schools through sound research, innovative teaching resources, and the provision of relevant service supports. This report, with its nine core themes; from the growth and development of immersion education in Ireland, to parental and family engagement, teacher needs, sharing of good practice, and system supports; provides us with a clear direction and path for our future work. We are in an exciting time with a new policy for Irish-medium education outside the Gaeltacht to be published soon, and new developments planned by the new Unit in the Department of Education and Youth – an tAonad Gaeilge um Scoileanna Meán-Bhéarla (AGSMB) in relation to improving the learning and teaching of Irish in L2 primary and post-primary schools. The findings and recommendations of this report will inform the COGG design processes and the work we are doing in these new policy areas.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr Claire Dunne, for her in-depth research and scholarly leadership, and to the critical friends who have consulted with her on an ongoing basis. Special thanks go to the stakeholders who have shared their time and expertise with her, and to Marino Institute of Education for facilitating the research.

I wish Dr. Claire Dunne and everyone involved in this valuable work every success, and I hope that the findings of the report will be used as a basis for future policy, practice and further research to contribute to the revitalisation and sustainability of the Irish language.

We are stronger together.

Introduction

Bilingual education dates back to Roman and Greek times, and today, immersion and bilingual education programmes are available in the vast majority of countries (Hornberger, 2008; Ó Brolcháin, 2015). Ireland is no exception and has a rich and interesting history of immersion education. Immersion education has grown and developed in Northern Ireland over the past number of years (Darmody and Daly, 2015; ETI Inspectorate, 2018), and Irish-medium schools in the Republic of Ireland are also in high demand (Mic Mhathúna agus Nic Fhionnlaoich, 2021a/b). Immersion education in Ireland plays an important role in the revitalisation and maintenance of the Irish language, distinguishing it from immersion education programmes in other jurisdictions (Ó Duibhir, 2009).

Irish-medium schools in Ireland aim is to provide a high standard of education, and foster a high standard of communicative competence in the language, so that children can become members of Irish-language communities and networks, and to support new speakers¹ of Irish (Ó Duibhir, 2018). Gaeltacht schools have a unique role in maintaining Irish as the primary language in the Gaeltacht, as stated in the *Education Act* (1998). Immersion education supports children in Gaeltacht areas and in areas outside the Gaeltacht who speak² Irish as a home language, or who use Irish and another language at home.

While international research contributes to our understanding of immersion education as a whole, the increase in national research available is a great advantage to all working in and interested in immersion education in Ireland. As Ó Ceallaigh and Ó Laoire (2016, v) express, international research on immersion education cannot be blanketly applied to the context of the Irish language. It is, therefore, a positive development that the specific context of immersion education at primary level in Ireland has been explored in recent years (Nig Uidhir, Ó Cathalláin and Ó Duibhir, 2016).

Scoping and Reviewing National Research

This report aims to examine the research published on immersion education at primary level on the island of Ireland up to 2024, in Gaeltacht schools, in Irish-medium schools outside the Gaeltacht, and Irish-medium units in Northern Ireland at primary level. In the past, a number of different approaches were used to explore the learning and teaching of Irish in Ireland, and to examine experiences in immersion education. These approaches included analysing data from the census, specific studies on achievement in language learning, as well as national surveys on attitudes to Irish, for example, the Committee on Irish Language Attitudes Research (1975). A synthesis of effective language teaching is available (see Harris and Ó Duibhir, 2011), as well as a synthesis of research relating to an integrated approach to the teaching of Irish (see Ó Duibhir and Cummins, 2012). In addition, a comparative study of other minority and minoritised languages is available in Ó Duibhir et al. (2015).

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- 1 Walsh and O'Rourke (2015) define a "new speaker" as someone who uses the language frequently but is not considered a traditional "native" speaker (p.2).
 - 2 This report uses the terms "spoken" and "used" in relation to languages. It is recognised that there are different ways that people communicate, rather than solely using oral language. This is further discussed in the section "Flexible Definitions of Bilingual / Plurilingual Competence" in the chapter *Including Every Child in Immersion Education*.

As was done in the publications *Effective Language Teaching* by Harris and Ó Duibhir (2011) and *Learning and Teaching Irish in English-Medium Schools 1971 – Present* (Dunne, 2020), two main approaches were utilised to locate suitable studies for this report: a hand search and a database search.

In preparing this report, a review was first undertaken of the research collection available on the websites of the following organisations:

- An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG)
- Education and Training Inspectorate in Northern Ireland
- Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta

Then, published research reports and assessments relating to immersion education in Ireland were sought, including the following sources:

- conference proceedings from the Reading Association of Ireland / Literacy Association of Ireland
- conferences proceedings from conferences related to immersion education in Ireland
- reports by the Department of Education (DE)
- reports by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).

Studies published in the following journals were also examined:

- *COMHARTaighde*
- *Irish Educational Studies*
- *Irish Teachers Journal*
- *Journal of Immersion and Content-Based Language Education*
- *Léann Teanga An Reiviú*
- *Oideas*
- *Taighde agus Teagasc*
- *Teanga*

Subsequently, specific studies focusing on the teaching of Irish, and on the education system at primary level were identified; for example,

- *Beginning to Teach* (Department of Education and Skills, Inspectorate, 2005);
- *Irish in Primary Schools: Long-Term National Trends in Achievement* (Harris et al., 2006)
- *Irish in the Primary School* (Department of Education and Skills, Inspectorate, 2007)
- *Teaching and Learning Irish in Primary School: A Review of Research and Development* (Harris and Murtagh, 1999)
- *The Chief Inspector's Report, 2010-2012; The Chief Inspector's Report, 2013-2016; and The Chief Inspector's Report, 2018-2020* (Department of Education and Skills / Department of Education, Inspectorate, 2013; 2018; 2022)

Consideration was given to research articles, doctoral dissertations and master's research published in academic and professional periodicals, which have undergone a peer review process or studies published on the COGG website.

In some national studies, although the research is not entirely related to the context of immersion education, findings from children in immersion education are discussed as part of the research. These national studies may relate to a specific theme, for example, children's attitudes to homework, and the national sampling includes groups of children attending Gaeltacht schools and Irish-medium schools. The current report discusses the findings from these studies that relate to children in immersion education (for example, Kiely et al., 2021; Kiely et al., 2022; Kiely et al., 2024).

In the literature review *Learning and Teaching Irish in English-Medium Schools 1878-1971* (Dunne, 2020), and *Learning and Teaching Irish in English-Medium Schools 1971-Present* (Dunne, 2020), it became evident that policies, as well as other factors outside the classroom, and factors at different levels of education, can impact on the effectiveness of the education system at primary level. Research on immersion education in Ireland is examined in this report in the context of policies and other relevant developments.

A database search was then conducted following the steps outlined in Harris and Ó Duibhir (2011). Harris and Ó Duibhir's (2011) synthesis of effective language teaching used the "best evidence search" method. This approach focuses on studies whose context and characteristics are similar to the research question. The best evidence search approach helps locate studies that enhance our understanding of immersion education at primary level in Ireland, its benefits, and the challenges that remain in relation to services, staff and teaching resources, and other issues.

Further research studies on immersion education on the island of Ireland were then consulted. Finally, researchers in the field were contacted to identify any other relevant studies.

Braun and Clarke's 6-stage approach to thematic analysis (2006) was used to identify the issues and key findings in the various pieces of research. One of the key features of the best evidence search is that an expert group works with the authors at every stage of the research process, finding and collecting data, evaluating and synthesising evidence, and discussing the themes that arise. A group of Critical Friends were at the heart of this research and consulted on various chapters of the report. I am very grateful to Emily Barnes, Richeal Ní Thiarnaigh and Sylvaine Ní Aogáin who generously shared their expertise throughout the process. Discussions that I have had at other points with various researchers and educators have also helped shape this report. Special thanks are owed to Tina Hickey, Enlli Thomas, Celia de Fréine, Gerry Shiel, Emer Delaney, Kerron Ó Luain, Caoileann Ní Dhonnchadha, Robbie Irwin, Donncha Ó Corcoráin, Madeleine Ní Ghallchobhair and Méabh Ní Shluáin. Many thanks to Pól Ó Cainín for his feedback on the report as a whole.

Following the analysis process, and in collaboration with Critical Friends, the following themes were agreed upon:

- The growth and development of immersion education in Ireland
- Children's achievement and experience in immersion education
- Immersion education and the development of biliteracy
- Immersion education and the multilingual world
- Assessment in immersion education
- Including every child in immersion education
- Parental and family involvement in immersion education
- The needs of teachers in immersion education and sharing good practice
- Supports for immersion education

The following nine chapters deal with each of the above themes.

The research discussed in this report forms the basis of an information booklet for the school community called *Irish-Medium Education: The Benefits – Supported by Research*. The information booklet is available at <http://www.cogg.ie/>.

The background is a solid blue color with a repeating pattern of white line-art icons. The icons include the letters 'A', 'B', and 'C' in various orientations, five-pointed stars, lightbulbs with a small flame, and apples with a small stem and leaf. The pattern is dense and covers the entire background.

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The Growth and Development of Immersion Education

The Growth and Development of Immersion Education

The growth and development of immersion education in Ireland will be examined, focusing on research carried out in Gaeltacht primary schools, Irish-medium schools and Irish-language units at primary level on the island of Ireland. The rich insights that can be gained from these contexts, and their contribution to our understanding of immersion education, will then be explored.

Chapter Overview

- First, the origins of immersion education in Ireland will be examined.
- Then, the challenges and opportunities that arise in immersion education will be explored.

The Origins of Immersion Education in Ireland

Literature on immersion education in Ireland generally cites 1922 as the starting point for this educational development (Ó Riagáin, 1997; Ó Giollagáin, 2014a), a time when immersion education was implemented in infant classes in the Free State. However, several developments in Irish-medium education before 1922 are worth discussing. The Bilingual Programme (An Clár Dátheangach) was implemented in the Gaeltacht in 1904 and provided an opportunity for children in Gaeltacht and bilingual areas to be educated through the medium of Irish, their own native language (if the teacher was able and willing to teach through Irish) (O'Donoghue, 2006).

However, some specific difficulties arose with the implementation of the bilingual programme:

- a) a lack of teachers who had a high command of Irish and who would be able to teach a bilingual programme;
- b) the responsibility on teachers to devise the teaching methods of the bilingual programme;
- c) a lack of suitable resources; and
- d) doubts among a handful of Gaeltacht teachers, particularly in rural areas, about the programme itself (Walsh, 2012, pp. 78-80).

Overall, Walsh (2012) argues that the expectation that teachers could implement such an ambitious programme in diverse educational contexts, without significant resourcing, was unrealistic. This development was nevertheless important as it was built on in later years by language educators and enthusiasts.

Another significant development was when Pádraig Pearse founded Scoil Éanna in 1908, a school in which subjects were taught bilingually. Afterwards, Luíse Ghabhánach Ní Dhufaigh and Áine Nic Aoidh co-founded the first Irish-medium school in 1917, Scoil Bhríde (de Fréine, 2018). However, little information was available until recently about the success of Scoil Bhríde.

The two biographies of Ghabhánach Ní Dhufaigh by Ní Ghacháin (1993) and de Fréine (2018) show that a team of teachers had the opportunity to work together in the school to create and share textbooks and other resources. Indeed, there were many innovative teachers on the staff, including Máire Ní Cheallacháin from Árainn, who wrote textbooks to promote the Irish language in the school and at home, based on the Phrase Method or Modh na Ráite. The school benefited from the enthusiasm of teachers on staff, and it is clear that a number of effective approaches were in place, for example, continuous assessment (Ní Ghacháin, 1993).

The biographies written about Ghabhánach Ní Dhufaigh describe the child-centred pedagogy used in the school and show a clear vision for immersion education and the holistic development of the child through immersion education, a vision that remains at the heart of Irish-medium education today. The school received financial and other support from the government, and support from educational lecturers at University College Dublin, including Tadhg Ó Corcora (Timothy Corcoran), who was reportedly very impressed with the progress being made in the school.

In 1922, the government embarked on a very ambitious project: introducing immersion education in all primary schools in the Free State, especially in infant classes. Among the revivalists, Father Eoghan Ó Gramhnaigh supported education through the medium of Irish, but other revivalists, for example, Mac Néill, thought that the focus should be on promoting Irish as a family language and recommended a focus on intergenerational transmission (Ó Laoire, 2005; Prats Porcar, 2013). Most teachers at the time supported the plan to place Irish as a core curricular subject. The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) also supported the new policy recommending immersion education in infant classes (Jones, 1991). Looking at the successful immersion education enacted in Scoil Bhríde, models of bilingual education in Pearse's school (see Ó Buachalla, 1980), as well as examples of effective immersion education abroad, language enthusiasts and educators were confident about the potential of providing high-quality immersion education in Ireland and creating Irish speakers.

O'Connell (1969), however, points out that this ambitious language policy did not consider the needs of teachers and learners, as the bilingual certificate was considered sufficient to enable the teacher to teach through the medium of Irish. Timothy Corcoran heavily influenced the ideology of immersion education due to his strong belief in the success of Irish-medium education. He was influenced by what he had seen at Scoil Bhríde (Ní Eachaidh, 1993). However, he did not give due consideration to the resources which would be required to establish a high-quality immersion education system throughout the country. The *School Attendance Act* (1926) saw more children attend primary school after the Free State was established, resulting in a wider variety of abilities and needs among children in the classroom. Due to the marriage bar, women teachers who had gained experience of immersion education in infant classes had to leave the education system (Dunne, 2024).

After a few years, support for immersion education waned amongst teachers, families and the community, especially when many difficulties arose in promoting bilingualism in school. Of course, there were examples of creative and innovative pedagogy in the immersion system during this period, but these examples are all too often left out of our cultural memory (Dunne, 2024).

Opportunities and Challenges in Early Immersion Models

A few research studies were carried out in the early years of immersion education in Ireland:

- A study of Protestant experience in immersion education in 1938
- The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) study in 1941 of children whose home language was English
- Macnamara's 1966 study of children's achievement in Irish-medium schools in English and mathematics.

These studies mainly concern new speakers of Irish. The studies with the Protestant community and by the INTO show that many of the same difficulties existed in the system (INTO, 1941; Jones, 1991): teachers did not feel that they had the appropriate resources to implement immersion education effectively, they felt they lacked support from parents, and they did not consider that there was satisfactory achievement among children in these circumstances (Cummins, 1978).

Macnamara's study (1966), comparing the achievement of children in Ireland in English reading to their peers in England, claimed that Irish children were less successful than children in England. Macnamara had first-hand experience of immersion education as he was part of the first generation to attend national schools in the Free State. His research findings also claim that learning Irish had a detrimental effect on children's achievement in written mathematical problems (Macnamara, 1966).

It is worth mentioning that Macnamara (1966, p.136) shows that Irish children perform as well in mechanical mathematics – that is, in questions where mathematical symbols are used – as English children do. The difficulties faced by the children in written mathematical problems at that time may relate to gaps in the development of literacy skills in Irish more than gaps in mathematical knowledge, as the same study showed that Irish children also obtained a lower score in English reading.

This study was published at a time when there was not much empirical research available on children's experiences in the primary school system, and it had a huge impact on the attitudes of the public and educators. Towards the end of the 1970s, the researcher Jim Cummins examined the methodologies and results arising from the Macnamara study, challenging some of the findings. He noted, for example, the lack of similarity between the groups used in the initial test and the test itself (the preliminary test was conducted mainly with schools in Dublin, but the final test was conducted mainly with children in rural schools). Also, Cummins argues that there was a conflation of

a) the child's ability in a skill, and

b) the ability to demonstrate that skill in an additional language (Cummins 1977; 1978).

Ó Domhnaill (1978) noted that Macnamara's study also had specific weaknesses. It is important to remember that Irish children who took part in the Macnamara study did not previously have experience of taking this type of examination (Ní Dhonnabháin, 2014). In any case, the studies conducted in 1964, which used similar research instruments, and the surveys conducted by the Department of Education in 1972, 1980 and 1988 showed an improvement in children's achievement in English. They did not show a significant difference between Irish children and English children's achievement (Harris et al., 2006).

These were clearly difficult circumstances for teachers, children and the school community, which ultimately led to a decline in the number of Irish-medium schools over the years, especially after the Circular in 1960, which gave teachers the option of teaching Irish or teaching Irish through the medium of Irish (O'Connor, 2004).

Immersion Education: Looking Back and Looking Forward

Over the years, several sensible proposals have been made to support immersion education in Ireland, but sometimes they have been overlooked or not implemented in a reasonable timeframe (Ó Flatharta, 2007). The Coimisiún um Athbheochan na Gaeilge (Commission for the Revival of the Irish Language) (1963) recommended, for example, that special Gaeltacht tutors be employed in all colleges of education to provide teachers with an intensive course on phonetics in the Irish language. Emphasis on phonological awareness was at the heart of the teaching of Irish in the colleges of education in the 1960s and 1970s (Mac Mathúna, 2022) but this was marginalised in *Curaclam na Gaeilge* (Irish-language Curriculum) (1999). Researchers have long recognised that phonological awareness has a key role in the teaching of reading (Barnes, 2021; de Brún, 2022; Hickey and Ó Cainín, 2003).

The Gaeltacht Commission of 1926 recommended that a full course in initial teacher education be undertaken through the medium of Irish. Such a course was offered in 1995 at St. Mary's University College and in 2019 at Marino Institute of Education. There was a significant time lag in implementing this recommendation since the foundation of the two states, and this delay has posed a number of challenges for immersion education.

That being said, the success of immersion education today builds on many developments that have emerged in recent years. The seeds of immersion education in Northern Ireland were sown in the 1960s when native speakers gathered together and established an urban Gaeltacht on Bóthar Seoighe in West Belfast (Ó Baoill, 2007). Bunscoil Phobal Feirste was founded in 1971 by parents in the urban Gaeltacht, with only a small number of children at first. In the absence of state support, formal recognition as a school, and funding until 1984, the school relied heavily on the support of parents and families. The 1970s in the Republic of Ireland saw a turning point in immersion education when parents, teachers and communities chose to provide an alternative educational option for their children (Ó hAiniféin, 2008).

In Northern Ireland, Derry opened the first Irish-language unit in 1983 (Ó Cathalláin, Nig Uidhir and Ó Duibhir, 2016). On the other hand, Irish-medium schools are the preferred option in the Republic of Ireland rather than units at primary level. Since 1999, the *Good Friday Agreement* (1998), the *Education Order* (1998), the establishment of Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (2000), and Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta (2001) have led to increased support for immersion education. In the Republic of Ireland, in 2002, An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG) was established under *The Education Act* (1998).

The renaissance in immersion practices in the 1970s was of great value, not only in terms of language revitalisation and maintenance, but also in terms of the expansion of educational provision and parental participation (Coolahan, 1981; Ní Mhaoláin, 1998; Ó Ceallaigh and Ní Dhonnabháin, 2015; Ó Luain, 2024). It is clear that Irish-medium education has grown and developed over the years. The table below describes some of the major developments.

Conclusion

Immersion education has a rich history in Ireland. The early models provide cause for reflection on the types of support needed in the classroom and outside, to provide high-quality immersion education. Going forward, we can learn from the experience of establishing immersion education in different settings and contexts, to help provide sustainable support for Irish-medium schools.

The Growth and Development of Immersion Education

1904 – The Bilingual Programme was established.	1990s – The <i>Good Friday Agreement</i> (1998), <i>The Education Order</i> (1998) and the establishment of Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (2000) as well as Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta (2001) have increased support for immersion education in Northern Ireland.
1908 – St Enda's school was founded by Patrick Pearse in which subjects were taught bilingually.	
1917 – Luíse Ghabhánach Ní Dhufaigh and Áine Nic Aodha co-founded Scoil Bhríde, the first Irish-medium school.	1991 – The first post-primary school, Coláiste Feirste (Meánscoil Feirste) was established in Northern Ireland. Gaeloiliúint became the first umbrella organisation for Irish-medium schools in Northern Ireland.
1922 – Immersion education was implemented in infant classes in the Free State.	
1952 – Scoil Lorcáin was founded in Dublin, the Republic of Ireland's first all-Irish primary school. Subsequently, other Irish-medium primary schools came into existence, including Scoil Neasáin (1969), Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch (1973) and Scoil Naithí (1973).	1993 – An Foras Pátrúnachta was set up to provide an alternative in terms of patronage for emerging Irish-medium schools. Today, An Foras Pátrúnachta is the largest patron of Irish-medium schools.
1960s – Native speakers gathered to establish an urban Gaeltacht on Bóthar Seoighe in West Belfast.	1993 – Gaelscoil an Ghoirt Álainn in Cork, the first Irish-medium multi-denominational school, was established.
1969 – Coláiste Eoin, and later Coláiste Íosagáin (1971), was founded, providing the option of Irish-medium post-primary education.	1995 – An Irish-medium Post-Graduate Certificate in Education began at St Mary's University College, Belfast. The following year, the first cohort of BEd students began their degree through the medium of Irish.
1970s – Parents, families and educators came together to establish more immersion schools.	1996 – Gaelscoil Chill Mhantáin was established in County Wicklow, the first Irish-medium interdenominational school.
1971 – Bunscoil Phobal Feirste, the first Irish-medium school in Northern Ireland, was established.	1998 – The Higher Certificate in Education, a post-primary qualification, commenced at the University of Galway. Since 2014, it has been known as the Professional Master of Education.
1972 – Comhdháil na Scoileanna Gaelacha, (Gaelic Schools' Conference), Galway, was founded.	2002 – An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG) was established.
1973 – Comhchoiste Náisiúnta na Scoileanna Gaeilge (Joint National Committee for Irish-Language Schools), Dublin, was established.	2011 – A Masters in Irish-Medium Education began at St. Mary's University College.
1974-1976 – The two organisations above consolidated to support immersion education, which was coming into existence. The name Gaelscoileanna was adopted. The organisation is now known as Gaeloideachas.	2013 – A Masters in Irish-Medium and Gaeltacht Education began at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. As of 2023, Trinity College Dublin is providing this Masters.
1981 – Coláiste Chillíain was established in Clondalkin, the first Irish-medium post-primary school run by Vocational Education Committee outside the Gaeltacht.	2016 – The Policy on Gaeltacht Education was published, and the Unit for Gaeltacht Education was established in the Department of Education.
1983 – The first Irish-medium unit was established in Northern Ireland in the city of Derry.	2019 – The first cohort of the Bachelor of Education through the medium of Irish began at Marino Institute of Education.
1987 – Eagraíocht na Scoileanna Gaeltachta (The Gaeltacht Schools' Organisation) was established.	2024 – The public consultation on Irish-medium Education outside the Gaeltacht has been published. The Department of Education is developing a new policy for Irish-medium education outside the Gaeltacht.

3

Children's Achievement and Experience in Immersion Education

Children's Achievement and Experience in Immersion Education

Overall, children perform well in immersion education. Results from national studies on children's achievement in English and mathematics show that children in immersion education perform as well or better than children in English-medium schools (Educational Research Centre, 2024³; Gilleece, Shiel, Clerkin and Millar, 2012). The Chief Inspector's Report in Northern Ireland shows that an increasing number of children receive their education through the medium of Irish and that there is a generally high standard of education in these immersion schools (ETI Northern Ireland, 2014).

Like their peers, children with special and additional educational needs gain advantages in immersion education in many of the same academic and developmental areas: bilingualism, ability in Irish, academic advantages in post-primary school, self-confidence and a positive school culture (Nic Aindriú, 2019). Immersion education also fosters positive attitudes towards learning Irish (Harris et al., 2006). For example, 71.9 % of parents in Irish-medium schools think their children enjoy learning Irish, compared to 27.2 % of parents in English-medium schools (Harris et al., 2006, p.143). For children who speak languages other than Irish or English at home, their parents see the benefits of immersion education in enhancing their children's plurilingual abilities (Ní Dhiorbháin, Connaughton-Crean and Ó Duibhir 2023).

The *Primary Language Curriculum* (2019) aims to address a number of weaknesses that were present in *Curaclam na Gaeilge* (Irish Language Curriculum) (1999), for example, that it did not adequately cater for learners from different language contexts (Ó Duibhir and Cummins 2012). It is worth recalling that the profile of immersion schools in Ireland varies, and there are also many subcategories:

- Gaeltacht schools (categories A, B and C, and those that participate in the Schools Support Programme due to their rural location)
- Irish-medium schools in the Republic of Ireland (schools with and without DEIS status)
- Irish-medium schools and units in Northern Ireland (in middle-class urban areas and disadvantaged settings).

Thus, in this chapter, the results of various studies are presented in the context of the type of immersion education setting. The term "immersion education" is used when the results relate to a combination of Gaeltacht schools, Irish-medium schools and Irish-medium units outside the Gaeltacht.

3 Personal communication with the Educational Research Centre on 18 July 2024 on the outcome of children in immersion education in the latest cycle of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study.

Chapter Overview

- International research on the benefits of bilingualism and plurilingualism will be explored initially.
- Next, the impact of immersion on cognitive development will be considered.
- Children's achievement in immersion education in Ireland will then be considered, particularly achievement in mathematics, and social and cultural development.
- The final section will examine the factors that influence children's experience and achievement in immersion education, particularly socio-economic status.
- Language and literacy abilities are the cornerstones of learning in primary school. A wide range of research has been carried out on the development of literacy in English and Irish in the immersion education context. The development of biliteracy will be specifically discussed in the chapter *Immersion Education and the Development of Biliteracy*.

Advantages of Bilingualism and Plurilingualism

Much research on the benefits of bilingualism and plurilingualism concerns people who speak two or more major global languages (for example, Spanish, French and Italian), as opposed to minority languages (languages spoken by a minority of the population) and minoritised languages (namely a language that has been suppressed in formal domains, for example, in education and politics) (MacKenzie, O'Keefe, Thurston and O'Neill, 2022).

The advantages of bilingualism and immersion education are discussed regarding cognitive, metacognitive, economic, social and academic benefits. These benefits have been widely discussed in national literature (see Harris et al., 2006; Ó Ceallaigh and Ní Shéaghda, 2017; Ó hAiniféin, 2008; Parsons and Lyddy, 2009). The advantages of bilingualism demonstrated in international research are outlined in Ó Ceallaigh (2013, p.33).

Summary of the Advantages of Bilingualism / Immersion Education

Advantage	Reference
Metalinguistic awareness Bilinguals are more aware of languages and how they work.	Bialystok & Codd, 1997; Bournot-Trites & Denizot, 2005; Galambos & Hakuta, 1988; Harley, Hart & Swain, 1986; Lyster, Collins & Ballinger, 2009; Lyster, Quiroga & Ballinger, 2013.
Communication sensitivity Bilinguals are more sensitive to nuances in communication.	Baker, 2007; Ben-Zeev, 1977; Genesee, Lambert & Tucker, 1975.
Cognitive flexibility Bilinguals are more creative and flexible in their thinking.	Cummins, 1975, 1977; Lambert, Tucker & d'Anglejan, 1973; Lazuruk, 2007; Ricciardelli, 1992.
Multidirectional thinking, field autonomy, pattern recognition and problem solving Bilinguals often find it easier to figure out the way and see hidden patterns and figures.	Baker, 2001; Bialystok, 2001; Bialystok & Martin 2004; Cenoz & Genesee, 1998; Peal & Lambert, 1962.
Concept formation, classification, creativity, analogous reasoning, and visual-spatial skills Knowing the structural properties of two languages, bilinguals are more effective at decoding.	Bialystok et al., 2008; Diaz & Klingler, 1991.
Higher executive execution and better episodic memory Bilinguals can engage in encoding and strategic retrieval and remember events.	Bialystok, Craik & Luc, 2008; Salvatierra & Rosselli, 2011; Schroeder & Marian, 2012; Wodniecka et al., 2010.
Multiculturalism, open-mindedness, and understanding Bilingualism provides greater contact with other cultures and languages and fosters relationships.	Genesee, 1987; Met, 1994; Rebuffot, 1993.
Ease of learning a third language It can be easier to learn a third language if a person already speaks two languages.	Cenoz, 2004; Cenoz & Valencia, 1994; Sanz, 2000.
Equal opportunities Pupils from diverse socio-economic, ethnic and indigenous backgrounds perform well in immersion education.	Bruck, Tucker & Jakimik, 1975; Caldas & Boudreaux, 1999; Holobow, Genesee & Lambert, 1991; Lindholm- Leary, 2001; Slaughter, 1997.
Economic advantages People who have two or more languages have increased employment opportunities in the global market.	Baker, 2001, 2007; Cloud, Genesee & Hamayan. 2000.

(Ó Ceallaigh, 2013, p.33)

Some of the studies in the table above relate to language acquisition at home rather than in immersion education, while others relate to bilingualism and plurilingualism in the majority language. The next part of the chapter will focus specifically on research on children's achievement and experience in immersion education at primary level in Ireland.

The Impact of School-Based Bilingualism on Cognitive Development

A small collection of research has been carried out on the impact of immersion education on cognitive development, such as studies by Antonijevic, Durham and de hÍde (2017), Cummins (1978), Kennedy (2012), Macnamara (1966), and Stephens (2013). International research on neuro-imaging shows that bilinguals⁴ use the part of the brain linked to language when encountering difficult, non-verbal tasks. Monolinguals, however, use the part of the brain linked to problem-solving when encountering difficult, non-verbal tasks (Kennedy, 2012). Bilinguals and plurilinguals are faster at some non-verbal tasks (Bialystok, 2009). In the context of Irish-medium immersion education, research showing neuro-imaging of bilingual and plurilingual brains is not available. However, such research would greatly enhance our understanding of the link between bilingualism / plurilingualism and the development of executive function (the ability to organise and understand content) (Stephens, 2013).

School-Based Bilingualism and Executive Function

Research on school-based bilingualism shows that it has no negative impact on executive function (Kennedy, 2012) and that in some cases bilingualism may be linked to an increased ability where the participant engages in complex executive function tasks (Stephens, 2013). Differing results have emerged internationally, however, regarding the impact of bilingualism on a range of cognitive skills (Gunnerud et al., 2020).

Findings that emerge in the national context concerning the benefits of bilingualism and plurilingualism are consistent with much of international research, namely that bilingualism has a positive impact on specific areas and that there are areas where bilingualism has little impact, for example, working memory (Bialystok, 2009). McVeigh, Wylie and Mulhern's (2017) study of 7-9 year olds in Irish immersion education shows that school-based bilingualism has little impact on short-term memory. Kennedy's research (2012) focuses on the impact of school-based bilingualism on individual aspects of executive function and does not reveal any significant impact either.

It is worth looking at aspects of the research methods and analysis that may influence these seemingly neutral findings that emerge. In the above-mentioned studies, only one aspect of executive function is usually examined. In the Stephens study (2013), a slightly different approach is used in the analysis, namely that the test combines a few aspects of executive function – recall, sorting, etc. Although bilingualism is not shown to have a strong effect on individual aspects of executive function, for example, inhibitory control (the ability to suppress a word, idea, emotion or action), school-based bilingualism has a positive impact on executive function, when multiple aspects of executive function are considered together. This indicates that it would be worthwhile recognising in future studies that executive function is an integrated system and that several processes take place in the brain at the same time.

⁴ Although participants in many studies are called "monolinguals" and "bilinguals", it is difficult to describe the group of children who attend an English-medium school as "monolinguals" because children in the Republic of Ireland have some contact with Irish at school and other languages outside of school. In addition, the child may speak more than two languages at home. Hence, the term bilingual / plurilingual is used in the report.

Some of the testing conditions in national and international research on bilinguals and plurilinguals may not be appropriate. This may contribute to the yielding of negative or neutral results. One testing condition that may prove difficult for bilinguals or plurilinguals is the time-constrained test due to the language delay that they may experience at an early age. International research, e.g. Best, Miller and Naglieri (2011) and national research, e.g. Stephens (2013), therefore suggest that results should be reported from these studies in relation to (a) accuracy and (b) the ability to achieve the target within time, rather than just results from (b) as is often the case.

School-Based Bilingualism and Metalinguistic Skills

National research shows that immersion education positively impacts on aspects of metalinguistic development. Metalinguistic skills are important for language ability in general. As research by Nic Fhlannchadha (2016) suggests, participants are better placed to express themselves accurately and clearly when they have metalinguistic awareness of grammatical items. Dillon's (2009) research shows that children in immersion education who took part in the Modern Languages in Primary School Initiative (MLPSI) are better able to make connections between languages than children in English-medium schools. The same study shows that children in Irish-medium schools have a greater advantage over children in Gaeltacht schools in connecting structures in L1, L2 and L3. This result is perhaps due to the transfer of language skills from one language to another that takes place, according to the Common Underlying Proficiency Hypothesis (Cummins, 2021), as these children have attained a high level of proficiency in L1 and L2. Children in Irish-medium schools may understand the conscious effort involved in the language learning process compared to native speakers or children in Irish-speaking communities, who acquire the language at home, and it is perhaps this conscious effort that enhances their metalinguistic skills.

Markey's research (2020) uses a diagnostic approach to look at the strategies that learners of Irish employ, rather than solely looking at achievement. Markey's research shows that learners in immersion schools need to be enabled to develop and use metacognitive strategies. Opportunities to process two or more languages over a period of time helps with metalinguistic development (Ó Duibhir and Cummins, 2012). According to Kennedy (2012), some of the benefits that children experience in immersion education in a range of metalinguistic skills relate to their increased exposure to an additional language. Further longitudinal studies are needed to explore the development of executive function among bilingual / plurilingual children over a longer period of time (Stephens, 2013). It should be noted that children can be supported to develop metalinguistic skills in the classroom through the use of an explicit approach to making connections between languages or highlighting similar aspects of the language, and by giving them opportunities to reflect on these connections individually and with their peers (Ní Dhiorbháin, Concannon- Gibney and Ní Dhubhghaill, 2024).

In the research conducted by Kiely et al. (2024), for example, children in an Irish-medium school learned the same song in Irish, English and French and had the opportunity to focus on similarities and differences between the word order in the sentence in each language. In Ó Cathalláin's (2011) research, children read the same story in English and Irish and then use some of the same reading comprehension activities to reinforce learning and to support them in connecting reading comprehension skills in both languages. Additionally, in research conducted by Ní Dhiorbháin and Ó Duibhir (2017), children are encouraged to keep a reflective diary in which they reflect on grammatical rules in their own words. While this is not shown to have a significant impact on achievement in the language test, the reflective diary allows them to develop metalinguistic skills. It is also suggested that their peer discussion is helpful for children in exploring grammatical elements and developing metalinguistic knowledge (Ní Dhiorbháin and Ó Duibhir, 2017).

General Achievement of Children in Immersion Education in National Studies

This section deals children's performance in immersion education in national studies. The chapter *Assessment in Immersion Education* will discuss in more detail the factors relating to testing and assessment that may influence these results.

A specific discussion on children's achievement in immersion education is sometimes lacking in national studies (for example, *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study* by Delaney et al., 2023; reports of the *Children's School Lives* project by Devine et al., 2020; *National Assessments of English Mathematics and Reading* by Eivers et al., 2010). In other cases, researchers do not seek specific information about aspects of learning Irish while exploring children's school experiences, for example, the *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) study, a longitudinal study examining children's experiences in the Republic of Ireland. In addition, in the thematic studies conducted by the Education and Training Inspectorate in Northern Ireland, although Irish-medium schools participate in these studies, the findings reported do not always discuss the immersion education context. Therefore, follow-up studies are needed to address pertinent issues in immersion education, such as Gilleece, Shiel, Clerkin and Millar (2012) which looks at children's achievement in mathematics and English, and additional studies from the Educational Research Centre (2024), which examines in closer detail the achievement of children in immersion education in the latest *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study* (PIRLS) (2023).

The results of major national studies in mathematics will now be discussed. The longitudinal GUI studies conducted in Ireland will also be examined to focus on any benefits that children in immersion education may obtain. It should be noted that the results of this research are related to cultural and social benefits and explore academic achievement in a limited range of curricular subjects (language and mathematics).

In the next chapter, *Immersion Education and the Development of Biliteracy*, results on achievement in English and Irish will be discussed. Little research is currently done on children's achievement in immersion education in other areas of the curriculum, for example, in the arts.

Immersion Education and Achievement in Mathematics

Children in Irish-medium schools in Northern Ireland generally perform well in numeracy (ETI Northern Ireland, 2014). In the Republic of Ireland, the Shiel, Gilleece, Clerkin and Millar report (2011) shows mixed results when comparing children's outcomes in immersion education to the results of children who were part of the national study carried out in 2009:

- Children in 2nd Class perform better in Irish-medium schools than the national average, although the results of children in 2nd Class in Gaeltacht schools do not differ significantly from the national average.
- Children in 6th Class perform better in Gaeltacht schools, although there is no significant difference for children in 6th Class in Irish-medium schools compared to the national average mark.

According to Strickland and Hickey (2016), children in Irish-medium schools show a slightly more negative attitude toward mathematics than children in English-medium schools.

It is necessary to probe this finding some more and understand it in the context of

children's views on the challenge inherent in learning mathematics, as well as the importance children perceive mathematics to have in the curriculum. In subsequent research on children's views on the *Draft Primary School Curriculum* and the *Primary School Curriculum* (2023), some case studies were conducted with children in immersion schools. Although children report that they view mathematics as challenging, they think it is important in the curriculum (Kiely et al., 2022; Kiely et al., 2024). Ní Ríordáin and O'Donoghue's study (2009) suggests that bilinguals / plurilinguals with a high level of proficiency in Irish receive higher results in mathematics testing than learners who do not have the same level of language proficiency, consistent with the earlier Macnamara study (1966).

The *Chief Inspector's Report* (2022) focuses on Gaeltacht and Irish-medium schools and recommends that specialised vocabulary relating to mathematics should be taught explicitly, especially in some Gaeltacht schools. One challenge that emerges is the variation in mathematical terms from area to area (MacKenzie, O'Keeffe, Thurston and O'Neill 2022). The existence of synonyms for nouns is an interesting feature of the Irish language (Doyle, 2015). As such, it may be possible to build on the Ríomhfhoclóir Matamaitice⁵ (Mathematics Dictionary) or develop a handbook that contains an explanation of mathematical terms, as well as the available synonyms. The development of mathematical thinking and general language proficiency clearly requires a focus on disciplinary literacy and specialised mathematical vocabulary (Shiel, Gilleece, Clerkin and Millar, 2011).

It is heartening to see the move from the "language as barrier" model to the "language as resource" model that has come to the fore in literature related to English as an additional language. Children in Irish-medium schools can draw on their language skills in Irish, English, and other languages to explore mathematical concepts. Research by Ní Ríordáin (2018) explores some of the benefits children have in developing conceptual mathematical knowledge when they can draw on skills in different languages. She cites a number of mathematical terms, "velocity", for example, in which the meaning of the concept may be clearer in the Irish version: "treoluas" (treo = direction; luas = speed). Children's learning can be scaffolded by explicitly teaching the specialised vocabulary in both languages and allowing children to engage in peer discussion and communicative tasks (MacKenzie, O'Keeffe, Thurston and O'Neill 2022). It is worth supporting teachers' metalinguistic knowledge in mathematics and implementing an appropriate pedagogical approach to draw on children's language resources (Ní Ríordáin, 2018). A comprehensive collection of resources is available for teachers in the Mol Mata (Mathematics Hub) on the COGG website. It would be worthwhile to examine the use of these resources in future research.

Immersion Education and Social and Cultural Development

The results of the *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) study show that children in immersion education attain a number of other benefits. The study shows that children in Irish-medium schools often have the opportunity to engage in cultural activities (McCoy, Quail, and Smyth, 2012b). The authors of the GUI explain that these cultural opportunities are among the factors contributing to higher academic achievement in children in Irish-medium schools. According to the same study, children in Irish-medium schools outside of the Gaeltacht acquire social benefits; that is, children keep in touch with friends, especially on social media. This finding seems to relate to children from different areas travelling to Irish-medium schools, which in turn encourages them to try to stay in touch with their friends outside of school (McCoy, Quail, and Smyth, 2012a).

⁵ The Ríomhfhoclóir Matamaitice is available here <https://www.rewardinglearning.org.uk/focloirmata/>

Children in Irish-medium and Gaeltacht schools are more likely to read for pleasure, with the incidence of reading for pleasure being higher among children in Irish-medium schools (McCoy, Quail and Smyth, 2012a). The GUI study does not ask what language children read in, but it is likely that children read mainly in English and that some transfer of language skills takes place (Ó Duibhir and Cummins, 2012).

Irish speakers express mixed views about whether the language they use can impact on their perception of the world (McHale, 2020). However, it has been shown that contact with Irish-language literature has a positive impact on young people's interest in engaging with Irish reading and culture (O'Kane Boal, 2023). Reading for pleasure also helps to foster a positive attitude towards the Irish language (Devitt et al., 2018). Children in Irish-medium schools show an understanding of the importance of learning about other cultures and languages (Kiely et al., 2022; Kiely et al., 2024). In the *Strategy for Wellbeing*⁶ in Wales, Welsh is mentioned as a factor that positively impacts people's overall wellbeing. More research is needed on the role of the Irish language in the overall emotional development of the child, and the advantages it holds for the child's social and cultural development.

Socio-Economic Factors and Achievement in Literacy and Mathematics

Given the diversity in types of immersion schools in Ireland, some studies look at differences that emerge in distinct Irish-medium contexts, for example, similarities and differences between Irish-medium and Gaeltacht schools in the Republic of Ireland (McCoy, Quail and Smyth, 2012a/b). Other studies compare Irish-medium schools that have a status of educational disadvantage (DEIS) to Irish-medium schools that do not have that status (Ní Chlochasaigh, Ó Duibhir and Shiel, 2021). The chapter *Immersion Education and the Development of Biliteracy* discusses the specific literacy needs of Gaeltacht Schools.

Literacy in DEIS Schools

As the national results on children's attainment in English literacy show, children's achievement in DEIS schools differs from children in other schools nationally (Delaney et al., 2023). Differences in literacy outcomes also emerge in immersion education. In 2017, standardised tests in English reading (Drumcondra Sentence Reading Test) and mathematics were administered in Irish-medium schools in the Republic of Ireland. These were the same tests that were used in the 2016 DEIS National Assessments and sought to compare test scores between Irish-medium DEIS schools with DEIS scores nationally.

Research conducted by Ní Chlochasaigh, Ó Duibhir, and Shiel (2021) shows that children in Irish-medium DEIS schools display significantly lower scores in English reading and mathematics compared to children in Irish-medium schools in general. However, it is important to remember that Irish-medium schools generally display higher scores than other schools nationally.

In comparing Irish-medium DEIS schools with English-medium DEIS schools, it becomes apparent that children in Irish-medium DEIS schools obtain higher results. In a study conducted by Ní Chlochasaigh, Shiel and Ó Duibhir (2020), 3rd Class and 6th Class in both bands (DEIS Band 1 and DEIS Band 2), more children in Irish-medium DEIS schools were in or above the 90th percentile in English reading compared DEIS schools nationally.

6 Wellbeing of Wales (2023) available at <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/pdf-versions/2024/9/4/1726734195/wellbeing-wales-2023.pdf>

In Irish-medium DEIS Band 2 schools, 3rd and 6th Class children achieve higher average scores than the national average in DEIS schools. The difference is significant in 3rd Class only.

In Irish-medium DEIS Band 1 schools, 3rd Class children have lower average scores than DEIS schools nationally, but by the end of primary schooling, children in Irish-medium DEIS schools outperform DEIS schools nationally. It may be the case that children in younger classes experience developmental delays (Ní Chlochasaigh, Shiel and Ó Duibhir, 2020). Strickland and Hickey (2016) have made an interesting point that more thought should be given to when children are assessed in immersion schools.

It is worth noting that some Gaeltacht schools, due to their rural location, participate in the Schools Support Programme. Children who do not attend a school that is part of the support programme have a higher average score in English reading (Shiel, Gilleece, Clerkin, and Millar, 2011).

Principals report that 17.5 % of children in Irish-medium DEIS schools have a wide range of learning needs (Ní Chlochasaigh, Shiel, and Ó Duibhir, 2020). This rate is significantly higher than the reported rate in immersion schools generally, which is 9.4 % (Andrews, 2020).

A handful of studies focus on children's experiences in Irish-medium DEIS schools in the Republic of Ireland. In a small-scale study involving a phonics scheme in infant classes in an Irish-medium DEIS Band 2 school, a structured phonics scheme to develop basic literacy skills utilising systematic teaching, as well as the explicit teaching of high-frequency words, is shown to be effective (Ní Chatháin Uí Chonchúir, 2021). Ní Chuaig (2016) makes a good point about reading materials for Irish-medium DEIS schools. The DEIS scheme provides a grant to invest in literacy resources in the school, but the language of the school does not seem to be taken into account when distributing the money. Arguably, schools attended by bilingual / plurilingual children need twice as much support to develop literacy in both languages (Ní Chuaig, 2016). It is noted that the number of students who are L1 speakers of Irish attending DEIS Irish-medium schools is minimal compared to Irish-medium schools in general (Gilleece, Shiel, Clerkin and Millar, 2012).

In Irish-medium schools in Northern Ireland, principals mention that schools serving areas of disadvantage face challenges when the children do not have access to Irish-language communities outside of school or when there are other social problems in the area. However, children report that they are happy with their experience in immersion education (Wright and Scullion, 2007) and Mac Corraidh (2013) discusses the lifetime benefits of bilingualism offered by Irish-medium schools in disadvantaged areas.

Mathematics in DEIS Schools

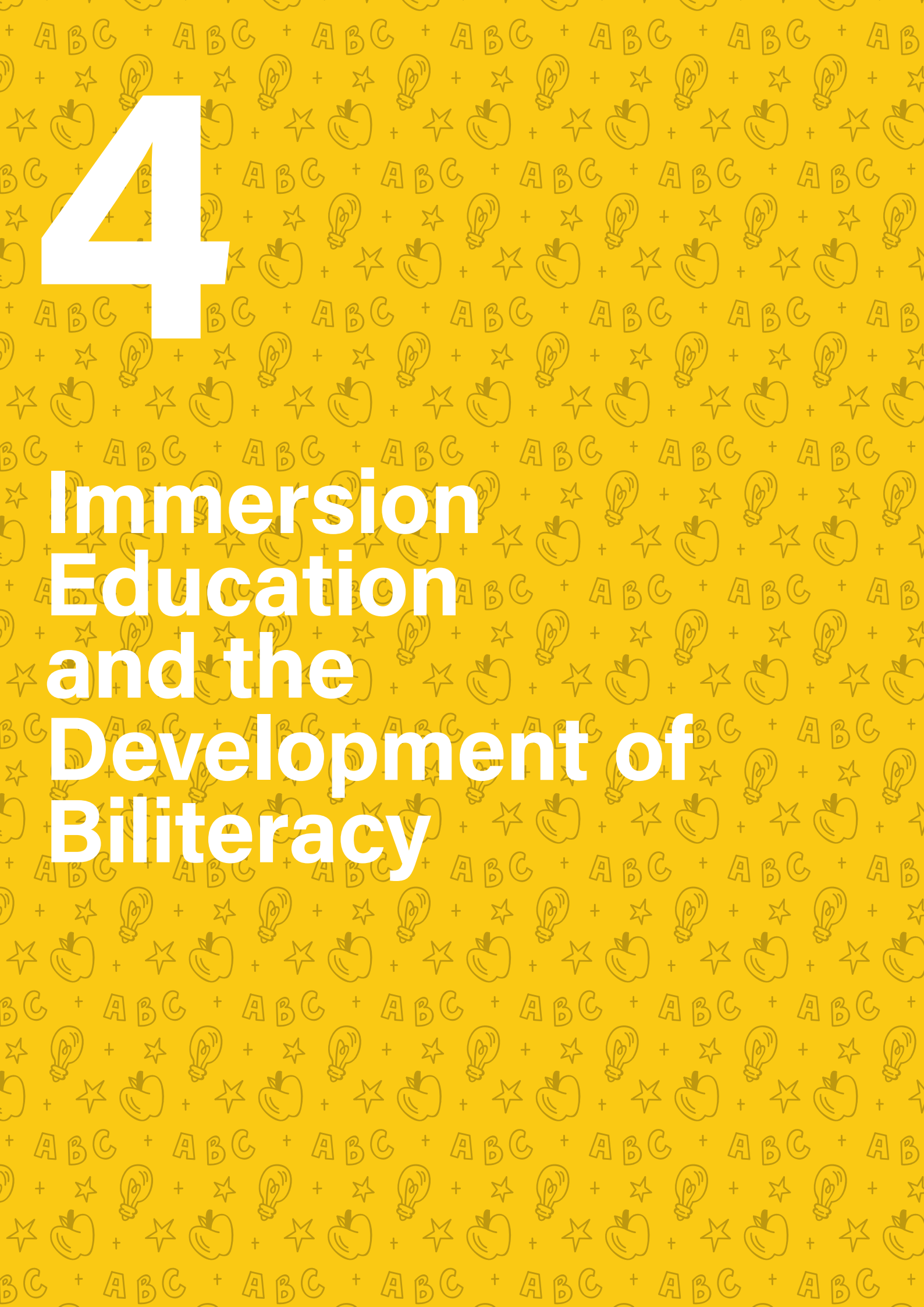
With regards to mathematical achievement in Irish-medium DEIS schools, greater emphasis should be placed on whole-school numeracy interventions as is done in the area of literacy. It is essential to address children's numeracy needs and to implement support for mathematics and for learning mathematics through the medium of Irish. Poor results may be linked to a lack of support for learning mathematics through a second / additional language, or may be due to the emphasis placed on literacy over numeracy in Irish-medium DEIS schools (Ní Chlochasaigh, Shiel and Ó Duibhir, 2020).

Only 1.6 % of pupils in Irish-medium DEIS Band 1 schools perform at a high level in standardised testing at the end of 3rd Class, compared to 10% of pupils nationally. A study by Ní Ríordáin and O'Donoghue (2007) shows that bilinguals / plurilinguals with high proficiency in Irish perform better in mathematics testing than learners who do not have the same level of proficiency.

This is consistent with teachers' reports of difficulties in supporting children's special educational needs in mathematics (Nic Aindriú, 2019). Nic Aindriú (2019) comments on the increase in the number of schools testing the child's mathematical ability through Irish or bilingually to support children in communicating clearly their mathematical knowledge, which is in line with Cummins' (1978) recommendations earlier on testing in the child's dominant language.

Conclusion

Overall, children in Irish-medium schools perform as well or better in standardised testing compared to children in English-medium schools. There is a number of cognitive, metalinguistic, academic, social, and cultural benefits for children attending Irish-medium schools. The types of immersion education schools in Ireland vary and as a result, different types of schools have specific needs. While children in immersion education generally perform well in literacy, there is an urgent need to support children, particularly in Irish-medium DEIS schools, to achieve their full potential in mathematics.

The background of the entire slide is a repeating pattern of the letters 'ABC', five-pointed stars, and apple icons. The pattern is light yellow and covers the entire area.

4

Immersion Education and the Development of Biliteracy

Immersion Education and the Development of Biliteracy

Immersion education in Ireland aims to develop language and literacy skills in the school's two formal languages: Irish and English. The *Primary Language Curriculum* (2019) and the *Strategy for Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024-2033 Every Learners from Birth to Young Adulthood* (2024) reinforce this aim.

Chapter Overview

- First, the development of language and literacy skills in English will be considered.
- Then, the development of foundational language and literacy skills in Irish in different contexts will be explored, looking at the similarities and differences between this process and the development of English language and literacy skills.
- There will be a particular focus on the language needs of Gaeltacht schools.
- The transfer of language skills from Irish to English, and from English to Irish, will be discussed.
- Finally, other literacies and the use of creative technologies will be examined.
- The chapter *Immersion Education and the Multilingual World* discusses the relationship between Irish and other languages.

Development of Language and Literacy Skills in English

In the *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study* (PIRLS) (2023), children in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland performed particularly well in English reading. There was a significant improvement in children's achievement in schools in the Republic of Ireland (it should, however, be taken into account that the children who participated in the study were slightly older than normal due to the delay caused by COVID-19) (Delaney et al., 2023). Children in immersion education were included in the study. The additional analysis provided by the Educational Research Centre⁷ shows that, on average, children in immersion education performed as well as children in English-medium schools and that they performed very well compared to their international peers.

PIRLS results are consistent with the results of other studies on children's achievement in English reading. In the study conducted by Shiel, Gilleece, Clerkin and Millar (2011), children in immersion education had an advantage over children in English-medium schools, meaning that children in Gaeltacht and Irish-medium schools show a significantly higher score in English reading compared to the national scores from the 2009 test, with the exception of children in 2nd Class in Gaeltacht schools. (Although children in 2nd Class in Gaeltacht schools had a higher average score, the difference was not statistically significant). These higher outcomes may be related to several factors, including the socio-economic status of children and a better teacher-child ratio in immersion education.

7 Personal communication with the Educational Research Centre, 18 July 2024.

The acquisition of a second / additional language without compromising mother tongue acquisition has long been noted in immersion education (Shiel, Gilleece, Clerkin and Millar 2011). In this way, it could be seen as an additive bilingual / multilingual programme. The results in Ireland are very positive. Children in immersion education achieve a high level of proficiency in Irish (McVeigh, Wylie and Mulhern, 2017; Nig Uidhir, 2001; Ó hAiniféin, 2008). As shown in the Welsh-language context, children's contact with English outside of schools helps to overcome gaps in the formal teaching of the major language in the early years of immersion education (Rhys and Thomas, 2013).

The *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) study shows that children in Irish-medium schools perform very well in English reading. In Strickland and Hickey's (2016) more in-depth analysis of the GUI study data, it is shown that children in Irish-medium schools show a slightly higher average score in English vocabulary compared to children in English-medium schools.

The study by Parsons and Lyddy (2016) explores children's achievement in English and Irish reading in English-medium schools, Gaeltacht schools and Irish-medium schools. Tests are used at three points where children must read words and non-words in 2nd Class to assess their reading and decoding abilities. Vocabulary is also tested.

Results show that children in Irish-medium schools generally perform as well as children in English-medium schools. The only exception is when it comes to reading English words, where children in Gaeltacht schools had lower scores. However, it should be taken into account that there was an improvement in that group from the first to the third test. The same study shows that children in immersion education perform better when reading Irish. These findings are consistent with a study conducted by the same authors in 2009 and a study undertaken by Ó hAiniféin (2008) looking at the results of children in immersion education in the following tests: Drumcondra Primary Reading Test and the Mary Immaculate College Reading Attainment Tests.

In terms of children's achievement in Gaeltacht schools, they have higher scores in English reading compared to Irish reading. Péterváry, Ó Curnáin, Ó Giollagáin and Sheahan (2014) also show that Gaeltacht children have greater accuracy and ability in English compared to Irish.

A small-scale study by Parsons and Lyddy (2016) shows that the order in which reading begins does not significantly influence the child's ability in the first language (Parsons and Lyddy, 2016). This is in line with the findings of Shiel, Gilleece, Clerkin and Millar (2011), which show that starting reading in English or Irish, or in both languages simultaneously, in Irish-medium schools has little impact. However, there is a negative impact shown for children in 6th Class in Gaeltacht schools if reading is started in both languages at the same time.

In Scotland, the study by Chondrogianni, Judge-Clayden and Butcher (2022) analyses achievement in English among children in immersion education. Later instruction in a second / additional language leads to an improvement in vocabulary development in the first language. However, earlier instruction in the second / additional language leads to an improvement in recognising non-words. Further research is needed in the future on the implementation of full early immersion in infant classes on children's literacy abilities, as part of the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education* (Department of Education and Skills, 2016).

Developing Language Skills and Literacy in Irish

In some studies of children's achievement in Irish, overall results from Gaeltacht schools, Irish-medium schools, and English-medium schools are taken together (for example, *Irish in the Primary School*, 2007), so it is difficult to extract the specific recommendations for immersion education from the general recommendations. Several studies have been undertaken over the years, focusing specifically on the context of immersion education. Shiel, Gilleece, Clerkin and Millar (2011, p.2) describe the tests carried out with children in immersion schools over the years:

- 1982: Oral Irish, 2nd Class (Harris, 1984)
- 1985: Oral Irish, 6th Class (Harris and Murtagh, 1987; 1988)
- 1988: English Reading, 5th Class (Department of Education, 1991)
- 2002: Oral Irish, Reading Irish, 6th Class (Harris et al., 2006)

Several studies focusing on achievement in immersion education and the linguistic and affective factors that influence children's achievement will now be explored. Different immersion schools have specific language needs, and unsurprisingly, differing results emerge in different immersion education settings, for example, in Gaeltacht schools compared to Irish-medium schools outside of the Gaeltacht. In particular, research relating to acquiring and enriching Irish language skills in Gaeltacht schools will be considered.

Attitudes towards the Irish language

Immersion education not only promotes competence in, but it also supports positive attitudes towards the Irish language. A positive attitude towards Irish influences children's achievement in the target language (Harris et al., 2006). The studies by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2008) and the Department of Education (2007) show that the 1999 Curriculum has helped foster children's positive attitudes to learning Irish and enjoyable experiences in Irish lessons. In addition, the *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) study shows that young people's attitudes towards Irish have not decreased significantly and that attitudes towards Irish in general are similar to those of speakers of other minority and minoritised languages (Devitt et al., 2018).

In the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, children in immersion education generally express a positive attitude towards learning Irish (Kiely et al., 2022; Kiely et al., 2024; Ó Duibhir et al., 2017). In Northern Ireland, children in Irish-medium primary schools display the highest scores in relation to the Attitudes to Irish Language Learning scale (Ó Duibhir et al., 2017). In Darmody and Daly's (2015) research, which examined the results of the *Growing Up in Ireland* study, a higher percentage of children in Irish-medium schools report that they enjoy Irish compared to children in Gaeltacht and English-medium schools. The specific needs of Gaeltacht schools will be discussed later in this chapter.

Development of and Contact with the Target Language

The *Education Act* (1998) is important in formally recognising that Gaeltacht schools have a special role to play in maintaining Irish as the main community language in Gaeltacht areas. There may have been a lack of guidance about this special role prior to the publication of the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2020* (Department of Education and Skills, 2016). Early immersion education was in place in most primary schools in Category A, but there were variations in the time frame for this period of immersion (Mac Donnacha et al., 2004; Ní Chuaig, 2016; Ní Shéaghdha, 2010; Ó Brolcháin, 2015). The *Policy on Gaeltacht Education* (Department of Education and Skills, 2016) and the *Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme* gave explicit guidance on the need to implement two years of immersion education. The success of the *Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme* is reflected in the biennial *Scéalta na Scéime* (Stories from the Scheme) newsletter which shares best practices in immersion education.

In terms of language development, Muckley (2015) points out that sociolinguistic status needs to be taken into account especially when it is a minority language (a language used by a minority of the population) or a minoritised language (a language that has been suppressed in formal domains, for example, in the education and political system). In order to support children in developing two or more languages, more input and opportunities for speaking in the minority / minoritised language are needed. In the same research, Muckley suggests that the number of contact hours a learner has with the majority language does not always equate to the level of proficiency obtained. The language input received by learners in minority / minoritised languages such as Irish is of particular significance. More input is needed in minority / minoritised languages to enable learners to achieve high proficiency levels. This is due to many learners' restricted access to the language outside of school.

How does the sociolinguistic status of Irish affect vocabulary learning in Irish? The O'Toole, Ní Shíthigh, Molamphy and Walsh study (2020) looks at children from Irish / bilingual backgrounds attending Gaeltacht and Irish-medium schools, as well as children from English-medium backgrounds attending Gaeltacht and Irish-medium schools. The results show that children's vocabulary increases throughout their time in Irish-medium and Gaeltacht schools, but that there is a need to support linguistic enrichment in Gaeltacht schools. Regarding the child's home language, it is unsurprising that children from Irish-language / bilingual backgrounds have more vocabulary in Irish than children from backgrounds where English is mainly used and no other language.

But forces outside schools can impact on children's learning. This was clearly seen during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020 – 2022). Symonds et al. (2020) examined how schools in the Republic of Ireland engaged with distance learning between March and May 2020. They showed that some schools spent less time on the Irish language. It is not said what percentage of schools were immersion schools but it seems that new speakers had fewer opportunities to use and develop their Irish when they did not have access to a language community at school.

Contact with the Irish Language in School

The opportunities for young people to engage with Irish in school impact on the ability they develop in the language. There is evidence to suggest that intensive programmes of teaching in the second or additional language over a short period are more effective compared to programmes with a drip-feed approach, that is when learners encounter only a limited amount of the language over a long period (Harris and Ó Duibhir, 2011). However, continuous programmes over a more extended period of time support the development of metalinguistic skills (Cummins and Ó Duibhir, 2012), the integration of language learning with other curriculum subjects, and the fostering of parental and family involvement. Therefore, it seems that the optimal language learning experience in Irish-medium and English-medium schools is to have continuous access to the language over a long period, supplemented with some intensive immersion experiences as part of the language course, to reap the maximum benefits. Some Irish-medium schools provide additional immersion opportunities for children in senior classes to develop links with the Irish-language community, and the children attend a Gaeltacht course (Dunne and Ní Aogáin, 2025).

Ó Duibhir and Cummins (2012) describe general principles relating to effective teaching of the target language, and these should be at the core of the teaching of Irish in immersion education to enhance the quality of children's contact with the language in school.

- **Principle 1:** Instruction needs to ensure that learners develop both a rich repertoire of formulaic expressions and a rule-based competence.
- **Principle 2:** Instruction needs to ensure that learners focus predominantly on meaning.
- **Principle 3:** Instruction needs to ensure that learners also focus on form.
- **Principle 4:** Instruction needs to be predominantly directed at developing implicit knowledge of the L2 while not neglecting explicit knowledge.
- **Principle 5:** Instruction needs to take account of the learner's "built in syllabus".
- **Principle 6:** Successful instructed language learning requires extensive L2 input.
- **Principle 7:** Successful instructed learning also requires opportunities for output.
- **Principle 8:** The opportunity to interact in the L2 is central to developing L2 proficiency.
- **Principle 9:** Instruction needs to take account of individual differences in learners.
- **Principle 10:** In assessing learners' L2 proficiency, it is important to examine free and controlled production.

(Ó Duibhir and Cummins, 2012, p.13)

The development of Irish vocabulary can also be supported by drawing on other resources. In previous reports of the national assessments, for example, Eivers et al. (2010); Gilleece, Shiel, Clerkin and Millar (2012); Kavanagh, Shiel and Gilleece (2015) the researchers outline the negative impact of having a television in the bedroom on achievement in English reading and mathematics. However, watching Irish-language programmes may have a positive impact on language development. While Péterváry, Ó Curnáin, Ó Giollagáin and Sheahan (2014) show that watching Irish-language programmes has a relatively weak impact on their achievement in Irish and English, the Lenoach study (2014) uses a multi-factor analysis. It suggests that when the following three factors are combined, there may be a positive impact on the acquisition of Irish-language vocabulary:

- (i) age in months,
- (ii) socialising in Irish and
- (iii) TV in Irish.

The approach utilised by Lenoach shows how future research could be carried out and how multi-factor analysis can be used to measure more effectively factors substantially influencing bilingualism and plurilingualism. Stephens (2013) also suggests that a few factors should be considered when exploring the development of bilingualism or plurilingualism. Lenoach's study highlights the value of out-of-school opportunities to foster increased contact with the language in an integrated manner. Ways to promote the Irish language at home are outlined in the chapter *Parental and Family Involvement in Immersion Education*.

Developing Skill and Will in Irish Reading

The primary school supports the development of literacy skills in Irish in particular. In an interesting study conducted with children in Scotland who speak the minoritised languages Scottish Gaelic and Sardinian, by comparison, Scottish Gaelic speakers achieve greater proficiency due to their contact with the language at school. Sardinian speakers in Scotland, on the other hand, do not have the opportunity to develop formal literacy skills in school (Lauchlan, Parisi and Fadda, 2012).

There is, therefore, a need to explicitly teach literacy skills in school to support minoritised languages (Barnes, 2021; Hickey and Stenson, 2016a). As de Brún (2022) shows, to enable teachers to teach reading effectively, it is necessary to look at the reading journey in Irish and English, and the similarities and differences between this bilingual journey, and reading in one language. This support is important when a minority of teachers in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland still report not feeling ready to teach reading effectively (de Brún, 2022). It is recognised that there is a continuum of bilingualism / plurilingualism and that children perform differently in immersion education in terms of language and literacy skills (Department of Education (NI) 2016); Flynn, 2021; Ó Duibhir, 2018).

Harris et al.'s (2006) research shows the importance of the family as part of the sociolinguistic context and how children are more successful in reading Irish if they have contact with Irish at home. Harris et al.'s (2006) research also shows that children in Gaeltacht and Irish-medium schools achieve better reading skills in Irish than their peers attending English-medium schools. This does not adversely affect their achievement in English (Parsons and Lyddy, 2009), but sometimes the child uses a different strategy for English reading compared to Irish reading (Ní Chiaruáin, 2009).

Hickey (2007) suggests that the following elements are required to support Irish reading amongst children:

- foundational literacy skills
- repeated reading
- extensive reading
- making better use of existing literacy resources and creating new ones
- supporting parents and families to promote reading at home.

In the following research studies, Dunne and Ní Fhaoláin (2020), Kiely et al. (2021) and Mac Mathúna (2008), repeated reading and dialogical reading with an adult at home are shown to be of great value to the child's reading ability. There are also advantages to using storytelling and task-based learning in language development (Harris and Ó Duibhir, 2011).

In immersion education children choose to read for pleasure in English more often than in Irish (de Brún, 2007; Dunne and Hickey, 2017; Harris et al., 2006). Some of this is linked to children having better literacy skills in English (Péterváry, Ó Curnáin, Ó Giollagáin and Sheahan, 2014) and the wider choice of texts also available in English. Shiel, Gilleece, Clerkin and Millar's study (2011) shows that children in immersion schools have fewer Irish books than English books at home and that more English books are available in the school library. This highlights the need to create a special and positive experience for reading in Irish, as has been done in some reading clubs (Dunne and Hickey, 2017; Ní Chlochasaigh, Ó Brolcháin and Nic Airt, 2024) and in the Bosca Leabharlainne (Library Box) project where children have access to contemporary Irish-language books, and workshops with writers and artists (O'Kane Boal, 2023). Great suggestions for Irish-language books and book club resources are available on the COGG website by accessing An Tairseach and the Book Club section 2024/25.

Many literacy learning theories emphasise cognitive skills related to reading. However, within the socio-cultural perspective, literacy motivation and engagement also need to be taken into account (Guthrie et al., 2006). Research by de Brún (2007), the Department of Education (Northern Ireland) (2016), as well as Dunne and Hickey (2017) highlight the need for children to have engaging texts available to encourage them to use their Irish-language literacy skills in context. In Dunne and Hickey's research (2017), the reading club in 3rd Class and 5th Class in an Irish-medium school explores the affective dimension of reading. Providing regular opportunities for children to read and discuss different genres improves motivation and attitudes toward reading, as well as awareness of the rich literature available in Irish. Ní Chlochasaigh, Ó Brolcháin, and Nic Airt (2024) also illustrate the benefit of bringing a selection of genres to the attention of young readers and providing additional activities relating to the books in the form of an activity booklet.

Specific Language Needs of Gaeltacht Schools

Gaeltacht schools have specific language needs because of their special role in promoting Irish in the community. While some researchers, for example Ó hÉallaithe (2015) disagree with Ó Giollagáin and Charlton's (2015)⁸ predictions about the rapid decline of Irish in the Gaeltacht, researchers agree that children and teachers in Gaeltacht schools need specific support (Mac Donnacha, 2005; Ní Shéaghda, 2010; Ó Brolcháin, 2016; Ó Duibhir, 2018). It is recognised that the relatively small number of young Gaeltacht speakers who have Irish as their family language are the most vulnerable and that the language rights of these children need to be addressed (Coady and Ó Laoire, 2002; Ó Brolcháin, 2016; Ó Duibhir et al., 2015). The support by the organisation Tuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta (Gaeltacht Parents) is of great help to families raising their children through Irish. An inclusive and differentiated approach to teaching Irish in school is also needed in complex linguistic contexts (Dunne and Ní Aogáin, 2025), particularly in Gaeltacht schools.

In the *Education Act* (1998), it is stated that a "recognised school" will use its available resources to contribute to the maintenance of Irish as the primary community language (p.13) Mac Donnacha et al. researched the current state of Gaeltacht schools and the report *Staid Reatha na Scoileanna Gaeltachta* was published in 2004, and it became clear that there were challenges relating to the language, the recruitment of teachers and suitable resources. The research highlighted the challenges faced by children, teachers, schools, COGG, and the Department of Education.

A few years earlier, in 2001, the Department of Education and Science established the *Séideán Sí* programme to meet the needs of Gaeltacht and Irish-medium schools. From 2003 onwards, led by COGG, a package came out every year, starting with Junior Infants and finishing with 6th Class. *Séideán Sí* focused on the three main dialects: Ulster, Connacht and Munster. The integrated programme used by *Séideán Sí* was well received. The programme acknowledged and supported the dialects of native speakers. Irish-medium schools also began to use the programmes.

The Department's Inspectors saw that the programme was so effective that they recommended in 2007 that a similar integrated programme should be developed for the schools teaching Irish as a subject. They suggested that there should be a clear and systematic outline of what was to be taught. The Chief Inspector's Report 2010-2012 contained the same recommendation.

The value of an integrated programme in these schools is clearly recognised. It is also recommended that poetry and whole-school programmes for oral language be developed. The use of drama and authentic literature is recommended too (Department of Education, 2007).

8 See <https://tuairisc.ie/anailis-nil-sceal-na-gaeltachta-chomh-duairc-is-a-tuairiscitear-sa-nuashonru-o-heallaithe/>

As Harris et al. (2006) explained, the differences that sometimes emerge between children's achievement in Gaeltacht schools and Irish-medium schools, are impacted by complex sociolinguistic factors. The period during which the research was carried out saw a significant drop in the standard of spoken Irish among young Irish speakers in the Gaeltacht (Harris et al., 2006). English was the dominant language of communication in the majority of Gaeltacht primary schools, even in those areas where the language was most used (Mac Donnacha et al., 2004), and the influence of English on the Irish-language use of Gaeltacht children was clear (Lenoach, 2014; Péterváry, Ó Curnáin, Ó Giollagáin and Sheahan, 2014).

A Comprehensive Linguistic Study of the Use of Irish in the Gaeltacht (Ó Giollagáin agus Mac Donnacha, 2007) was published in 2007. It recognised that Gaeltacht schools were succeeding in significantly developing the ability of Irish of Gaeltacht students who do not speak it at home, but that the use of English was increasing due to the socialisation through English that is taking place throughout the education system (p.520).

The research study *Taighde ar Dhea-chleachtais Bhunscoile i dtaca le Saibhriú / Sealbhú agus Sóisialú Teanga do Dhaltai arb í an Ghaeilge a gCéad Teanga* (*Best Practices in Primary School in relation to Language Enrichment / Acquisition and Socialisation for Pupils with Irish as their First Language*) by Aoife Ní Shéaghdha was published in 2010 and made the following recommendations:

1. Effective contact, co-operation and communication with parents / school community regarding the school's Irish language policy and its role in the preservation of the Gaeltacht
2. Regular group work with children whose first language is Irish
3. Constant attention to the accuracy / richness of the Irish language of the pupils
4. Events that focus on speaking Irish – drama and storytelling, puppetry, and "Sárchainteoirí" (or speakers from the public who can model rich oral language)
5. A clear policy for biliteracy
6. A campaign to encourage the speaking of Irish among the pupils

(pp. 42-51)

The *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) study shows that children in Irish-medium schools read for pleasure at home more often than children in Gaeltacht schools (McCoy, Quail and Smyth, 2012a). For native speakers, reading materials based on the local literature of the Gaeltacht areas are needed (Ní Shéaghdha, 2010). However, there may be a shortage or lack of awareness of reading materials in various dialects. A number of Irish language publishers print material in a particular dialect and a selection of materials in various dialects are available as part of the Séideán Sí programme. As suggested by Ó Baoill in *Lárchanúint don Ghaeilge* (1986), there may also be a need for material in a centralised dialect.

Some studies specifically focus on children's achievement in Gaeltacht schools in Category A, as well as the perspectives of parents and families, principals and teachers, for example, Ní Chuaig (2016), Ní Fhlaithearta and Ó Brolcháin (2023), Ní Shéaghdha (2010) and Nic Cionnaith (2008). Parents and families of children in Gaeltacht schools in Category A report a concern that their children's standard of Irish is declining and that insufficient attention has been given to enriching their language skills (Nic Cionnaith, 2008). This is in keeping with Hickey's (2001) research on naíonraí (Irish-medium early years education) and the tendency to prioritise the needs of language learners over native speakers. The directors of naíonraí in Hickey's research reported that they didn't focus as much on reading quite challenging stories or on engaging in complex storytelling for the whole group as they don't think this approach is appropriate for the new speakers.

Another study on children's achievement in Gaeltacht schools (Category A) was undertaken, and the results were published in 2015 (Department of Education and Skills, 2015). Nine schools participated in the study. As the study shows, there is a need to teach specific vocabulary in all areas of the curriculum. This recommendation is in line with Ní Ríogáin's (2022) study stating that there is a need to teach specialised vocabulary relating to Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), and that this, together with opportunities for peer discussion, enables children to discuss STEM fields. To this end, modelling and teaching phrases that the children can use with their peers is necessary. It is reported that multi-grade teachers have interesting strategies to protect the characteristic spirit of immersion education, and to cater for native and more proficient speakers (Ó Brolcháin, 2015). There may be greater consistency in approaches among Gaeltacht schools since the introduction of the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education* (Department of Education and Skills, 2016).

Despite the success of immersion education in the promotion of Irish, a challenge remains in encouraging children to use Irish outside school, as well as opportunities for the use of Irish in social contexts, and further educational opportunities through the medium of Irish when they leave primary or post-primary school (Darmody and Daly, 2015; Ní Dhonnchadha, 2021; Ó Duibhir et al., 2015). More research is needed on the specific needs of Gaeltacht schools in Category B and C, and on children's achievement and experience in all areas of the curriculum.

Transfer of Language and Literacy Skills

The *Primary Language Curriculum* (2019) looks at the development of language and literacy skills in an integrated manner. Cummins (2021) suggested The Common Underlying Proficiency Hypothesis, suggesting that that some transfer of language skills takes place from one language to the other. This framework forms the basis of the integrated language curriculum used in the Republic of Ireland from 2019. (The CTB began in infant classes from 2015 onwards).

National research on aspects of literacy development in Irish and English shows that some transfer of skills may take place but that there are other aspects that are distinct to the individual language. As Nic Aindriú (2019) shows, some factors influence the transfer of language skills, for example, how similar or different the orthography of a language is, and it is claimed that the transfer is stronger between languages that use the same alphabet. Although there are differences between English and Irish syntax, for example with the order of words (verb, subject, object in Irish, but subject, verb, object in English) children do not seem to have difficulty acquiring an awareness of word order, or the order of nouns and pronouns (Antonijevic, Durham and Ní Chonghaile, 2017). Guidance and useful exercises on Irish-language orthography are available in the book *Understanding Irish Spelling* (Stenson and Hickey, 2019).

Ó Duibhir and Cummins (2012) describe various types of skills that may transfer including conceptual knowledge, etymology, and metacognitive strategies. A description of the language skills that can transfer from one language to another is also available in Dunne and Ní Aogáin (2025). As per the Common Underlying Proficiency Hypothesis, when children start reading in an additional language, they do not need to start at the very beginning again (August and Shanahan, 2017; Baker and Wright, 2017; Ó Duibhir and Cummins, 2012). The effectiveness of teaching can be enhanced if the transfer of skills is explicitly taught (Cummins, 2021). A small-scale study by Ó Cathalláin (2011) explores literacy practices in infant classes in Irish-medium schools. The same approach of storytelling is used in Irish and English, and this helps children to transfer some language skills.

Ní Shiúrtáin's research (2013) also relates to a small-scale study of Senior Infants in an Irish-medium school. As part of this intervention to reflect more deeply on the content of the story, the particular language of prediction is clearly taught; for example, to indicate that you think something will happen: "Ceapaim go mbeidh" (I think there will be) "B'fhéidir go mbeidh" (Maybe there will be), and the children are given hand gestures to support them to make predictions and connections and to seek clarification. This approach could be useful, particularly in senior classes, in supporting the development of higher order reading skills. The reading comprehension posters available in English and Irish on the Oide website (the professional support service for primary and post-primary schools in Ireland) could be used across languages. The reading comprehension strategies can initially be taught through Irish and English. There is also a comprehension strategies poster with symbols for the different strategies, and this poster can then be used in either Irish or English lessons. However, it is recognised that not all language skills are transferred (Barnes, 2021; Barrett, William and Prendeville, 2020) and that this process may be more complicated than originally thought (Hickey and Stenson, 2011).

The study *Irish in the Primary School* (2007) compiles findings on Irish-language attainment from English-medium, Irish-medium and Gaeltacht schools. It shows that in 50% of classrooms, formal reading skills in Irish have not been taught and that children depend on English-language skills. Small-scale research by Ní Chiaruáin (2009) shows that teachers' practice varies in relation to the teaching of phonics in Irish and English. Other research shows the need to explicitly teaching phonics in the target language (Hickey, 2007), as recommended in international research.

Another small-scale study of early literacy skills in Irish and English among children in Irish-medium schools shows that children have higher scores in Irish in some subcategories and higher scores in English in other subcategories (Murphy and Travers, 2012). This may be evidence that progress in reading in both languages does not always occur at the same rate. Some researchers argue that the assessment of conceptual knowledge should be conducted in both languages (Barnes, 2021; Murphy and Travers, 2012).

Barnes' (2021) comprehensive study shows that spelling errors are associated with the language and its orthographic and phonological system. Irish is more regular than English when it comes to the letter-to-sound (or grapheme-phoneme) rules. Teachers in immersion education need to have accurate knowledge of Irish phonemes (McKendry, 2007) and these phonemes need to be taught explicitly (Barnes, 2021). It is worth noting that the number of phonemes in traditional dialects differs from dialect to dialect, and some phonemes are no longer as common in speech (de Brún, 2007). The Irish spelling system has been standardised over the years to strengthen the relationship between the letter and sound, but some irregularity remains (Ó Laoire, 2005). In the 1960s, the teaching of phonemes and experience in the phonetics laboratory were at the heart of initial teacher education courses (Mac Mathúna, 2022). This emphasis was in line with the research undertaken by Tomás Ó Domhnalláin and Colmán Ó Huallacháin to base an Irish course in primary schools on the spoken language of people in the Gaeltacht (Hyland, 2024).

The 1999 Curriculum reduced the focus on phonological and phonemic awareness, and the role of reading was marginalised by the emphasis on separating language skills and focusing on oral language (Hickey and Stenson, 2016a/b). The *Primary Language Curriculum* (2019) places renewed emphasis on phonological and phonemic awareness. To teach these aspects of the language, teachers can draw on the effective resources provided by the Áisaonad since 1998, on the *Mar a Déarfá* resources adapted for primary school use, and on other literacy resources available on the COGG website.

Supporting Accurate Use of the Irish language

Effective learners of Irish report that they welcome feedback on the accurate use of Irish and that they are comfortable with self-directed learning and the use of metacognitive strategies (Ní Chlochasaigh, 2016). Research on language acquisition among young children in Northern Ireland (Henry and Tangney, 1999; Henry, Andrews and Ó Cainín, 2002; Ní Shúilleabháin, 1986; Owens, 1991) reveals that children manage to grasp aspects of the Irish language competently, such as the order of words, although it is different in comparison to English. However, there are other aspects of the language that pose challenges to children in immersion education (Ní Aogáin, Ní Mhurchú and Ó Ceallaigh, 2021), which will be discussed below.

Understanding Irish Morphology and Specific Features of the Language

An important issue that needs to be considered when discussing the orthography of the Irish language is morphology. The Irish language is morphologically rich. Changes can occur at the end of the word, like in English. Unlike English though, changes can also happen at the beginning of a word. Lenitions (séimhiú) or inflections (urú) can occur at the beginning or the end of the word (Barnes, 2017; Lynn, Foster and Dras, 2013; Stenson and Hickey, 2019). One of the difficulties children have when reading Irish texts is that they omit the lenition or inflection from the start of the word (de Brún, 2022). Special support is needed to help children familiarise themselves with Irish morphology (Lynn, Foster and Dras, 2013). Children acquire plural morphemes in Irish (for example, *bád* - *báid*) at a slightly later age compared to English speakers, which relates to the wider variety of plural morphemes in Irish (Hickey, 1992).

Another interesting feature of the Irish language is that there are synonyms for nouns. The variation of versions of the same noun is linked to the different dialects of Irish. This aspect of the Irish language can be seen as far back as Classical Irish (Doyle, 2015), and the diversity of the language varieties was celebrated in the Irish Revival (Ó Conchubhair, 2009). As such, a child may have conceptual awareness of a specific noun, for example, “madra” (dog), but may come across different versions of the noun in textbooks and stories, for example, “madadh” or “gadhar”. There is a need to support children to develop an understanding of the special features related to the phonological and morphological system that are inherent to the Irish language. Some descriptions of these special features of Irish, as well as suitable classroom activities, are available in the handbook *Léitheoirí Líofa* (Dunne, 2025).

While children in immersion education show a higher level of proficiency in Irish compared to children in English-medium schools, there is a significant decline in knowledge of the morphology of Irish, that is, the changes that occur in Irish words in various contexts and cases (Harris et al., 2006). Children may encounter different versions of the word, in the singular and plural (*bord* and *boird*), or in the nominative, dative and genitive case (for example, *an bord*, *ar an mbord* / *bhord* and *barr an bhoird*) (Muckley, 2015). Research by Antonijevic, Durham and Ní Chonghaile (2017), which is discussed in more detail in the chapter *Assessment in Immersion Education*, shows that children can often identify the root word or verb, but children have difficulties observing and pronouncing the morphological change correctly. For example, they say “*tá cáca á bácáil aige*” (a cake is being baked) instead of “*tá cáca á bhácáil aige*”. Because of the initial and final changes in Irish words, the child must become familiar with the various versions of the word to support their aural and visual memory (de Brún, 2022).

There are some parallels between Irish and Welsh, a language with an inflection system or “mutations”. For example, if children are exposed to morphological changes relating to gender being used irregularly or incorrectly by speakers around them, then it can take children longer to reach a threshold where they have sufficient contact with accurate speech patterns in the language (Gathercole and Thomas, 2009). Simple contact with the majority language is enough to encourage language development, but for a minority / minoritised language the child needs regular contact with that language at home and in school (Rhys and Thomas, 2013). Children depend on their parents and the adults around them to model accurate language use. However, differences are emerging in contemporary use of the language even amongst native speakers e.g., using the root of the English verb, lack of lenition (séimhiú) or inflection (urú), and a simpler syntax can be heard in modern Irish (Ó Curnáin, 2009; Lenoach, 2012).

Ó Curnáin (2012) and Nic Fhlannchadha (2016) show that there is a variety in the type of language spoken by different generations of Irish speakers:

- speakers born before 1960 who speak traditional Irish
- speakers born before 1990 who speak a non-traditional version
- speakers born after 1990 who do not adhere to the morphology of Irish on a regular basis.

Therefore, it is important to emphasise the development of reading skills in Irish so that children can access written versions that contain accurate use of Irish in the texts they read. This is all the more important when children do not have access to speakers who consistently use traditional speech patterns.

Corrective Feedback and Accurate Use of Irish

As in other immersion education contexts around the world, “interlanguage” or non-traditional versions of the language are heard among children, especially learners or new speakers, in immersion education in Ireland. Interlanguage is a language that is fluent in communication but lacks accuracy and is strongly influenced by the structure of the mother tongue (Ní Dhíorbháin and Ó Duibhir, 2017). Sometimes, the type of language children use in immersion education is criticised (Nic Pháidín, 2003) because English impacts on the syntax used. However, the influence of English should not be viewed solely in deficit terms (Mac Mathúna, 2008). Some of the new terms and expressions children use are creative (Mc Closkey, 2001). Also, it seems that language use is related to specific contexts. Ó Catháin (2001) has noted that children in Irish-medium schools use speech patterns with their peers which are not in keeping with traditional speech.

Ó Duibhir (2009) shows that children in Irish-medium schools use English more often than children in Gaeltacht schools. English words used in speech include expressions such as “so”, “okay”, “just”, “like” and “right”. Maguire’s (1992) study of 8-18 year old children in the urban Gaeltacht in Belfast shows that children give each other corrective feedback. Mac Corraidh (2022) and Ní Mhaoláin (2013) encourage teachers to keep a record of the most common examples of interlanguage that they hear so that they can base lessons on them, and try to engage with these speech patterns in whole-school planning.

Interlanguage may be due to incomplete acquisition, that is, children have not received enough contact with aspects of the target language to acquire correct syntax (Thomas et al., 2022), or because children have been exposed to inaccurate structures and observed these structures being accepted by other speakers (Ó Ceallaigh, 2013). It is harder to unlearn something than to learn something new, making it difficult for children who have had contact with inaccurate structures in the first place (Dunne, 2020).

The Ní Dhiorbháin (2010) study and the study later carried out by Ní Dhiorbháin and Ó Duibhir (2017) provide evidence that an explicit and inductive approach to grammatical accuracy, learning strategies and language awareness, helps children in senior classes. Ó Duibhir et al. (2016) recommend using a counterbalanced approach to emphasise form and meaning when teaching Irish. In the study of eight 5th Classes in Irish-medium schools, Ní Aogáin and Ó Duibhir (2021) show that teachers and children use corrective feedback to foster accurate use of the language. The study shows that prompts are more effective than recasts (a recast is when the teacher repeats the learner's utterance but corrects the mistake), and according to the synthesis completed by Harris and Ó Duibhir (2011), recasts are more effective than ignoring mistakes.

Ní Dhiorbháin and Ó Duibhir (2017), Ó Duibhir et al. (2016), and Duibhir et al.'s (2017) studies focus on children in senior classes and these studies also show that an explicit and inductive approach helps children develop metalinguistic skills and language accuracy, that is when the teacher gives them the opportunity to discover grammatical patterns and to compose grammatical rules. It would be worthwhile to make wider use of self-assessment and peer assessment for formative assessment in the teaching of Irish. Ó Duibhir (2009) shows the value of encouraging children to reflect on their own speech. Children also enjoy engaging in peer discussion to co-construct and discuss grammar rules (Ní Dhiorbháin and Ó Duibhir, 2017). The findings of a study conducted by Ó Duibhir, Ní Dhiorbháin and Cosgrove (2016) show that an inductive approach is successful in enabling children to identify and use the genitive case accurately, regardless of the ability they demonstrate at the beginning of the study. Children's accuracy in Irish improves from the preliminary to the final stage of testing, but that advantage does not remain when tested again after a longer period of time.

Few studies have been carried out to support younger children to become more familiar with Irish morphology other than Ní Fhlannagáin (2021). Three phases are used in Ní Fhlannagáin's small-scale study (2021) with 1st Class:

- First, children are asked to read sentences containing the target structure to evaluate pronunciation.
- The researcher then talks to them about pictures to re-evaluate the pronunciation.
- At the end, five sets of two sentences are available, the exact and inaccurate version, and they have to tick the box next to the correct sentence.

The research results show that targeted intervention like this helps children to become familiar with the morphology of the language.

Murtagh's (2011) study on language decline explains the need for regular contact with the language and a language community, and strategies to access the language acquired in order to maintain proficiency in Irish. It could, therefore, be suggested that children from 3rd Class to 6th Class keep reflective journals in which they create the grammar rules and that the children and the teacher could return to the rules and build on them from year to year. Children in 6th Class could have a responsibility to help 3rd Class as they begin keeping their reflective journals. A very effective approach to teaching grammar is proposed in the book *Bain Súp As!* by Aisling Ní Dhiorbháin. Research conducted by Ní Dhiorbháin, Ní Aogáin agus Ó Duibhir (2024) shows that this approach also has advantages for the teacher to become familiar with grammatical items and to reinforce their own subject knowledge.

Research shows that it is beneficial to strengthen children's knowledge of aspects of orthography through regular corrective feedback and opportunities to reflect on grammatical items. It is necessary to identify the part of the grammatical word / item that is correct first and to scaffold the child to acquire the aspect of the word that is not correct, for example, the lenition (séimhiú) **fh**ear, or the inflection (urú) **bh**fear that is missing.

Ní Shuibhne and Ní Aogáin (2022) and Ní Fhlannagáin (2021) recommend presenting the target structure by using a heavier font or a different colour to support children in noticing the patterns of the form. In turn, teachers can discuss the structures and patterns of the language with children and encourage them to co-create the grammar rules. In the Ní Shuibhne and Ní Aogáin study, children prefer poems over stories as the basis for the lesson's content, which is probably linked to the rhyme, repetition, gestures, and brevity associated with poems. Other examples of activities for teachers and children to familiarise themselves with Irish morphology in a fun way are available in the *Léitheoirí Líofa* handbook (Dunne, 2025).

Different Literacies

The *Primary Language Curriculum* (2019) acknowledges different forms of literacy, including digital and critical literacy. Digital literacy is a key focus of the *Digital Plan for the Irish Language Speech and Language Technologies 2023-2027* (2024) and *Future Ready Digital Learning* (ETI Northern Ireland, 2024). Harney (2018) has also proposed a list of Irish-language websites and apps. Despite the improvement in the material available in Irish (de Brún, Ó Duibhir, Ní Dhiorbháin and Ó Floinn, 2023; Harney, 2018; Ní Chuaig, 2016), it is clear that there is still much more English-language literacy content on the internet. Ní Chlochasaigh, Ó Duibhir and Shiel (2021) claim there is a lack of literacy schemes and digital resources available in Irish, particularly to support DEIS schools.

Harney (2018) and Ní Chiaráin (2024) demonstrate that developments in creative technologies – for example, that are available as part of Abair⁹ and An Scéalaí¹⁰ – can support prompt corrective feedback for the individual learner. Listening and understanding natural spoken language supports the development of listening comprehension (Harris and Ó Duibhir, 2011). Teachers can use digital stories to support children's aural skills if there is no community of speakers nearby. The research also shows that rich language resources exist in the form of archival material, such as the archives of Raidió na Gaeltachta and local magazines. Mac Uidhilin, Ní Thuairisg and Ní Mhullaoide (2015) utilised an innovative approach to using older resources. Their research relates to two primary schools located in a Category A Gaeltacht in Connemara. The children use audio resources from the radio archive, related to the local area, and present the material to their families. The above model could also be drawn upon using material on the Dúchas site. A study carried out by Ó Céidigh (2013) relates to 3rd Class in an Irish-medium school and the writing process. Children are given responsibility for designing digital storytelling for infant classes. This goal gives them a reason to come together and use their technology and Irish skills. A language target like this in senior classes helps to encourage children to use their Irish accurately and creatively in other contexts (Dunne and Ní Aogáin, 2025).

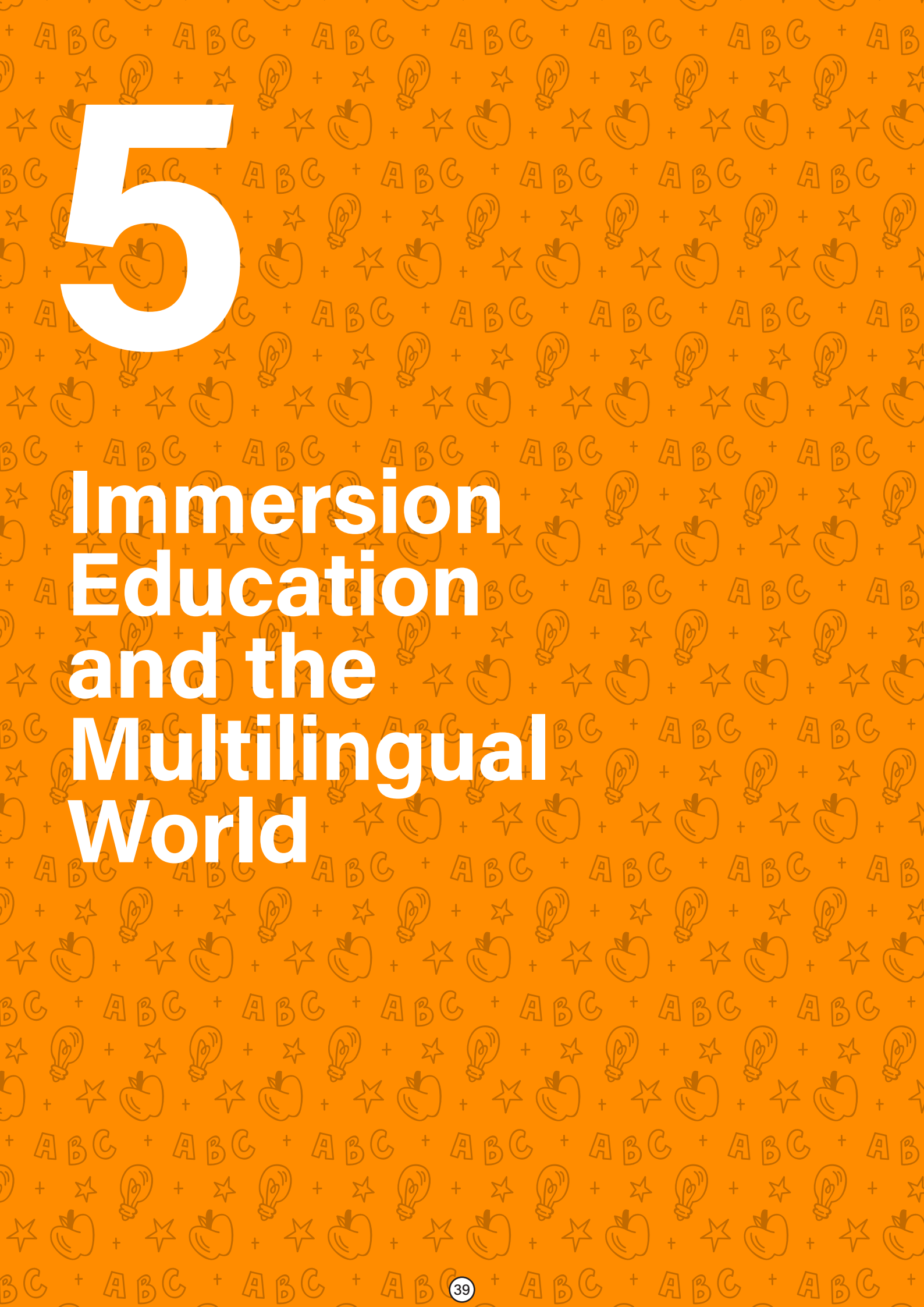
It is essential that digital resources in Irish are available to young contemporary speakers (Ní Chasaide et al., 2019). There is a need to look at and digitise other resources, such as, the rich resources used in the early periods in the teaching of Irish (Dunne, 2024). Creative technologies can help overcome some of the traditional weaknesses associated with the teaching of Irish (Ní Chasaide et al., 2019; Ní Chiaráin, 2024). There is now a shift in the perception of Irish digital resource users. They play a role in deciding research priorities, providing feedback on the design, and testing the same resources (Ní Chasaide et al., 2019). Feedback from children and teachers on using these creative technologies is very important for designing future resources.

Conclusion

In immersion education, children generally achieve a high standard in the two formal languages of the school: Irish and English. Skill and will are required to develop literacy skills in Irish, and appropriate supports must be provided in the education system for a minoritised language such as Irish to develop literacy skills. There is a need to create a specific space for Irish in which the distinctive features of the language are taught, particularly aspects of Irish morphology, as well as explicit teaching which focuses on the transfer of language skills from English to Irish, and from Irish to English. Children's proficiency in Irish can be supported through systematic and regular corrective feedback, drawing on the creative technologies available. It is clear that children should always be encouraged to use their Irish in a variety of creative contexts and to develop a variety of literacies.

9 Available at www.abair.ie

10 Available at scealai.abair.ie

The background of the entire page is a repeating pattern of the letters 'ABC', stars, lightbulbs, and apples. The pattern is light orange and covers the entire surface. A large white number '5' is positioned in the upper left quadrant.

5

Immersion Education and the Multilingual World

Immersion Education and the Multilingual World

Immersion programmes must move from a bilingual perspective on immersion education that served to a large extent a homogeneous and monolingual community, and aimed to create additive bilingualism, to a plurilingual perspective on immersion education that reinforces the linguistic and cultural diversity of all immersion learners.

(Ní Dhiorbháin, Connaughton-Crean and Ó Duibhir, 2023, p.9)

Chapter Overview

This chapter will discuss the diversity of languages in Irish society and the developments that have taken place to support minoritised indigenous languages, focusing on the following areas:

- Diversity in languages and the linguistic profile of children in immersion education.
- Issues that arise in relation to translanguaging as an approach for bilingual / plurilingual children in immersion education.
- Immersion education and the promotion of a plurilingual and intercultural approach.
- Diversity and the Irish-language community.

Diversity of Languages and Minoritised Indigenous Languages

Bilingualism and plurilingualism are very common all over the world (Commission Europe, 2005 in Ó Brolcháin, 2015). Today, more than 200 languages are used in Ireland, including the three indigenous minoritised languages: Irish, Irish Sign Language and Cant. British Sign Language and Ulster Scots are also used in Northern Ireland. For the most part, English is the main language of instruction in many of the country's schools. However, Gaeltacht schools and Irish-medium schools contribute to the diversity of languages in Ireland by creating a space for children to have regular contact with the Irish language. The special role of Gaeltacht schools in maintaining Irish as the primary language in the Gaeltacht area is reinforced in the *Education Act* (1998). Immersion schools, therefore, have a role to play in supporting children to develop proficiency in Irish and being members of a multilingual society.

Ó Duibhir and Cummins (2012), in their review of the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999), argue that it was not suited to Ireland's multilingual context and the wide range of needs that different learners have. The *Policy on Gaeltacht Education* (Department of Education and Skills, 2016) recognises that awareness should be raised about the learning opportunities available to bilingual and plurilingual learners (Department of Education and Skills, 2016). The *Primary Language Curriculum* (2019) aims to promote an integrated approach to strengthening skills in the two formal languages of the school: Irish and English. There is an emphasis on Modern Foreign Languages in the *Primary Language Curriculum* (PLC) (CNCM, 2024), and this provides an opportunity to teach and learn Irish through a plurilingual approach, which could support the transfer of language skills (O'Toole, 2023).

Over the past few years, there have been developments to support minority languages (languages spoken by a minority of the population), minoritised languages (that is, languages that have been suppressed in formal domains, for example, in the education and political system), and minoritised indigenous cultures in Ireland (for example, Travellers). In 1995, an Irish-medium Post-Graduate Certificate in Education was established at St Mary's University College, Belfast. The following year, the first cohort of BEd students began their degree through the medium of Irish (Mac Corraidh, 2004). In 2016, the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education* was published (Department of Education and Skills, 2016), which recognises Gaeltacht schools as a unique educational setting with specific linguistic and other needs. In 2017, Travellers were recognised as having a distinct ethnic culture, with their own language, culture, norms, attitudes and values¹¹. In the same year, the *Irish Sign Language Act* (2017) recognised the right of people to use Irish Sign Language (ISL) as their mother tongue and the responsibility of public bodies to provide free interpretation to ISL users when they wish to access to public services¹². In 2023, the first cohort of students of the Bachelor of Education in Irish Sign Language (Dublin City University, St. Patrick's Campus) and the first cohort of students of the Bachelor of Education through the Medium of Irish (Marino Institute of Education) graduated. There is an opportunity to build on these developments and encourage a more coordinated approach to promoting the Irish language and the other languages in Ireland (Ó Laoire, 2005).

Diversity of Languages and Cultures in Immersion Education

During the second wave of immersion education in Ireland (from the 1970s onwards), there was a perception that the schools were catering for a homogeneous profile of children from middle-class families (Ní Chlochasaigh, Shiel and Ó Duibhir, 2020). However, as discussed in the chapter *Achievement in Immersion Education*, Irish-medium schools also cater for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and children with special needs and additional educational needs. The number of children in Irish-medium schools who report having a language other than English or Irish as their mother tongue is significantly lower than the national average (Department of Education, 2022; Shiel, Gilleece, Clerkin and Millar, 2011) and the public consultation on Irish-medium education outside the Gaeltacht shows that the public has an interest in supporting plurilingual speakers to attend immersion schools (de Brún, Ó Duibhir, Ní Dhiorbháin and Ó Floinn, 2023).

In immersion education to date, there is little research on the needs of children with English as an additional language (Mac Intyre Coyle and Nic Aindriú, 2023). However, in the research available, parents see the advantages of immersion education in terms of developing plurilingualism (Ní Dhiorbháin, Connaughton-Crean and Ó Duibhir, 2023). The low incidence of children from different language backgrounds in Irish-medium education needs to be examined further. Irish-medium schools are sometimes oversubscribed (Mhic Mhathúna and Nic Fhionnlaóich, 2021a/b; Strickland and Hickey 2016) and this can prevent plurilingual families from finding a place in schools (Darmody and Daly, 2015; Darmody, Smyth and McCoy, 2012). On the other hand, some plurilingual families may not get a place for their child in an English-medium school, and that is why they choose an Irish-medium school (Ní Dhiorbháin, Nic Aindriú, Connaughton-Crean and Ó Duibhir, 2023). The organisation Tuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta has provided resources to support Ukrainian children in Gaeltacht schools. Gaeloideachas and An Foras Pátrúnachta have also provided information and documentation about immersion education in several languages.

¹¹ See [Traveller Recognition Report](#)

¹² See [Irish Sign Language Act 2017](#)

There is also a chance that families who have just arrived in Ireland cannot access information about immersion education. This is recognised as a priority area for implementing *The Migrant Integration Strategy* (Ní Dhíorbháin, Connaughton-Crean, and Ó Duibhir, 2023). Research is needed on the experiences of refugees and migrants attending immersion schools and the implementation of the Céad Míle Fáilte¹³ (Hundred Thousand Welcomes) programme aimed at supporting migrants.

The diversity of school ethos in immersion schools should be mentioned. In *Léargas ar Sholáthar don Oideachas Lán-Ghaeilge lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht* (Overview of Irish-Medium Education outside of the Gaeltacht) (2022) it is shown that most immersion schools have a Catholic ethos, in line with the trend in primary schools across the country; but a much more significant percentage of Irish-medium schools (23% compared to 5% of all schools) are interdenominational or multid denominational. All interdenominational schools in Ireland are Irish-medium schools, and An Foras Pátrúnachta is the patron of all but one of these schools (RO, 2022). This shows that immersion schools help to expand the range of educational options available (Ó Luain, 2024).

Plurilingualism and Translanguaging

Lanvers (2023) shows that there is a traditional divide in the discussion on the teaching of Irish on one hand, and the teaching of major global languages on the other hand. This divide contradicts the emphasis on integrated language teaching in the *Primary Language Curriculum* (2019). A plurilingual approach could be of benefit in the classroom in fostering global citizenship education (Furlong, 2016; Ní Dhíorbháin, 2021). Lanvers (2023) mentions that there is, however, a need for practical educational support to draw on experiences of learning Irish when learning another language.

Translanguaging was originally developed as a pedagogical approach. The idea was to use knowledge in one language to do something in another language. For example, someone could watch an interview with a historian in English and use the material to discuss effective ways to gather historical evidence in Irish.

Translanguaging is used informally in immersion education, for example,

- children conduct research online for a project on a country and use the information available in English to compile the project through Irish.
- children go on a school tour through Irish and later speak to their parents at home about the highlights of the day in English or another language.

Translanguaging is not a direct translation. A more in-depth discussion of the differences between translanguaging and translation is available in *Translanguaging in the Classroom Handbook: A Quick Reference Guide for Educators* (Thomas et al., 2022).¹⁴

¹³ Information on the Céad Míle Fáilte scheme is available [here](#)

¹⁴ Available here [Translanguaging in the classroom](#) (literacyireland.com)

As occurred in Wales, for a long time in Ireland, it was recommended that Irish and English be separated in language teaching. Cummins (2007) calls this practice the "two solitudes assumption". This is because educators wanted children to have as much access as possible to the target language in school, as school is it is the main place where children would have regular contact with the language (Thomas et al., 2022). There are not the same opportunities in Ireland to use Irish regularly outside of school, especially in areas outside the Gaeltacht, as is the case with Welsh and some other minority and minoritised languages.

Research on translanguageing internationally often looks at the language practices of speakers (rather than educators), for example, García and Lin (2017). Some of this research is relevant to the case of native Irish speakers. It is shown that in some Gaeltacht areas and Irish-language communities, speakers switch between languages and that Irish is used in certain contexts, and English is used in others (Breathnach, 2021). It is clear from the study of teachers in Gaeltacht schools that they make use of different practices regarding pedagogical translanguageing, and these practices can be used in a meaningful or ad hoc manner (Ó Ceallaigh and Ó Brolcháin, 2020).

In discussing the appropriateness of translanguageing in the context of Irish, the minoritised status of the language and the contact that Irish has with English, need be considered (Thomas et al., 2022). Ní Shéaghdha (2010) recommends that there should be no translanguageing between a major and a minority language until a certain threshold of proficiency has been reached in the minority language. The original model of translanguageing proposed in Wales had a similar rationale and scope, i.e., it was a pedagogical approach for more proficient language learners.

Several translanguageing studies relate to English-medium schools. In the Moriarty study (2017) she uses raps containing Irish and English. This approach aligns with recent developments in oral art forms where Irish and English are used in a single creative work, such as the REIC performances by spoken word artist Ciara Ní É. As recognised by Hickey (2013) and Moriarty (2010), it is necessary to recognise that translanguageing has advantages for bringing the target language into new domains, for example, in the arts, particularly among new speakers. The status of Irish as a minoritised language compared to English and other dominant global languages has to be borne in mind. This imbalance needs to be taken into account so that the recommended pedagogy does not negatively impact the acquisition and enrichment of language among native speakers.

Concerns have been expressed that a looser approach, such as translanguageing, would result in language shift towards English in the Gaeltacht, which would ultimately be detrimental to the Irish language (Nic Pháidín, 2003; Ó Brolcháin, 2017; Ó Curnáin, 2009). There is a greater risk of this happening when a major global language, such as English, is concerned. Some other researchers also think that learners should be supported to engage in deep processing in the minority / minoritised language(s) rather than using the major language (Tedick and Lyster, 2020). There are few studies to date on integrating Irish with languages other than English (Dunne, 2020).

Immersion Education, Plurilingual and Intercultural Competence

Sustainability relates to both the physical and social environment (Cronin, 2019; Magan, 2020). It is no coincidence that there are examples of the broadest range of biodiversity in places where there is also the widest variety of languages spoken, such as Papua New Guinea. Children bring their linguistic talents, experiences, and interests to the classroom, and nurturing plurilingual competence is part and parcel of living in a sustainable way.

Children in 3rd and 4th Classes will have the opportunity to formally develop language and intercultural awareness as part of the *Primary Language Curriculum* (2024), through the new element, Building an Awareness of Languages and Cultures. As the study by Ní Dhiorbháin, Concannon-Gibney and Ní Dhubhghaill (2024) in English-medium schools shows, a plurilingual study of Irish grammar can be of great benefit in developing language awareness.

Children will have the opportunity to learn a Modern Foreign Language in 5th and 6th Class (NCCA, 2024). Between 1998 and 2012, several schools took part in the *Modern Foreign Languages in Primary Schools Initiative* (MLPSI), where children had the opportunity to learn a Modern Language. A number of primary schools from 2021 participated in the *Say Yes to Languages* programme in which a specific language (for example, French or Irish Sign Language) was taught for 8 weeks. Several schools also participated in a pilot programme on Modern Languages in primary school.

The review of the MLPSI between 1998-2012 reflects different perspectives on the impact of learning a Modern Language on experiences of the Irish language. Some children express a negative attitude towards Irish compared to their attitude towards a Modern Language (Harris and O'Leary, 2012). The results of the Harris and O'Leary study concern the whole group of children who took part in the programme, including children in English-medium schools. It should be noted that a negative attitude often emerges in research into the teaching of Irish in English-medium schools, but this does not usually occur in Irish-medium schools (Kiely et al., 2022).

Learning a Modern Foreign Language, in other instances can, positively impact on attitudes towards Irish and language learning in general. Most teachers in immersion schools who participated in MLPSI reported the benefits of Modern Language learning (Harris and O'Leary, 2012). They considered that it allowed for the transfer of language skills and supported an openness to learning other languages. Metalinguistic awareness is further encouraged by highlighting the differences and similarities between languages (Harris and O'Leary, 2012; Ní Dhiorbháin, 2021).

The Dillon (2009) study also shows that children in immersion education who participated in the MLPSI had a particular advantage in developing metalinguistic awareness, as discussed in the chapter *Children's Achievement and Experience in Immersion Education*. The *Say Yes to Languages* programme encourages children to explore the similarities and differences between languages, which is an integral part of language awareness, as stated in the *Primary Language Curriculum* (2019). Dillon (2009) also shows that children in immersion education feel that they have the advantage of learning a third language – in this case German – because of their experience of learning Irish. Principals also believe that school-based bilingualism gives the child an advantage in learning a third language (Prats Porcar, 2013). Children in immersion education express a keen interest in learning about other languages and cultures as part of the curriculum (Kiely et al., 2022; Kiely et al., 2024) and are interested in making connections between the acquisition and learning of Irish and the learning of other languages (Kiely et al., 2024).

In a small-scale study by Lennon Malbashaa, Dautelband and Taylor (2022) the researchers explore children's understanding of the symbols relating to Ireland and Europe. Children are asked, *What symbols do you associate with Ireland and being Irish?* There are some differences in the views expressed by children in Irish-medium schools in relation to Ireland compared to the views of children in English-medium schools. Children in Irish-medium schools show an awareness of historical events and folklore, as well as an awareness of the symbols of Europe.

There is also a need to foster language awareness in immersion teachers (Ó Ceallaigh, Hourigan and Leavy, 2019). Language shift sometimes occurs when two or more languages are in contact (Murtagh, 2011). Teachers' and children's understanding of the past and present contact that Irish has with other languages is important (Breatnach, 1994; Mag Eacháin, 2014). Exploring the links between languages helps learners examine the etymology or root of some words, for example, the words about ecclesiastical matters that came into the Irish language with the advent of Christianity, or the words that relate to navigational matters, that were introduced to the Irish language by the Vikings. This linguistic exploration encourages learners not to view contact between languages as a cause for concern but as a way to enrich language (Dunne, 2025).

Prats Porcar (2013) shows that there is a need for effective resources to support the development of plurilingual skills, and opportunities for children to reflect on their progress in the Irish language and plurilingual competence. The book *Language Explorers* is very useful as a starting point for fostering language awareness. Plurilingual activities are also available in *Sceitimíní* (Dunne, 2024) to explore similarities and differences between Irish, Welsh and Scottish Gaelic words.

Cummins (2021) has coined the phrase "Language-Friendly Schools" to describe schools that make efforts to acknowledge and value different languages. There are different ways to welcome different languages and cultures. Multilingual literature and writing can be done in the classroom, for instance. Kirwan and Little (2019) suggest that primary school teachers could integrate home languages in the following three ways:

- i. if teachers know the home language, they can communicate with the children through the home language
- ii. if children in a class have the same home languages, they could use the language as an academic tool when working together on different projects, such as solving problems in mathematics
- iii. children could share knowledge from their home language with other children in class and help develop language awareness in other learners.

However, it is necessary to ensure that children are not expected to act as the sole ambassadors for their cultures.

Recently, some studies have used Embodied Language Approaches, which means that learners develop an understanding of all their languages and places in the body to which they are connected (Kiely et al., 2024; Piazzoli, 2018). The approach of embodied language learning helps children understand that languages are not external to them. Rather, all of us have elements of languages in different parts of the body which can be used in different contexts. In a small-scale study conducted by Kiely et al. (2024) children in Irish-medium schools are given an opportunity to think about all the languages they know and where they are located in the body. The researcher draws a body outline on the whiteboard and goes through several examples. If someone plays the piano, they may be familiar with the Italian term "Crescendo", etc., and realise that they have some Italian in their fingers. The researcher then writes the word 'Italian' next to the fingers in the outline.

A few more examples are given to the class, and then they have the opportunity to draw an outline of their own body and write in the name of the language, or use a symbol that represents the language, to show that part of the body with which this language is connected.

The results of the Kiely et al. (2024) study show that most children show an emotional connection with the Irish language; that is, they feel that Irish is in their hearts. They associate a cognitive challenge with English, especially reading the class novel in English, and so, they connect English with their heads. A handful of children in the study mentioned that they had some Portuguese in their feet and used some words they had heard from soccer player Ronaldo.

As stated in *Intercultural Education in the Primary School. Guidelines for Primary Schools*, schools play a role in preparing children for a diverse society where linguistic and cultural diversity is a reality (NCCA, 2005). Children in immersion education express a keen interest in learning about other languages and cultures as part of the curriculum (Kiely et al., 2022). Teachers in the Irish-medium sector need additional support to work on explicit intercultural awareness and decolonisation of the curriculum as schools do not see the same diversity in the profile of students, and there is no natural interaction between students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds as there is in schools with a greater diversity of cultures (Ní Thiarnaigh, 2019). Irish-language resources, particularly youth literature, can foster intercultural awareness (Dunne, 2014) and promote a critical stance for global citizenship education (Dunne, 2025). The Modern Foreign Languages dimension of the *Primary Language Curriculum* (NCCA, 2024) aims to foster intercultural awareness; however, there is a need for greater awareness of the Irish-language resources, and the Irish-language books available to teachers and children to support global citizenship education.

In *How effectively are children being prepared for living in, and contributing to a diverse society?* (2024), the Education Training Inspectorate in Northern Ireland has made helpful recommendations for fostering mutual understandings and discussing sensitive themes in history, such as the Great Famine and the *Good Friday Agreement*.

Immersion Education and Diversity Amongst Irish Speakers

Immersion education has a role in making children aware of the diversity within the Irish-language community and welcoming children with different identities, including native speakers and new speakers.

Up until the 1960s, dialectologists around the world tended to record information from traditional speakers, and examples of non-traditional speech in minority languages / languages in bilingual / multilingual contexts were not given much consideration (Lenoach, 2012). The native speaker is often seen as an authoritative speaker, and this practice sometimes contributes to a division between depictions of the “native speaker” and the “non-native speaker” (O’Rourke and Ramallo, 2011). Although there may be a traditional image of what constitutes an Irish speaker, there is also a diversity of identities in the Irish-language community. Teachers have high regard for the speech of traditional Irish speakers, but they believe that new speakers use standard Irish more frequently (Ó Murchadha and Flynn, 2018).

In the general discussion of the promotion of the Irish language, an emphasis is usually placed on intergenerational transmission (Fishman, 1991), which may marginalise members of the LGBTQ+ community due to the focus on the traditional family unit (Walsh, 2019). Immersion education depends on individual language advocates who promote the Irish language within

the family and beyond. Single women teachers played a very large role in promoting Irish by establishing early Irish-medium schools (de Fréine, 2018). They provided high-quality resources for teaching Irish (Dunne, 2024). In order to help immersion education grow and develop, there is a need to foster an understanding of the diversity within the Irish-language community and to challenge stereotypes associated with particular speakers (CILAR, 1975; Ní Dhonnabháin, 2014).

Some researchers have tried not to focus on the binary labels – native- or non-native – and have tried to include other categories of speakers (see for example, the categories of in Ó Giollagáin and Mac Donnacha (2007); Lenoach, (2014); Nic Cionnaith (2008)). Though the continuum of bilingualism is recognised in the literature in general, and in particular in the *Primary Language Curriculum*, new speakers often describe their ability to speak Irish in deficit terms (Ó Cathalláin and Ní Neachtain, 2021). Ó Cathalláin and Ní Neachtain suggest that there is a need to find ways to create positive identities for different speakers. Walsh's research (2019) gives speakers the opportunity to choose the term that best describes themselves. Walsh and O'Rourke (2015) define a "new speaker" as someone who uses the language regularly but is not considered a traditional "native" speaker. Linguistic developments have taken place in the field recently, for example, An Foclóir Aiteach, to support Irish speakers in immersion education and beyond to reflect on their identities through Irish.

The concept of the Gaeltacht is now defined as a physical place (Ó Torna, 2005), but the term had a broader meaning before the establishment of the Free State (O'Donoghue and O'Doherty, 2019). Irish-language networks and groups that use Irish in their daily lives also exist outside of the Gaeltacht. The scholarship on "linguistic mudes", which are the defining moments in a speaker's life when the target language takes a more active role in their life, and when their language practice changes significantly, allows us to look at the language journey that a person experiences (Walsh and O'Rourke, 2015). Armstrong (2012) describes an emerging Irish speaker identity among language activists and enthusiasts, unrelated to the language spoken at home or in the community in which they grew up. Despite the lack of a critical concentration of speakers outside the Gaeltacht, some new speakers report having regular contact with the language. Walsh and O'Rourke (2015) describe this practice in terms of personal identity change. Ní Dhonnchadha (2021) describes it as a directed motivational current, building on the work of Dörnyei, Henry and Muir (2016), that is, a distinct energy, interest and commitment by an individual to immerse themselves in the learning of the language. As Ní Dhonnchadha (2021) shows, this can be linked to additional opportunities to study through the medium of Irish after post-primary school.

Flexibility in how an Irish speaker is defined helps us welcome different people and identities, and gives every child in immersion education and beyond, the opportunity to think about the role they can play within Irish-language communities and networks.

Conclusion

Immersion education provides children with an opportunity to acquire and enrich their Irish language skills, and to develop an understanding of the multilingual world we live in. Even in cases where there are not many children from plurilingual backgrounds in the classroom, immersion education still has a role to play in promoting a plurilingual and intercultural approach that fosters respect for diversity in society and within the Irish-language community.

6

Assessment in Immersion Education

Assessment in Immersion Education

Assessments need to be flexible, dynamic, and adaptive. They must take into account children's bilingual / plurilingual abilities, and allow them to effectively communicate what they know.

Chapter Overview

- Firstly, this chapter explores general approaches to assessment in immersion schools, the complexities of using an English-based approach, and lack of flexibility in some assessments.
- Next, the issues that arise in designing school-based assessments for different linguistic contexts and the need for bilingual assessment (in the school's two formal languages, Irish and English) will be discussed.
- Areas that are tested and the different types of assessments that can be utilised will be explored.
- Finally, an overview will be given of the linguistic and sociolinguistic issues relating to the Irish language that need to be considered in the design of assessments.

Approaches to Assessment in Immersion Education

Anne English has produced a booklet entitled *Measúnú trí Ghaeilge: Treoir Phraiticiúil agus Ábhar Tacaíochta do Mhúinteoirí Bunscoile* (Assessment through Irish: A Practical Guide and Support Material for Primary Teachers) (2024) in which she collected all assessments available through Irish. Psychological assessments in immersion schools are mainly, however, carried out through English. Principals recognise the significant gap in Irish-language assessment tools (Ní Chlochasaigh, Shiel and Ó Duibhir, 2020), and teachers and researchers also see the urgent need for appropriate assessment tools in Irish (Barnes, 2021; Barnes and Ó Duibhir, 2023; Mhic Aoidh, 2017; Mulgrew, Duffy and Kennedy, 2020).

In 2004, Ní Bhaoill and Ó Duibhir recommended strengthening the links between immersion education and the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). It is disappointing that only a small percentage of immersion schools (10%) have access to Irish-medium educational psychological services (Nic Aindriú et al., 2021). The lack of appropriate assessment in all areas of the curriculum for one of the languages of immersion education is inequitable (Barnes, 2017).

The Mac Intyre Coyle and Nic Aindriú study (2023) focuses on assessment issues in Gaeltacht schools. In schools where parents wish to receive a formal diagnosis that their child has a reading difficulty, for example, dyslexia, the child must undertake an English-medium educational assessment as appropriate assessments are not available in Irish (Barrett, William and Prendeville, 2020; Mac Donnacha et al., 2004; O'Toole and Hickey, 2013), as is the case for other minority / minoritised languages (August and Shanahan, 2017). If these resources are only available in English this can hinder the early recognition of dyslexia in children in immersion schools (Nic Aindriú, 2019; Nic Aindriú et al., 2020), and there is also a risk of misdiagnosis (Barnes, 2017), which will affect early intervention (Nic Aindriú, 2019).

When a new test comes out in English, a similar test must also be available in Irish for use in immersion education. If both versions are not developed simultaneously, the English-language version needs to be adapted for the Irish-language context and then tested in schools to make sure that the language and testing levels are appropriate. This often slows down the publication of the Irish-language version. Therefore, if the immersion education sector does not create its own tests, this leads to a reliance on the English-medium sector and is therefore dependent on translation and normative data relating to the acquisition of English. In addition, the unique sociolinguistic context of Gaeltacht primary schools needs to be considered when making decisions regarding the creation of future tests (Nic Aindriú, 2024).

O'Toole (2020) describes some of the difficulties involved in translating the English vocabulary used in assessments. For example, the Irish version of a word may be longer or shorter, or children may not be familiar with that term in Irish. Several researchers have engaged with these complexities in the design of their assessment tools: Barnes (2021), McVeigh, Wylie and Mulhern (2017), and Parsons and Lyddy (2009; 2016). They adapted the English-language vocabulary for the Irish-language version and tried to match the Irish words with the English words in terms of word length and number of syllables. When O'Toole, Ní Shíthigh, Molamphy, and Walsh (2020) assessed receptive vocabulary among Irish-English bilinguals, they drew on a model used in Welsh by Gathercole, Thomas and Hughes (2008).

In immersion education and in the broader education system, theorists such as Piaget and Vygotsky influenced the tests developed. Piaget's approach and cognitive constructivism have been the cornerstone of many assessments over the years, namely that the assessment shows what the child can do at one point in time. With the emergence of Vygotsky's theories about social learning, the emphasis on social constructivism in assessments can be seen. Some recent studies use a sociocultural lens, for example, Mhic Aoidh (2016). This shifts the emphasis from what the child can do independently at any one time, to the child's interactions with other children and with the learning environment (McClure Watters et al., 2016). It may be necessary to make wider use of dynamic assessment (Muckley, 2015) and the child's response to the intervention, as well as adaptive assessments.

Assessments in Schools in Different Contexts

From 2012, Gaeltacht and Irish-medium schools are required to administer standardised tests in Irish reading, English reading and mathematics at the end of the school year (May / June) for all children in 2nd, 4th and 6th Class (Department of Education and Skills, 2011). The *Drumcondra Irish Test* (*Triail Ghaeilge Dhroim Conrach do Bhunscoileanna Gaeltachta agus Lán-Ghaeilge*) is mostly used. English-medium schools are not obliged to administer an Irish-language test in standardised assessments. However, it would appear from the research on achievement in Irish that children in immersion schools perform better than children in English-medium schools (Harris et al., 2006).

A difficulty in discussing the results of standardised tests in Irish is the variety of language abilities among the children who undertake them. As Gathercole, Thomas and Hughes (2008) remind us, it is necessary to compare the child's achievement with the general population, and with other bilingual / plurilingual children who have the same level of contact with the language, so that there is not just one normative measure for bilinguals / plurilinguals. It is not appropriate to compare bilinguals / plurilinguals with children who speak mainly one language at home and at school (O'Toole and Hickey, 2013)¹⁵.

Assessments of receptive vocabulary and data on normative distribution are available for very young children (O'Toole and Hickey, 2017), and this type of assessment for children at other ages would be very beneficial. Information on typical language development is required to enable children to be accurately assessed (Antonićević, Durham and Ní Chonghaile, 2017). While there are norms available for the Drumcondra Tests in relation to immersion schools, there are no norms available for the linguistic diversity that exists among the children, for example,

- children raised through Irish
- children who speak Irish to two parents
- children who speak Irish to one parent
- children who don't speak any Irish outside of school

(Nic Aindriú, Ó Duibhir and Travers, 2021)

In research conducted by Ní Chuaig (2016) in Gaeltacht schools in Category A, some principals expressed the opinion that the test was too easy for certain children, and that they believed that the marks awarded were not consistent the children's language ability. For this reason, Barnes (2017) and Muckley (2015) claim that the design of these normative tests in Irish should be a priority area in immersion education.

There are complexities in creating norms for Irish speakers without a critical mass of participants to provide accurate results. Another option is to provide an adaptive assessment with a few assessment versions available at different difficulty levels. In this case, the assessment version children undertake is adapted according to the score they receive in the first part. For example, if they get a very high score, they will continue with the more challenging version of the assessment. There is potential in using this type of adaptive design in online assessments. However, it would be complicated to apply adaptive texting in traditional pen-and-paper assessments, and most schools currently choose this version of a test.

¹⁵ This report will examine how the child's degree of contact with the language influences their achievement in particular areas, rather than assuming that there is no other language in the child's life and that the child is monolingual.

Research on children's progress in literacy has shown that bilingual assessment (in Irish and English) is necessary to give children an opportunity to communicate their conceptual knowledge in whatever language is most appropriate for them (Antoničević, Durham and Ní Chonghaile, 2017; Barnes, 2021; IASLT, 2017; Mac Donnacha, et al. 2005; Murphy and Travers, 2012; Department of Education, 2009).

In *the National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading in Irish-medium schools*, the schools were asked to choose the English or Irish version of the mathematics examination for 2nd Class. The entire class needed to have one version, as exam instructions were read out in one language. In 6th Class, schools were asked to choose the English or Irish version of the exam in advance for individual children, but teachers were allowed to provide the English version of a term or phrase if necessary.

Over 90% of children in 2nd Class and 80% of children in 6th Class in Irish-medium schools chose to take the exam in Irish. About 50% of children in Gaeltacht schools in 2nd Class and 60% of children in 6th Class in Gaeltacht schools chose the Irish-language version of the exam (Shiel, Gilleece, Clerkin and Millar, 2011). This may be related to the practice in some schools of teaching mathematics bilingually. The average score was very similar between the same class levels, regardless of whether children chose the English or Irish version of the exam. This shows the need to provide choice in the language of assessment so that children can demonstrate their knowledge effectively.

But what happens if the assessment is done bilingually? Murphy and Travers' research (2012) relates to 31 children in an Irish-medium school undertaking the bilingual assessment. Children perform better when a conceptual score is given across the two languages of the school than when the assessment is done in only one language. It is not enough to compare a child's achievement in the non-dominant language (i.e. the one that the child uses less often) with speakers who mainly use one language. If the expected norms among an additional language speaker have not been recognised, and a child is compared to a native speaker, then they may mistakenly be diagnosed as having a language difficulty (Muckley, 2015).

At policy level in relation to assessment, the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education* (Department of Education and Skills, 2016) aims to strengthen links between NEPS Internal Management Group (IMG) and Principal Educational Psychologists (PEPs) in Northern Ireland, to liaise with COGG and PEPs with a view to exploring ways of addressing gaps in school-based assessment tools and in other assessments that are used by psychologists in the Irish-medium sector.

Areas Tested and Gaps in Approaches to Assessment

In the research conducted by Barnes and Ó Duibhir (2023) with a small group of teachers in Gaeltacht schools and Irish-medium schools outside of the Gaeltacht in the Republic of Ireland, teachers recognise the need for further screening tests. Teachers in the same study understand the need to include a range of skills in testing including, phonemic awareness and listening comprehension, not just reading and writing skills, which Shiel, Gilleece, Clerkin and Millar also suggested in 2011. There is a particular demand for tests relating to language and literacy in the early years in Gaeltacht schools (Nic Aindriú, 2024). Regular and effective assessment requires that any assessment tool be clear and that teachers, and other members of the school community, be familiar with how to use it (Déiseach, 2001; Barnes and Ó Duibhir, 2023). It is also necessary that the children are at ease and comfortable with the testing scenario.

It is important to assess a broader range of language skills and focus on areas where children in immersion education display particular talents, such as aspects of children's creative writing and oral language. In Ní Chuaig's (2016) research in Category A Gaeltacht schools, it is shown that children's voices and ideas improve in their writing after an intervention and the formation of a community of practice. In research conducted by Barnes and Ó Duibhir (2023) in Gaeltacht schools, teachers stress the need to assess oral language. There is potential for the Cúntóir Teanga (Language Assistant in a Gaeltacht school) or the Cúntóir Ranga (Class Assistant in Northern Ireland) to have a more significant role in assessing children.

Although Déiseach (2001) shows that immersion education positively influences oral language development, this element has been omitted from tests carried out with children (for example, Drumcondra Attainment Test for Irish, ERC, 1967). In the study carried out by Déiseach, 32 teachers used a checklist to assess ten children in their class. Reliability in this study depends on teachers' clear understandings of the various criteria in the checklist. This research shows that there is a continuum of oral language skills and that teachers need to gain experience in using the checklist effectively. Despite the advantages of this tool, it has not been widely used in immersion schools.

As an integral part of language teaching, Cummins and Ó Duibhir (2012) advocate opportunities for free conversation with someone else. It is, therefore, interesting that assessment mainly focuses on the individual's performance in the test. There is a small collection of research on children's interactions with other children through the target language, for example, Péterváry, Ó Curnáin, Ó Giollagáin and Sheahan (2014) and Ó Duibhir (2009). In the research by Péterváry, Ó Curnáin, Ó Giollagáin and Sheahan (2014), the text in a book is covered. The children are asked to tell the story in English and in Irish by looking at the pictures only. The interview consists of two parts; The first part, an individual interview, is where one child speaks (in Irish and English) and the second part where two children from the same school talk to each other (in Irish and English). Results show that for the most part, children are more accurate in undertaking the task in English. In Ó Duibhir's (2009) study, speech samples were collected from 80 children aged 11-12 in 6th Class in 9 Irish-medium schools and in 2 Gaeltacht schools, as they discussed a task together. It was shown that children used a particular variety of language when talking to each other, which is different from the standard version of Irish.

In designing language tests the researcher can adopt one of two approaches – they can focus on errors that emerge in the speech samples, as done by Péterváry, Ó Curnáin, Ó Giollagáin and Sheahan (2014), or they can focus on the frequency of accurate use as done by Nic Fhlannchadha (2016) - depending on what the researcher is trying to find out about children's language development. Researchers also have the choice of combining these approaches to ascertain a more complete picture of the learners' use of language.

There is a need to develop resources that support the implementation of a wider range of assessments, so that there is a balance between teacher-led and child-led assessment. Self- and peer-assessment encourage children to reflect on their own achievement, and take responsibility for their learning (NCCA, 2007; Ní Longaigh, 2016). The *Primary Language Curriculum* (2019) is replete with "can do" statements and recognises that different children can make progress at different rates (Ní Dhiorbháin, 2019). At the pre-school stage, *Aistear: Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (ECCE, 2009) recommends that young children engage with self-assessment. But it is clear that early childhood educators need support to promote self-assessment (Mhic Aoidh, 2016).

Factors Influencing the Test

Various factors can affect children's achievement, for example, the relationship with the assessor, children's anxiety, and the type of test. Leung and Scott (2009) in Mhic Aoidh (2017) mention the following factors:

- the language of the test may prevent students from demonstrating everything they know
- students may not have enough experience of academic language to engage with the test
- the test may be culturally biased
- students may not be familiar with the location of the testing
- the test may not take into account the differences between the cognitive ability and language development of pupils.

Several research studies used good practice to overcome many of the above-mentioned areas. Barnes and Ó Duibhir (2023) and Péterváry, Ó Curnáin, Ó Giollagáin and Sheahan (2014) describe ways to reassure children before they start the assessment. Barnes (2021) offers children the opportunity to engage in a pre-exercise using a playful approach. Barnes and Ó Duibhir (2023) allow children to undertake assessments with the class teacher and in a familiar setting. This differs from other studies, for example, Harris et al. (2006), in which external professionals administered tests.

Various strategies are used in other studies to make children feel comfortable. In Kiely et al. (2022), the teachers collect the children's views in the classroom, and the recordings are forwarded to the researchers for analysis. In Kiely et al. (2024), a mosaic approach is used; that is, children can give feedback in a variety of ways, for example, by giving oral opinions, discussing opinions with their classmates, engaging in drawing, taking photographs, completing sentences or responding to pictures about the school. The children themselves choose one of the research methods. This flexible approach aims to give children the opportunity to choose the best way of expressing their views. The chapter *Including Every Child in Immersion Education* provides a more detailed description of accessing children's voices and flexible methods for seeking views from children with special and additional needs.

Applying Linguistic and Sociolinguistic Information to the Design of Assessments

Drawing on international research into the achievement of bilingual / plurilingual children, it is clear that bilinguals / plurilinguals do not perform as well on specific tests, such as Rapid Automatised Naming (RAN) (Barnes, 2017). As O'Toole (2020) points out, mixed findings emerge in international research on the amount of vocabulary bilinguals / plurilinguals have in one language.

In the international tests of RAN, the focus is quite often on nouns. This makes sense as an image can sometimes be more easily located to express a noun, compared to a verb or an adjective. It is recognised that there is a continuum in the development of language skills among primary school children (NCCA, 2019; Department of Education (NI) 2016). In the case of the Irish language, when the majority of children in immersion education are learners, it is not possible to rely on common nouns – the household goods or common items in the home, for example – that a child raised through Irish would have. In the test carried out by Barnes and Ó Duibhir (2023) they focus on vocabulary relating to *the Primary Language Curriculum* (2019) to gain an insight into what kind of language could reasonably be expected from children at that age. Researchers also need to have a strong sociolinguistic knowledge, as there are sometimes challenges in separating the impact of low socio-economic status from the children's interaction with both languages (see Gathercole, Kennedy and Thomas, 2016).

Internationally, it is acknowledged that there can be gaps in children's vocabulary compared to their understanding of grammar. This is pertinent to additional language learners because in acquiring vocabulary, children are required to learn each new word incrementally, but some grammatical rules can be generalised (O'Toole, Ní Shíthigh, Molamphy and Walsh, 2020).

While there is logic to this opinion, the sociolinguistic aspects of Irish need be taken into account:

- lack of linguistic input relating to traditional language structures, especially where younger speakers no longer use them, rich morphology and the need to hear and see different lemmas or versions of the word often.

Because the initial change of the noun in Irish (e.g. lenition, inflection or pre-letter – an **t**-úll, ár **n**-athair, an **t**seachtain) depends on the case and gender of the word (for example, oráiste -> an **t**-oráiste), children's knowledge of morphology is not accurately tested unless children have to use the noun in context.

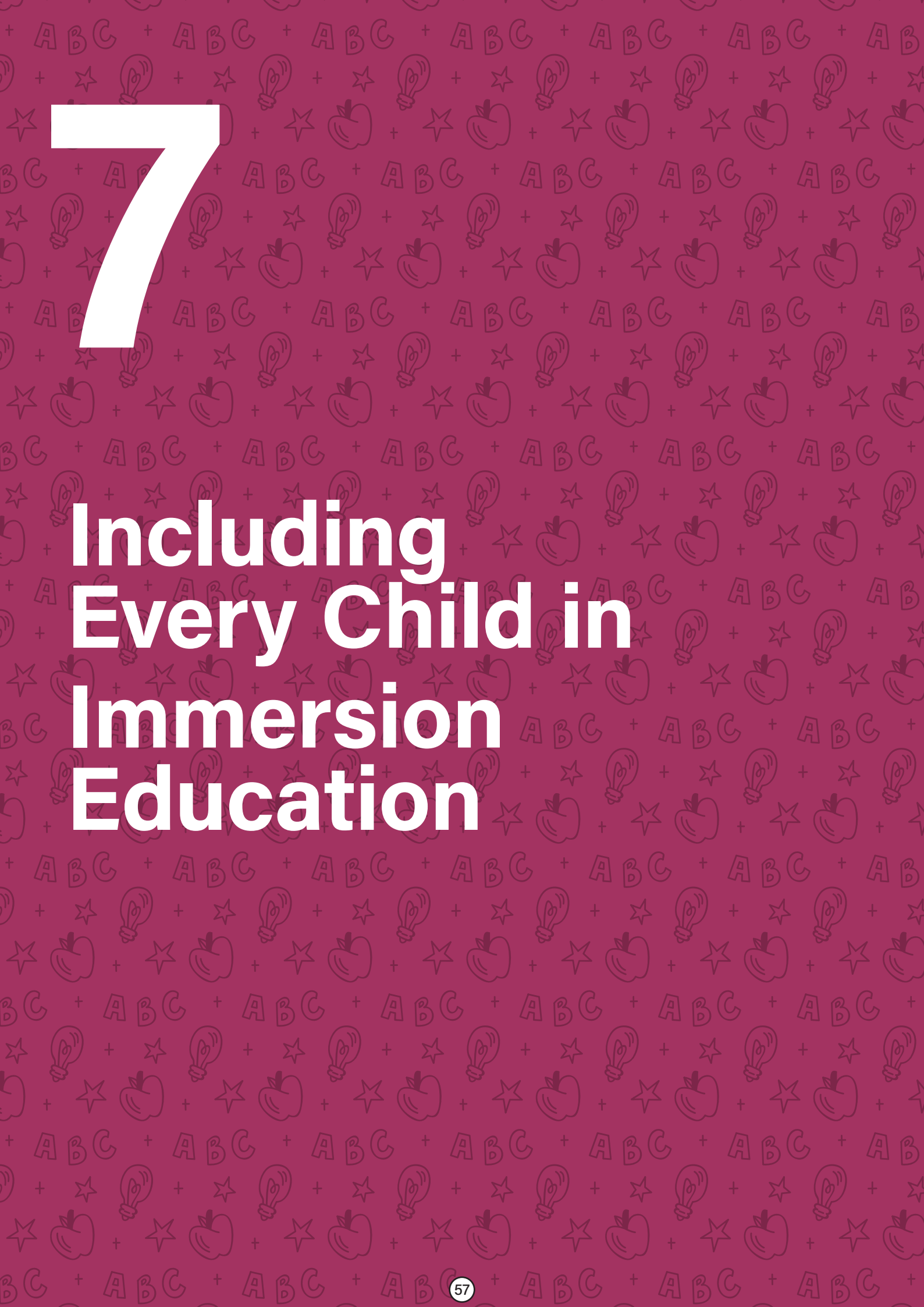
The Antonijevic, Durham and Ní Chonghaile (2017) study concerns 32 1st Class children in an Irish-medium school in an urban area where English is spoken at home. No children with a disability, learning difficulty or learning difference were included in the study. Children listen to sentences and are asked to repeat them afterwards. Children perform better in the English sentences. The biggest mistake in the Irish sentences is that they leave out the initial change, for example, they hear "**B**hácáil mamaí an béile" but say "**B**ácáil mamaí an béile". Children most often omit the initial change (in verbs and in feminine nouns), which is consistent with the results of Parsons and Lyddy (2016).

As already stated, there is a challenge in assessing language development by focusing mainly on errors. If the initial change in a word (e.g. lenition or inflection) is omitted it should not be seen as a complete mistake, as the children's answers show that they can identify the root word. Initial changes are a special feature of the Irish language, and therefore, it is necessary to explicitly teach the contexts in which initial changes occur. A description of the type of scaffolding teachers can provide for children to support them in mastering Irish morphology is available in the section "Supporting Accurate Use of Irish" in the chapter *Immersion Education and Development of Biliteracy*.

Due to incomplete acquisition among native speakers (i.e. the child has not had enough exposure to aspects of the target language to internalise the appropriate syntax) (Péterváry, Ó Curnáin, Ó Giollagáin and Sheahan, 2014), it is clear that English and the use of both languages influence their speech (Hickey, 2007; Muckley, 2015; Muckley, Uí Chomhraí and Antonijevic, 2012) and that this contributes to the lack of awareness of Irish morphology. The oral language test in Antonijevic, Durham and Ní Chonghaile's (2017) study shows that it is not only a decoding difficulty if the child does not read the word with the appropriate initial change. This study shows a need to support oral language skills alongside reading skills.

Conclusion

Assessment gives us an insight into the child's progress and the areas in which support is needed. It is necessary to design assessments that take into account the continuum of bilingualism and plurilingualism among children in immersion schools and not to rely on English-oriented assessments. The child's achievement in any given assessment can be influenced by many factors, which is why it is necessary to reflect on the testing scenario and the relationship with the assessor. There is a wide range of recommended forms of assessment in the *Primary School Curriculum* that can be drawn upon, but it is necessary to adapt them to the different talents and language skills that children display in Irish. In the design of any assessment, it is essential that consideration is also given to the linguistic and sociolinguistic context of the Irish language.

The background of the entire page is a repeating pattern of the letters 'ABC', stars, lightbulbs, and apples in a light purple color on a darker purple background.

7

Including Every Child in Immersion Education

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Every child has the right to attend a school that caters for their needs (Education Act, 1998; Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs, 2004). Like children in English-medium schools, children attending immersion education have a variety of talents, needs, interests and personalities (Dunne and Ní Aogáin, 2025; Nic Aindriú, 2019), and no two learners are the same (Ní Chlochasaigh, 2020). There is also diversity among members of the Irish-language community, as discussed in the chapter *Immersion Education and the Multilingual World*.

Chapter Overview

- The prevalence of different strengths and needs among children in immersion education will be considered.
- Next, a flexible definition of bilingual / plurilingual ability will be discussed.
- Different models of catering for each child in immersion education will then be explored.
- The question of the suitability of Irish-medium schools for each child will be discussed.
- Finally, children's experiences in immersion education and the contribution of the child's voice will be considered.

The Prevalence of Different Strengths and Needs in Immersion Education

Special and additional educational needs present among children in immersion schools include:

- A specific language impairment
- general learning difficulties
- autism spectrum disorder
- co-ordinated development disorder

(Barrett, 2016; Nic Gabhann,, 2008; Nic Aindriú, 2016)

A summary of the most common needs is provided in the table below.

Table 1.1: Statistics on the most common SEN subgroups in Irish-medium schools over a period of ten years.

Nic Gabhann, (2008)	Barrett (2016)	Andrews (2020)
Dyslexia (29.9%)	Dyslexia (30.9%)	Dyslexia (26.5%) and Dyspraxia (14.0%)
Mild General Learning Difficulties (16.5%)	Autism spectrum disorder (13.5%)	Autism spectrum disorder (14.2%)
Mild General Learning Difficulties (16%)	Co-ordinated developmental disorder (Dyspraxia 11.1%)	Emotional and behavioural disturbances (8.9%)
Moderate General Learning Difficulties (12.2%)	Emotional and behavioural difficulties (9.4%)	Specific speech and language disorder (7.4%)
Specific language impairment (6%)	Specific language impairment (8.6%)	Attention Deficit Disorder / Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (5.7%)

(Ní Chlochasaigh, Shiel and Ó Duibhir, 2020, p.15)

In recent times, several studies have described the prevalence of special and additional needs in different immersion education contexts. *The Special Educational Needs of Bilingual (Irish-English) Children* (2009) by Ní Chinnéide deals with the Northern Irish context. In *A Survey of Special Education Needs in Gaelscoileanna* (Nic Gabhann, 2008), and in the chapter "The inclusion of Irish-medium learners with special education needs" (Ní Fhoighil and Travers, 2012), the authors focus on Irish-medium schools. In *Staid Reatha na Scoileanna Gaeltachta 2004* (The Current State of Gaeltacht Schools) (Mac Donnacha et al., 2004), and in the report *Freastal ar Riachtanais Speisialta Oideachais i mBunscoileanna Gaeltachta* (Catering for Special Educational Needs in Gaeltacht Schools) (Nic Aindriú, 2024), the authors focus on Gaeltacht schools. The article "The suitability of Irish immersion education for children with special educational needs" is an all-island study (Nic Aindriú, Ó Duibhir and Travers, 2024).

In the article *Na Dúshláin a bhaineann leis an Soláthar maidir le Riachtanais Speisialta Oideachais i Scoileanna Lán-Ghaeilge* (Challenges in Catering for Special Educational Needs in Irish-Medium Schools) Nic Aindriú, Ó Duibhir and Travers (2021) report a wide range of needs among children in immersion schools, and they show that the most common types of needs have changed since other studies were conducted, for example, *Special Educational Needs in Irish-Medium Schools* (COGG and Pobal, 2010). The following special needs and additional needs are shown to be the most common in Gaeltacht schools: dyslexia, autism, behaviours of concern, and speech and language disorders (Nic Aindriú, 2024).

National research on children's experience in immersion education, such as Macnamara's study (1966), initially focused on language issues. Over the years, researchers have explored a wider range of learning abilities, needs and differences in immersion education. International research shows that children with autism spectrum disorder and / or dyslexia can acquire an additional language without negatively affecting the development of their first language (Bonifacci and Tobia, 2016; Kay-Raining Bird, Genesee, and Verhoeven, 2016, as discussed in Nic Aindriú, 2019). However, achievement in an additional language is related to children's ability in their first language, their engagement with the second / additional language, and the supports available. This is also evident in national research. One study with children who have Down Syndrome and are attending an Irish-medium school, shows no significant differences in their receptive or expressive oral language abilities compared to children with Down Syndrome attending English-medium schools (Kennedy, 2023).

The first class for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder within the Irish-medium education system was opened in 2011. Ní Mhaoilchiaráin and Ó Brolcháin's (2021) study describes an autism class in immersion education. At the time their research was conducted there were 13 Irish-medium schools in the Republic of Ireland with ASD class(es) operating in them (National Council for Special Education, 2019), five of which were operating within Gaeltacht areas. The small-scale study by Ní Mhaoilchiaráin and Ó Brolcháin relates to two schools. They describe the lack of support for the teaching of Irish in special classes. However, it is clear from teachers' views that children with special and additional educational needs are an integral part of the life of both schools. In one of the schools, Irish is used as a medium of instruction, and in the other, while English is the medium of instruction, children are surrounded by Irish during the day. Teachers say that children who do not communicate verbally can follow instructions in Irish and use apps in Irish. In keeping with findings from international research, children use the Irish language according to their own needs.

Traditionally, children with visual impairments have been marginalised in the study of Irish (Ní Chasaide et al., 2019). Little research has been undertaken on blind or visually impaired children in immersion education. There is, however, considerable collaboration between the National Council for the Blind and Trinity College where a blind researcher works with staff to design a screen reader. The screen reader can be downloaded from the abair.ie website. There is a choice of dialects and the content is translated to Braille simultaneously. Research is currently underway to explore ways to support the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community in Irish-medium schools (Matthews, 2023). It is crucial that the voices of other minorities and minoritised groups in immersion education, such as the experience of Travellers and children with a disability, are also heard.

The small collection of studies on children with special and additional educational needs shows that bilingualism does not cause a language delay or learning difficulty. As Barnes explains (2021), support and accommodations for children with specific educational needs have evolved in recent years. Several of these developments and remaining gaps will be discussed later in the report.

Flexible Definitions of Bilingual / Plurilingual Competence

Many definitions of bilingualism and plurilingualism exist. Choosing a definition is complicated because a wide range of language skills, abilities and ways of expression must be considered (Baker and Wright, 2017). Grosjean (1992) describes bilinguals as being able to work in both languages according to their own needs. Nic Aindriú (2019) chooses to use this definition to highlight how people *use* their languages rather than focusing on their *ability* in the language. This shift in focus is important as some children may not be able to be fully proficient in different language skills (Fortune and Menke, 2010; Kay-Raining Bird, Genesee, and Verhoeven, 2016, as cited in Nic Aindriú, 2019). In addition, this is the definition used by speech and language therapists to ensure best practice (O'Toole, Ní Shíthigh, Molamphy and Walsh, 2020).

Barnes et al. (2022) describe the various ways of communicating through Irish, beyond the traditional understanding of the elements of language (oral language, reading and writing). Augmentative and Alternative Communication Systems (AAC), enable people to communicate by choosing from a set of words or images. This system can support speakers with different language needs, for example, people with autism, Cerebral Palsy, Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease.

Flexibility is important in the way bilinguals and plurilinguals are perceived in immersion education to recognise the diversity of the Irish-language community, the continuum of bilingualism / plurilingualism, and the specific supports that some children need.

Models to Support All Children

In the document *Guidelines for Primary Schools: Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools*, the quality of teaching is said to be the most critical factor in children's education. Additionally, the primary responsibility for supporting all children, including those with special and additional educational needs, lies with the class teacher (Department of Education, 2020).

De Búrca (2023) shows that there are some good practices that are suitable for both English-medium and Irish-medium schools. Risk factors and protective factors related to the development of literacy are similar across first and additional languages. That is, there are factors that we can identify at an early stage that will indicate whether a child may have difficulty in a particular area. There are also supports that we can implement early on to support a child to reach their full potential.

Risk factors include difficulties with auditory and visual memory, processing speed and limited contact with the language or written text. The protective factors on the other hand, are early identification and appropriate intervention (Snow, Burns and Griffin, 1998). Schools report using the following methods to support children with special and additional educational needs:

- reflective diaries
- DVDs / recordings
- technology
- practical activities
- self-assessment
- reflective learning
- problem-based learning
- the use of cameras.

(Nic Aindriú, 2019)

Dunne and Ní Aogáin (2025) recommend using Universal Design for Learning as a proactive way to include every child in the learning and teaching of Irish.

Some specific supports are required in immersion education, but the general allocation model is insufficient to meet all the needs of immersion education. Resources were allocated according to a need identified through a formal psychological diagnosis (Shevlin, Winters and Flynn, 2013). Subsequently, a General Allocation Model was implemented to allocate resources based on the school's demographic needs (Department of Education and Science, 2005). Barrett (2016) demonstrates that Irish was the least supported curriculum area under the general distribution model.

Currently, there is a Special Education Teaching model in place (Department of Education and Skills, 2017), and there is an increased likelihood that in-class support is now provided through Irish. In the document *Guidelines for Primary schools: Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools*, it is recommended that schools should use part of their allocation to provide Irish-language support for children with special and additional educational needs. These bilingual supports will help children to access the full curriculum.

However, teachers point out that the following challenges remain:

- lack of Irish-language resources
- lack of differentiation
- lack of in-class support
- Inappropriate use of textbooks

(Nic Aindriú, 2019)

There is a need to raise awareness of existing resources. The COGG website offers a collection of resources to include each child in immersion education. The *An Ghaeilge do Gach Duine* handbook, which relates to the inclusive teaching of Irish, is also available on the COGG website (Dunne agus Ní Aogáin, 2025).

The research shows an ongoing issue in how to best support children with different abilities in Irish, as well as learning differences, in immersion education (Ní Mhaoláin, 1998). Some of the remaining gaps include resources, continuous professional development, supports in supporting neurodiverse children in the classroom and enacting a differentiated approach (Barnes and Ó Duibhir, 2023; Dunne and Ní Aogáin, 2025; McCoy, Quail and Smyth, 2012b; Nic Aindriú, 2024). Teachers in Northern Ireland also report needing more support to effectively cater for children with special and additional needs (ETI, 2023).

In Gaeltacht schools, a differentiated approach to teaching and learning can be challenging, particularly catering for the needs of native speakers in the context of a multi-grade class (Department of Education and Skills, 2015). Ní Shéaghdha (2010) and Hickey (1997) discuss the lack of attention given to the needs of native speakers in the education system and naíonraí (Irish-medium early years education). When new speakers are present, educators tend to use the following strategies:

- simpler language,
- more repetition,
- fewer corrections

This, however, does not seem to be the best approach for native speakers or language enrichment (Hickey, Lewis and Baker, 2013). Principals of Gaeltacht schools point out a continuing need for enrichment / language acquisition work aimed at the native speaker level (Ní Shéaghdha, 2010). Supporting native / highly proficient speakers is further discussed in the chapter *Immersion Education and the Development of Biliteracy*.

Hickey (2001) reminds us of the need for equity rather than equality in the education system, i.e. recognising the need to cater for the diverse needs of the children and the education system rather than providing the same supports to everyone. Principals and teachers say that they would love to have a Múinteoir Tacaíochta Teanga (Language Support Teacher) in Irish-medium DEIS schools to develop the profile of Irish in the school as well as engaging in other tasks, for example,

- supporting the implementation of Aistear
- developing children's informal, social language and Irish phonics in infant classes
- implementing Irish-language literacy interventions.

(Ní Chlochasaigh, Ó Duibhir and Shiel, 2021)

In accordance with the *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030*, it is recommended that the Language Assistants Scheme be extended to all Irish-medium schools. However, the scheme currently operates only in Gaeltacht schools. This model could be extended as a pilot to support a network of schools.

The Suitability of Irish-Medium Schools for Children with Special and Additional Needs

Patton and Matthews (2020) show that principals have expressed mixed views on the suitability of Irish-medium schools for certain children. Interestingly, principals in Gaeltacht schools more often believe that children with dyslexia should have exemptions from Irish, although this difference was not statistically significant.

According to some teachers in other studies, primary schooling through Irish is an advantage for children with special and additional educational needs (Barrett, 2016; Nic Aindriú, 2019). The view that immersion education is not suitable for all children emerged in the *Report on Public Consultation on Exemptions from the Study of Irish in Schools* (Flynn, Murray, Lynch and Davitt, 2019). Misconceptions about immersion education can result in inaccurate information and advice being disseminated by professionals and by the general public.

As stated in the *Guidelines for Primary Schools: Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools*, there is a need to raise awareness among the school community of how immersion schools can meet the needs of children (Department of Education, 2020). There is a need for better professional development for those supporting the school in relation to the cognitive and other benefits of bilingualism for all children, including children with special and additional educational needs. There is also a need to enact an inclusive and differentiated approach.

Due to the range of views about the suitability of Irish-medium schools for children with special needs and additional needs, it is unsurprising that there are different practices in place. Nic Aindriú, Ó Duibhir, and Travers (2024) explored the case of children who moved from immersion education in the period 2014-2017.

- Almost a quarter of the schools involved in the study indicate that children transferred to another immersion school,
- Over three-quarters of schools indicate that a child has switched to an English-medium school, about 14% have switched to an English-medium special school, and
- Over a quarter indicate that they transferred to a special class in an English-medium school.

Worry and anxiety are the main reasons for the transfer, and almost half of the transfer cases relate to difficulties for the child in learning through Irish. At other times, the move was recommended by various people and for various reasons, for example,

- by an educational psychologist (41.67%)
- by a speech and language therapist (16.67%)
- by the occupational therapist (4.17%)
- by the principal or class teacher (21%)
- because the school had difficulty meeting the child's needs (8%).

In a very small number of cases, the transfer is related to the family's personal circumstances, such as moving to a new area.

In Irish-medium DEIS schools, Ní Chlochasaigh, Ó Duibhir and Shiel (2021) have made an interesting point about children with special and additional needs, or learning difficulties and differences. It does not often occur that a child with learning difficulties leaves an Irish-medium DEIS school on the principal's advice. In cases where children did move, the recommendation often came from external professionals, such as someone from NEPS or the HSE, rather than on the school's recommendation. Nic Aindriú (2019) states that children can experience the same ongoing challenges, even when they are moved from immersion education to an English-medium school.

A whole-school approach and the promotion of inclusive values in the education system and society are of utmost importance (Banks et al., 2016) and planning for the whole school needs to consider special classes. If children with special and additional educational needs leave immersion education, the experience and expertise of teachers to support a wide range of abilities are also lost. There is also a need to consider special needs and additional educational needs in general research on immersion education. As Hickey (2013) has said, there is an urgent need to move away from the view that the child needs to adapt to immersion education and instead think about ways to adapt the immersion education system to the needs of the child.

Children's Experience in Immersion Education: The Child's Voice

In some of Nic Aindriú's (2019) study on the attitudes of children with special and additional needs, she explores children's perceptions of their school experience. Also, as part of the Kavanagh study (2013), children in Irish-medium schools provide feedback on aspects of their educational experience, as well as parental and family engagement and partnerships.

Several studies are available specifically seeking the views of children in immersion education. In the studies of Kiely et al. (2022) and Kiely et al. (2024), the authors seek children's views on the *Draft Primary School Curriculum* and the *Primary School Curriculum* (2023). One case study in the 2024 study relates to the views of children in an Irish-medium school on Modern Foreign Languages.

There is a need to use a wide range of research methods, or mosaic approaches, to support children in providing feedback, especially children with special or additional needs (Kennedy, 2023; Kiely et al., 2022; Nic Aindriú, 2019). It is necessary to listen to the child's voice while reflecting on the best ways to include each child in immersion education. In their research into children's attitudes in Key Stage 4 in Irish-medium schools in Northern Ireland, Wright and Scullion (2007) revealed that children generally reported positive attitudes towards immersion education. This is a significant finding, considering the limited resourcing for Irish-medium education at that time. In the Rogan study (2023) in Northern Ireland, young children show an understanding of the role that the Irish language plays in their identity as citizens of Ireland. It is, therefore, worthwhile seeking children's views on the overall aims of immersion education.

Within a number of national studies, children's achievement in immersion education is discussed. Children in Gaeltacht and Irish-medium schools enjoy many of the same things that children in English-medium schools do (Kiely et al., 2024). They place a great value on friends and play, for example. When children's views on the *Draft Primary School Curriculum* are sought, children in immersion schools do not show a negative attitude towards Irish (Kiely et al., 2022), as shown in general research on the views of primary school children such as the *Children's School Lives* study (see Devine et al., 2020).

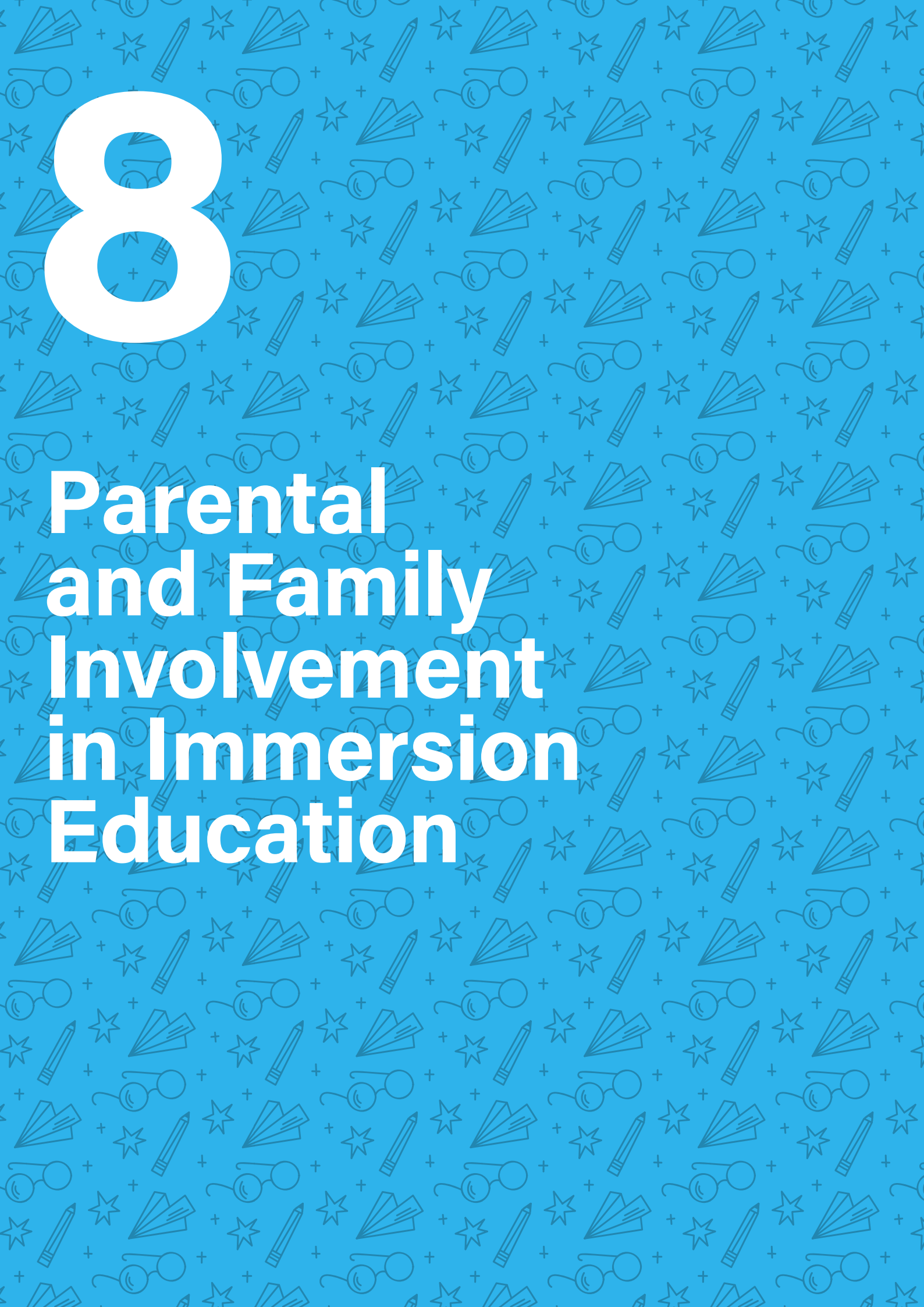
Children in immersion education generally show a more positive attitude towards the Irish language (Strickland and Hickey, 2016). The *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) study shows that Irish-medium schools spend more time on Drama, Music, and Physical Education than Gaeltacht schools and English-medium schools (McCoy, Quail and Smyth, 2012b). In the research by Kiely et al. (2021) and Kiely et al. (2024), children mention that these are their favourite subjects, and that they like to enrich their language skills through them.

Nic Fhionnlaoich and Mhic Mhathúna (2021b) note that the development of the Irish-medium education system from the 1970s onwards makes it more common for parents today to have first-hand experience of immersion education. Studies conducted by Kiely et al. (2022) and Kiely et al. (2024) note that children in Irish-medium schools believe they will have the opportunity to learn more Irish in the senior classes. Some other children note that their parents did not have this opportunity but that they can teach them some Irish from time to time.

In Gaeltacht schools, children say more often that their parents or grandparents attended the school. However, children do not think that parents and guardians have a role to play in the choice of work that children do in school. This view is consistent with the division some children see between Irish-medium schools and the largely English-medium home (Kavanagh and Hickey, 2012). The chapter *Parental and Family Involvement in Immersion Education* discusses ways of empowering parents and guardians to participate actively in their children's education.

Conclusion

Like all schools, children attending immersion education have a variety of talents, interests, and needs. They need some of the same supports as children in English-medium schools, but specific supports are needed in relation to the Irish language. Listening to the child's voice is of particular value when selecting and creating these supports. All children can benefit from immersion education, provided they have access to inclusive pedagogy, whole-school planning, and appropriate resources.

The background is a solid blue color with a repeating pattern of white line-art icons. The icons include stars, pencils, paper airplanes, and pairs of glasses, arranged in a grid-like fashion with small plus signs between them.

8

Parental and Family Involvement in Immersion Education

Parental and Family Involvement in Immersion Education

As indicated in the chapter *The Growth and Development of Immersion Education*, the seeds of immersion education were sown at the beginning of the twentieth century. There has been a renaissance in immersion education, especially since the 1970s, due to the work of parents, families and educators who wished to provide an option for Irish-medium education in the community. The participation of parents, family and other important people in the child's life remains at the heart of the vision for immersion education in Ireland. Around a quarter of parents have expressed an interest in sending their children to an Irish-medium school, if there was a school in the area (Darmody and Daly, 2015), and parents generally report satisfaction with immersion education (McKendry, 2007; Ó Duibhir and Ní Thuairisg, 2019).

The *Primary School Curriculum* (2023) names partnerships with parents as a key principle. However, not all parents and families are the same, and the discussion below includes a flexible definition of parents, guardians and other important people in a child's life. According to Bronfenbrenner's theory, these relationships play a key role in the child's life and can also have an important impact on the child's educational experience (O'Toole, 2016).

Chapter Overview

- Research on the involvement and partnerships of parents and families in immersion education will be examined.
- Next the growth in parental involvement in immersion education in recent years will be explored.
- A discussion on diversity, the profile of parents in immersion education, and the support parents need, will then be given.
- The final section explores creative examples of parental and family involvement.

The Growth and Development of Parental Engagement in Immersion Education

According to Cummins (1978), when the Free State was founded in 1922, parents had neutral or negative attitudes towards immersion schools. Unfortunately, little analysis is available concerning parents' views of the early models of Irish-medium education prior to the establishment of the Free State (except for the two biographies of Luíse Ghabhánach Ní Dhufaigh and Scoil Bhríde, for example).

The publication of the *Plowden Report* (1967) increasingly emphasised parental involvement and the National Parents' Council was later founded in 1985 (Harris et al., 2006). Immersion education provides opportunities for parents and families to be involved in their children's education. From the 1970s onwards, as Ó Luain (2024) shows, some families became interested in immersion education as there was more flexibility in the role parents could play in this type of education. Unlike the views of parents whose children attended immersion schools in the early years of the Free State, parents and families from the 1970s onwards took on the role of language and education enthusiasts. They were very active in the establishment of Irish-medium schools in their areas. Because of the enthusiasm of parents, families, and others in the community, a number of Gaeltacht schools that were at risk of closure remained open. Under the current system, establishing a new school is based on demographic factors rather than primarily public interest in immersion education (Department of Education, 2022).

Diversity in the Profile of Parents in Immersion Education

Although there was a perception that parents in immersion education were a homogeneous middle-class group in the 1970s (Ní Chlochasaigh, Ó Duibhir and Shiel, 2021; Ó Riagáin and Ó Gliasáin, 1979), it is now recognised that there is diversity among parents and families who choose immersion education for their children (Kavanagh, 2013; Strickland and Hickey, 2016), and among parents whose children attend naíonraí, Gaeltacht schools and Irish-medium schools outside of the Gaeltacht (Department of Education and Skills, 2015; Harris et al., 2006). For example, the study conducted by Hickey in the 1990s showed that one-third of parents in naíonraí either had the lowest level of education or did not have any educational qualification (Hickey, 1999).

Shiel, Gilleece, Clerkin and Millar (2011) sought more information on the social profile of parents in Irish-medium DEIS schools. They note that a higher proportion of parents of 6th Class children come from a high socio-economic background compared to parents in English-medium schools. However, 20% of parents come from the group with the lowest socio-economic status (according to the job held by a parent). Although this percentage is lower than the average in English-medium schools, it shows that parents in immersion education are not a homogeneous group either.

Parents choose immersion education for a variety of reasons. Sometimes, it is the local school. Immersion schools are co-educational, and there is a variety of patronage for these schools (Department of Education, 2022) and parents may be interested in a particular ethos. There is no indication in the case studies in Ó Brolcháin (2015) that parents in Gaeltacht schools choose this type of education based on their language ideology (Ó Brolcháin, 2015). The introduction of the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education* (Department of Education and Skills, 2016) may have clarified the school's language ideology and approach for parents. In any case, the need to make parents aware of the school's approach to immersion education is apparent.

In Mas Moury Mack's (2013) research on parents of Irish-medium schools in Dublin, parents choose immersion education because of identity and cultural capital, which is the value they place on education and additive bilingualism / plurilingualism. This is in keeping with research by Ní Thuairisg and Ó Duibhir (2016), in which parents highlight the benefits of bilingualism / plurilingualism and insights into other cultures that immersion education offers. It is interesting that parents who use languages other than English and Irish at home mention the opportunity that exists in immersion education to enhance the plurilingual abilities of their children (Ní Dhiorbháin, Connaughton-Crean and Ó Duibhir, 2023).

In the case of DEIS schools, it is not only heritage or linguistic reasons that parents cite but

- smaller classes,
- the environment and ethos of the school,
- good resources in the school,
- co-educational schooling,
- a different choice, and
- that there are not many English language learners in the school.

(Ní Chlochasaigh, Shiel and Ó Duibhir, 2020)

The chapter *Immersion Education and the Multilingual World* contains recommendations on fostering an inclusive approach in immersion education and fostering intercultural awareness.

Mhic Mhathúna and Nic Fhionnlaoich (2021b) show in their research that parents have a genuine interest in the Irish language, that they have a positive experience of immersion education, that some have first-hand experience of the same system, and that they have positive attitudes towards the language.

Supporting Parents to Participate in Immersion Education

Parents in immersion education are shown to have a high level of involvement in their children's education in general (Coady and Ó Laoire, 2002; Mac Giolla Phádraig, 2003; McAdory and Janmaat, 2015). One study dealing with parents' experience in immersion schools, and parents' experiences in English-medium schools, shows that there is no difference in the importance parents attach to getting information from the school about their children's education. With regard to parents' experiences of communicating with staff in English-medium and Irish-medium schools, parents agree that it is important to be able to talk to the principal when necessary (Kiely et al., 2021).

It helps parents in immersion education when very clear information about the immersion education approach is shared (Ní Shéaghdha, 2010), as well as information about the school's curriculum (Kiely et al., 2021). In the study by Kiely et al. (2021), parents in immersion education report that it helps them to have informal conversations with teachers and that bilingual communication is welcome.

According to the *Growing Up in Ireland* study, children in immersion education are more likely to participate in cultural events (Music and Drama) (McCoy, Quail and Smyth, 2012b). It is also shown that parents in immersion education read more often with their children (Strickland and Hickey, 2016). It is worth mentioning that the Strickland and Hickey study (2016) shows that there is a strong relationship between literacy practices at home and the child's achievement in English and mathematics.

No two parents or families are the same, but everyone brings a range of experiences and talents to the school community. These experiences and talents can be used to support the child's educational journey in many ways. The views expressed by Gaeltacht parents have been highlighted in the following studies:

- *Raising Children to be Bilingual in the Gaeltacht: Language Preference and Practice* (Ó hIfeárnáin, 2007),
- *Staid Reatha na Scoileanna Gaeltachta 2004. Léargas ó na Príomhoidí, na Múinteoirí agus na Tuismitheoirí* (Current status of Gaeltacht Schools 2004. An insight from Principals, Teachers and Parents) (Mac Donnacha, 2005), and
- *Staid Reatha na Scoileanna Gaeltachta 2004 (Current State Gaeltacht Schools 2004)* (Mac Donnacha et al., 2004).

Nic Cionnaith (2008) shows that parents who are native speakers of Irish may have concerns about their child's linguistic needs being met. Language enrichment is needed within and outside the school. In particular, it is recommended that an intergenerational connection with the language is strengthened. For example, Ní Shéaghdha describes the "Sárcainteoirí" initiative where people from the community visit and model rich oral language for the children. As homework, children could be encouraged to use their Irish with a parent or an older member of the community and collect information from them.



Irish is, of course, the language of immersion schools, and parents and families need to be enabled to take an active role in their children's education while being mindful of their own language needs (Nig Uidhir, Ó Cathalláin and Ó Duibhir, 2016). Devitt et al. (2018), in looking at the results of the *Growing Up in Ireland* study, showed that children who have access to the Irish language at home have an advantage. Coady and Ó Laoire (2002) show, however, that between the 1970s and 2000s, there has been a decrease in the number of families in immersion education who speak Irish at home.

Ó Laoire and Harris (2006), Kavanagh and Hickey (2012), and Strickland and Hickey (2016) discuss the diversity of parents in immersion education in terms of educational background and competence in Irish. Some studies relate to the linguistic aspect of participation, namely difficulties reported by parents who do not yet feel comfortable communicating in Irish, for example, Kavanagh and Hickey (2012) and Maguire (1991).

Some parents in Gaeltacht schools also highlight the need for support with their own Irish-language proficiency (Mac Donnacha, 2005). Parents and families can have different levels of confidence in using Irish; however, a positive attitude towards the language and an interest in Irish can make a big difference (Harris et al., 2006). When a parent praises children's efforts in Irish, there is a positive effect on their child's learning, namely that the child's motivation is increased, regardless of the parent's linguistic competence (Harris et al., 2006).

Parents who have children with special and additional needs are sometimes concerned about their own ability to speak Irish and how they can support their children (Barrett, 2016). This perception of parents' lack of competence in the Irish language is also linked to the decision to sometimes move children from immersion education to an English-medium school for post-primary education (Ní Thuairisg and Ó Duibhir, 2016).

Gaeltacht schools report using regular communication to support parents whose children have special and additional needs (Mac Intyre Coyle and Nic Aindriú, 2023). Nic Aindriú, Connaughton-Crean, Ó Duibhir and Travers (2022) suggest that where the child has specific difficulties, detailed interviews should be arranged with parents and teachers to discuss the child's language development (L1 and L2) and plan an approach to support the child.

Creative Ways to Encourage Engagement

Kavanagh and Hickey (2012) show the danger of interpreting parents' abilities in deficit terms or being unable to participate in their children's school activities and learning if they have little or no Irish. It is, therefore, worth recalling that there are multiple ways in which parents can support their children's education.

In the study by Kiely et al. (2021) parents indicate that the Irish-medium school welcomes bilingual correspondence and that parents can participate in school activities, for example, yard supervision or in the library. In the study by Kiely et al. (2024), some children in Irish-medium schools show that they enjoy teaching Irish to their parents or younger siblings. This is in line with the O'Toole study (2023) in English-medium schools where the children are given the opportunity to teach Irish to their parents at home.

In research by Ó Duibhir et al. (2017) on how schools support learning at home, they mention the following approaches as being effective:

- giving bilingual information on homework
- providing an English-language textbook if necessary
- providing homework and numeracy clubs
- providing a booklet with themes and vocabulary the child will be learning in school
- sharing this booklet with parents in advance
- providing workshops to give parents practical tips to promote literacy at home.

Schools could also promote more interactive tasks and games, such as dialogical reading, reading aloud, and fostering rich conversation between parents and children (Andrews, 2020; Barnes, 2017; Kavanagh and Hickey, 2012).

Some parents say they are less confident about using their Irish and value classes that focus on their particular language needs (for example, supporting reading in Irish). The Department of Education (2016) also recommends developing language resources to support partnerships with parents. To foster continuous parental and family involvement, the Department and other authors encourage greater use of creative technologies to communicate with parents (Department of Education and Skills, 2015; Government of Ireland, 2024; Stenson and Hickey, 2019). Some Irish-medium schools report an increased use of platforms such as SeeSaw to support parents, particularly after the period of distance learning (Kiely et al., 2024).

In immersion education, children sometimes see a division between school and home, and they associate Irish largely with the school context (Kavanagh, 2013). This division may explain some of the more negative perceptions children in Irish-medium schools express about coming to school (Strickland and Hickey, 2016).

Some studies suggest that there is a need to forge a stronger link between school and home. Research on parents in Irish-medium DEIS schools indicates that there are more families with fewer than 50 printed books at home compared to the national average, and fewer families with more than a hundred books at home compared to the national average (Ní Chlochasaigh, Shiel and Ó Duibhir, 2020).

In the research conducted by Dunne and Ní Fhaoláin (2020) and Kiely et al. (2021), key supports were provided for parents to read at home with their children. Each family receives a reading pack. The stories in the reading pack include translations and contemporary original stories in Irish. The reading pack contains:

- the text of the story, available bilingually
- key questions for dialogical reading
- key phrases to praise the children's efforts, and
- a number of oral language games.



Parents and children report that they enjoy reading together and that their confidence in reading stories together in Irish increases after engaging with the reading pack. It would be worth considering adapting other interventions, such as the Bosca Leabharlainne¹⁶ (Library Box) or the reading club (Dunne and Hickey, 2017), for Irish-medium DEIS schools.

A very innovative project is described among households in Northern Ireland (Engman, McGurk and MacKenzie, 2023). A language reclamation approach is used (Leonard, 2019) to strengthen the link between the school and the home. Six families are given a baking box containing ingredients, a baking video, and language support. This study places great emphasis on intergenerational relationships. This project could be extended to children and families in various schools, especially considering that children in Gaeltacht and Irish-medium schools would like to do more baking at school and for homework (Kiely et al., 2024). Nic Aindriú (2019) shows that children with special and additional educational needs also enjoy baking, and language can be developed during these baking activities.

Conclusion

The participation of parents, the family and other important people in the child's life is at the heart of the vision for immersion education in Ireland. It is widely recognised that the involvement of parents and families positively impacts on the child's educational experience. Parents and families bring a lot of experience and talents to the school community, and making the most of these talents is important rather than focusing on any perceived deficit in language ability. Immersion parents are not a homogeneous group; various supports are required to empower them to participate in their child's education.

16 Information on the Bosca Leabharlainne project is available [here](#)

9

The Needs of Teachers in Immersion Education and Sharing Good Practice

The Needs of Teachers in Immersion Education and Sharing Good Practice

One of the key recommendations of the study *Staid Reatha na Scoileanna Gaeltachta 2004* (Current State of Gaeltacht Schools) was that a Gaeltacht area should be recognised as a distinct educational context (Mac Donnacha, 2005), and a Unit for Gaeltacht Education was subsequently established in the Department of Education in 2016. It is now also recognised that immersion education as a whole is a distinct educational setting and that immersion teachers, therefore, have particular needs (Nig Uidhir and Ó Ceallaigh, 2023; Shiel, Gilleece, Clerkin and Millar, 2011). Nic Aindriú, Connaughton-Crean, Ó Duibhir and Travers (2023) have shown that teachers in immersion education who support children with special needs and additional educational needs also need specialised support. Awareness of the sociolinguistic context of immersion education schools, both Gaeltacht schools and Irish-medium schools outside of the Gaeltacht, is needed to provide appropriate support for the school community.

There is also a need to develop a better understanding of the profile of teachers in immersion education, and explore appropriate pedagogies for immersion education during initial teacher education and continuing professional development. This involves personal, school, and systemic needs, and support must be robust enough to consider all of these different needs (Ó Duibhir, 2006).

Chapter Overview

- Continuing professional development targeted at immersion teachers will be considered.
- Next, the need to support content and pedagogical knowledge will be explored.
- Finally, a whole-school approach to supporting teachers will be examined.

Continuing Professional Development for Immersion Teachers

When Irish-medium education started in the Republic of Ireland in 1922, it was considered sufficient for a teacher to have a bilingual certificate to teach through the medium of Irish (O'Connell, 1969). Today, the need for support for immersion teachers across the continuum of education is recognised. A number of developments have been made over the years to provide targeted support for immersion teachers.

- In 1995, an Irish-medium Post-Graduate Certificate in Education was established at St Mary's University College, Belfast. The following year, the first cohort of BEd students began their degree through the medium of Irish.
- In 2011 a Postgraduate option in Irish-Medium Education was established in Northern Ireland to meet the professional needs of teachers in Irish-medium schools (Ó Cathalláin, Nig Uidhir and Ó Duibhir, 2016).
- Since 2013, a Master degree in Irish-medium and Gaeltacht Education has been established in the Republic of Ireland.
- 2019 saw the start of a Bachelor of Education through the medium of Irish in Marino Institute of Education.

The shortage of teachers in the primary education system as a whole still presents difficulties, and finding teachers and substitutes in immersion education is an additional challenge.

Research on professional development for teachers at different education levels shows a need for targeted professional development. Ó Cathalláin and Ní Neachtain (2021) discuss the particular needs of teachers, both linguistic and pedagogical, who will be teaching in Irish-medium settings.

Ó Ceallaigh and Nig Uidhir (2023) suggest that there is a need to focus on the following areas among immersion teachers:

- vision and values
- teacher knowledge of immersion education
- pedagogical skills and practices.

However, in the Republic of Ireland, immersion teachers report that continuous professional development is not entirely suited to their educational setting (Ó Duibhir, 2000; Nic Aindriú, Ó Duibhir, Connaughton-Crean and Travers, 2022). Teachers also consider that there needs to be a balance between the theory of language teaching and effective classroom pedagogy (Mac Domhnaill and Nic an Bhaird, 2022). In research conducted by Ó Duibhir (2000), principals felt teachers need to have the opportunity to meet other teachers in Irish-medium schools.

Mac Donnacha et al.'s (2004) study highlights that Gaeltacht schools in Category A, B and C may have different needs. Subsequent research has shown that Gaeltacht schools have a complex sociolinguistic context (Department of Education and Skills, 2015; Ní Shéaghdha, 2010). Targeted programmes such as *Séideán Sí* are shown to positively impact on meeting the complex needs of Gaeltacht schools (Department of Education and Skills, 2015).

Teachers who support children with special and additional educational needs say that they would like support in the following areas:

- Irish-language literacy
- assessment of children's learning through the medium of Irish
- support in identifying children with special needs and additional educational needs in immersion education
- differentiation, and
- additional language acquisition

(Nic Aindriú, Ó Duibhir, Connaughton-Crean and Travers, 2022)

Research by Nic Aindriú, Connaughton-Crean Ó Duibhir, and Travers (2023) shows that it is worthwhile to get feedback from teachers to inform the design of professional development.

Research on the Irish-medium preschool system in Northern Ireland shows that additional skills are required in the Irish-medium system: language proficiency as well as an understanding of the pedagogies of immersion education to increase children's contact with the language, and to support their language development (Mhic Aoidh, 2021). Hickey and de Mejía (2014) acknowledge that the same practices should not be expected in early childhood settings operating through English. Mhic Aoidh (2021) proposes that some of the same continuing professional development be provided for practitioners in voluntary and state early childhood settings. This idea could be extended to incorporate all-island continuous professional development where effective practice is shared, as recommended in the *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030*.

From October 2022 to July 2023, the Department of Education conducted a public consultation process, seeking views from interested parties to inform the development of a new policy for Irish-medium education outside the Gaeltacht. The results of the consultation process are available in a series of reports:

- *Comhairliúchán don Pholasaí don Oideachas lán-Ghaeilge lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht: Tuarascáil ar na hAighneachtaí (Consultation on the Policy for Irish-medium Education outside the Gaeltacht: Report on Written Submissions)*
- *Comhairliúchán don Pholasaí don Oideachas lán-Ghaeilge lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht: Gearrthuirisc ar Fhreagraí an Phobail ar an gCeistneoir (Consultation on the Policy for Irish-medium Education outside the Gaeltacht: Short Report on the Public's Response to the Questionnaire).*
- *Comhairliúchán don Pholasaí don Oideachas lán-Ghaeilge lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht: Tuarascáil ar an gCeistneoir (Consultation on the Policy for Irish-medium Education outside the Gaeltacht: Report on the Questionnaire)*
- *Comhairliúchán don Pholasaí don Oideachas lán-Ghaeilge lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht: Tuarascáil ar na grúpaí fócais (Consultation on the Policy on Irish-medium education outside of the Gaeltacht Report on Focus Groups)*
- *Comhairliúchán don Pholasaí don Oideachas lán-Ghaeilge lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht: Achoimre ar na Moltaí don Pholasaí (Consultation on the Policy for Irish-medium Education outside the Gaeltacht: Summary of Policy Proposals).*

Language and Pedagogical Knowledge of Teachers in Immersion Education

Today, teachers share some of the same needs as teachers who worked in the early immersion models when the Free State was established (see the section "Opportunities and Challenges in Early Immersion Models" in the chapter *The Growth and Development of Immersion Education*).

Ní Chuaig's (2016) study shows that language proficiency and effective pedagogies for the teaching of Irish need to be taken into account in the continuous professional development provided to teachers. Language proficiency of primary school teachers is cited as a cause of concern by principals who took part in a survey on teacher supply to Irish-medium primary schools (Máirtín, 2006).

In the public consultation process, which sought the views of interested parties to inform the development of a new policy for Irish-medium education outside the Gaeltacht, the need to support the language capacity of teachers in immersion education was reiterated (de Brún, Ó Duibhir, Ní Dhiorbháin and Ó Floinn, 2023). Even if there is a generally a high standard of language proficiency amongst teachers, immersion teachers can still show a lack of understanding of specific grammatical rules (Ní Dhiorbháin and Ó Duibhir, 2017). There can be significant gaps in teacher content knowledge relating to immersion education and their proficiency in this type of language (Ó Ceallaigh, 2016). Hickey (1997) shows that educators in naíonraí had some of the same difficulties. Ó Ceallaigh and Ní Shéaghdha (2021) remind us that primary school teachers who are also language learners may face several challenges.

Similarly, in 2006 Nig Uidhir suggested that a more structured professional development pathway was needed to provide support for early years educators in the Irish-medium sector as part of initial teacher education. In terms of continued support during the education continuum, in 2011, Harris and Ó Duibhir proposed that the European Language Portfolio be used to support teachers in reflecting on the strengths and needs of the target language.



The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, better known as CEFR, can be used to assess language proficiency. Ní Ghloinn (2015) proposes that minimum standards in Irish be agreed upon so that teachers' language proficiency can be assessed more easily and in a more co-ordinated manner. The Irish syllabus for the BEd is aligned with B2 level according to CEFR (Ní Dhiorbháin, 2019), and teachers on the BEd through the medium of Irish and on the Masters in Irish-Medium and Gaeltacht Education must achieve the C1 level exit requirement.

As Fahey (2021) claims, there is a need to develop the teacher's metalanguage, i.e. their understanding of aspects of language such as grammar and syntax. Harris and Ó Duibhir (2011) and Ní Dhiorbháin (2010) suggested that the European Language Portfolio can facilitate teachers' reflections on metalinguistic skills. In the research undertaken by Ní Dhiorbháin, Ní Aogáin and Ó Duibhir (2024), an emphasis is placed in professional development on teacher awareness and on effective pedagogies to develop both the teacher's and the children's metalinguistic skills. This approach is effective in building the confidence of teachers, and it also supports children's language development.

Immersion teachers sometimes face challenges in effectively integrating language and content in the lesson (Ó Ceallaigh and Ní Shéaghdha, 2021). Effective task design requires guidance from a pedagogical perspective, particularly tasks that can stimulate the child's expressive language (Dunne, 2019; Ó Ceallaigh, 2013).

In Ó Ceallaigh, Hourigan and Leavy (2019), lesson study is used as a planning approach. A group of teachers reflect on the types of mathematics activities that can be used in the immersion classroom. These activities are aimed at enabling children to build on what other children have said and expand their vocabulary and sentence structure. Exploring the meaning and form (grammar) happens simultaneously in this approach. The emphasis is on translating content and pedagogical knowledge into effective pedagogical tasks (Ní Dhiorbháin, Ní Aogáin and Ó Duibhir, 2024; Ó Ceallaigh, Leavy and Hourigan, 2016).

The challenge that still faces the Irish-medium education sector, according to Nig Uidhir and Ó Ceallaigh (2023), is to identify competencies specific to immersion education and align these with the guidelines for professional learning. The same authors developed a rubric for effective practice in immersion education to address these specific aspects of immersion education. This rubric can be used in conjunction with school self-evaluation to take account of the school context and its particular needs.

A Whole-School Approach and Sharing of Good Practice

Ó Ceallaigh and Ní Shéaghdha (2021) claim that effective leadership is crucial in immersion education. *Looking at Our School (2022): A Quality Framework for Primary Schools and Special Schools*, is a framework that provides a shared understanding of what effective and highly effective learning, teaching, leadership and management practices look like in the Irish school system. (Department of Education, 2022, p.5).

While this framework is particularly valuable for schools, Ó Ceallaigh and Ní Shéaghdha (2017) have produced best practice indicators in immersion education. These practices are based on input from practitioners in Irish-medium education. Within the practices identified, the following are discussed:

- inclusiveness of the immersion model
- programme structure
- integration and planning
- responsibility
- leadership and assessment
- curriculum
- pedagogy
- tailor-made professional development
- systematic instruction in L1 and L2
- strong links with the public
- maximising the use of language and socialisation through the target language
- government support
- resources.

Ó Ceallaigh and Nig Uidhir (2023) have further developed their priority areas. The authors propose the following areas:

- An integrated, co-ordinated and context-appropriate approach to enable high-quality professional learning of teachers across the continuum
- Irish-medium teachers' lifelong learning, both formal and informal
- Strong visionary leadership based on the values, knowledge and skills of Irish-medium education, which strategically engages stakeholders in the various contexts of Irish-medium education in creative and innovative ways
- Curriculum materials, resources and guidelines specific to immersion education and aligned with the specific criteria of Irish-medium education, identifying specific language outcomes in different subject areas and taking into account the complexities of immersion education classrooms with a diversity of languages
- Collaborative relationships and accountability partnerships with parents / guardians that encourage, support and expand the professional development of teachers
- Time to engage in collaboration, planning, innovation, reflection, and capacity development
- Internal school review and self-evaluation processes that enable Irish-medium education professionals to engage with areas of professional learning that teachers need to develop, celebrating strengths and encouraging a culture of inquiry
- A legislative and regulatory framework that shapes and guides teachers' professional learning in Irish-medium education

- Recognising the additional workload of teachers in Irish-medium education through appropriate incentives and compensation
- A research programme for Irish-medium education that fosters high-quality professional learning for teachers, focusing on the contexts and authentic practices in Irish-medium education.

Amongst the best practices in immersion education is a strong expectation in the school / programme policy that spoken use of the target language will be widely promoted (Mac Donnacha et al., 2004; Péterváry, Ó Curnáin, Ó Giollagáin and Sheahan, 2014). It is expected that this policy and the promotion of spoken Irish will be implemented through different school initiatives which emphasise positive reinforcement and praise / incentives for children who use the target language (Ní Shéaghdha, 2010). Children must also be encouraged to use Irish outside of the lesson in social contexts.

Effective practice in immersion education also means encouraging teachers to be innovative and creative in designing teaching resources through Irish in collaboration with other teachers. Teachers need to be aware of resources that are, or have been, available and how they can be used for language enrichment today (Mac Uidhlin, Ní Thuairisg and Ní Mhullaoidh, 2021). As reported in the *Staid Reatha na Scoileanna Gaeltachta 2004 (The Current State of Gaeltacht Schools 2004)*, most teachers feel that in order to teach effectively through Irish in schools, suitable textbooks and teaching aids in Irish are one of the main supports needed. A very extensive collection of resources for primary and post-primary schools is available on the COGG website to guide and assist in teaching all curriculum subjects. It has already been shown that Gaeltacht schools are drawing on rich resources published by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and An tÁisaonad (Department of Education and Skills, 2015). In the resource *An Ghaeilge do Gach Duine (Irish for Everyone)* (Dunne and Ní Aogáin, 2025), there is also a description of resources for the teaching of Irish which have been created across the island for all teachers in immersion education and beyond.

In the case of children who begin immersion education with little Irish, the teacher can support their language development by accepting the child's utterance in English, providing an appropriate scaffold so that the children can express a word or sentence in Irish, and then responding in Irish at a level that children will understand (Mhic Mathúna, 2003). Using gestures and total physical response is also effective in scaffolding learning (Ó Ceallaigh, Hourigan and Leavy, 2019), as well as using simple language with repetition, drama and role-playing (Rogan, 2023).

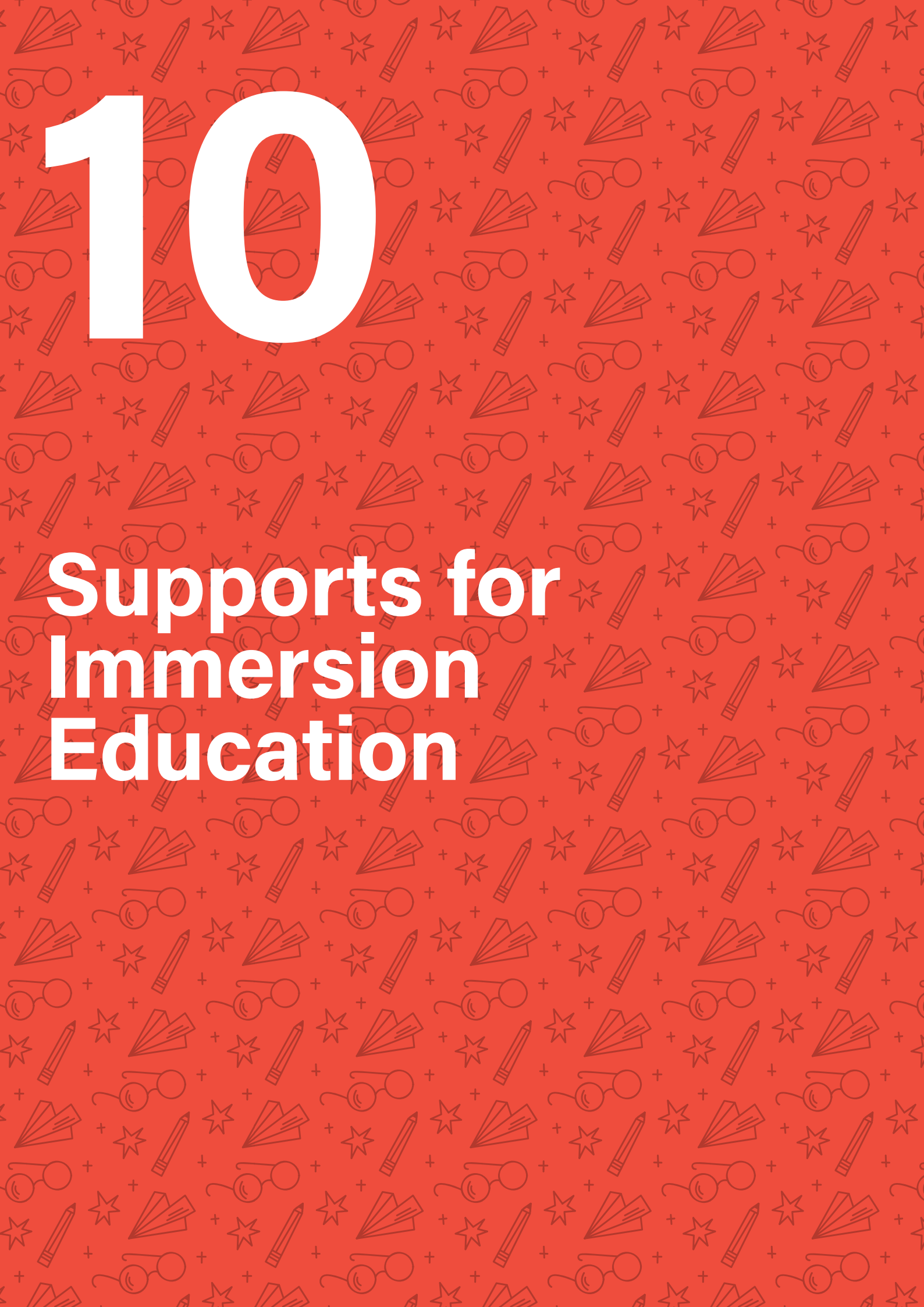
It is necessary to access teachers' views relating to the teaching of Irish throughout the entire continuum of education (Devitt et al., 2018; Dunne, 2015; Thomas and Dunne, 2022). Different children need different approaches, and classroom needs change over time. Approaches to fostering language enrichment in Gaeltacht schools include regularly using the arts, poetry and singing as learning strategies (Ó Brolcháin, 2016). The use of the arts is very much in line with the *Straitéis d'Ealaíona Teangabhunaithe na Gaeilge. Plean Gníomhaíochta 2024-2027 (Strategy for Irish Language-Based Arts)* (An Roinn Turasóireachta, Cultúir, Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán, 2023) and the playful approach recommended in the *Primary School Curriculum Framework* (Department of Education, 2023).

Teachers must be able to share good practices they learn about in continuing professional development with the rest of their staff (Ní Chuaig, 2016), and share their own effective classroom practices.



Conclusion

In immersion education today, teachers report facing some of the same difficulties as teachers who worked in immersion education in the first half of the twentieth century. Immersion teachers have specific needs, and the following has to be taken into account to support teachers: the need to continuously develop language proficiency, an emphasis on building awareness of appropriate resources and maximising their usefulness, providing opportunities for discussing and sharing effective and creative pedagogy. In order to harness the benefits of immersion education, it is necessary to work together and to promote effective leadership and a whole-school approach.



10

Supports for Immersion Education

Supports for Immersion Education

In Chapter 1, *The Growth and Development of Immersion Education in Ireland*, we saw that the issues that arose in early models of immersion education included difficulties in promoting Irish and a high standard of education, especially when the language is not reinforced outside the school gates. In the chapter *The Needs of Teachers In Immersion Education and Sharing Good Practice*, we saw that some of these challenges still face teachers in Irish-medium education today.

Chapter Overview

- First, ways to strengthen the connection between home, community and school will be examined.
- Next, continuity in the immersion education journey will be explored.
- Finally, the language supports children require in immersion education will be considered.

Home, Community and School

As stated in the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education*, we know that schools and the education system cannot secure the future of the Irish language on their own. Only Irish speakers and communities can do this, supported by language planning processes (Department of Education and Skills, 2016, p.4). As Mac Donnacha et al. (2004) have noted, keeping Irish alive in the Gaeltacht is not the role of schools alone because this task concerns all organisations operating in the Gaeltacht (Mac Donnacha et al., 2004, p.137), as is also stated in the *Gaeltacht Act* (2012). The home or school provides a foundation in the language for the child, after which it is essential that language networks are in place in order for the speaker to have regular contact with the language (de Brún, Ó Duibhir, Ní Dhiorbháin and Ó Floinn, 2023; Murtagh, 2011).

The growth and development of immersion education is often described as a top-down movement in the 1920s and a bottom-up grassroots movement from the 1970s (Ó Riagáin and Ó Glasáin, 1979). However, Mhic Mhathúna and Nic Fhionnlaoich used Bronfenbrenner's conceptualisation to explore the relationship between the various elements that influence the child's educational journey:

- home
- school
- relationships between parents and the school community,
- events in the community, etc.

Using Bronfenbrenner's model, as opposed to a linear, chronological view, may be useful in reflecting on the different areas that have, and still do, influence the promotion of immersion education in Ireland and to help us recognise that different aspects are interlinked. In Fishman's terms (1991), there is an essential link between home, community and school regarding language revitalisation and maintenance. The three major areas of the speaker's life must be fully operational as a resource for language acquisition and maintenance (McCarty, 2003 and Warner, 2001, cited in Ó Duibhir, 2012, p.278). A deeper understanding needs to be developed among immersion teachers of their role as advocates in the revitalisation of Irish (Ó Brolcháin, 2015), as well as fostering partnerships between teachers and other language organisations

and advocates (Dunne, 2015). The *Policy on Gaeltacht Education* (Department of Education and Skills, 2016) recommends strengthening links between home, school and community to support the acquisition of Irish. The emphasis in the policy on enrichment in the Irish language is also important as literacy in the minority or minoritised language is developed in the formal educational context, and literacy is vital to the revitalisation of the language (Hickey and Stenson, 2016a/b). In some Category C communities, the Irish-medium network only relates to primary school children (Ó Giollagáin and Mac Donnacha, 2007). Specific targets need to be developed for Categories B and C to establish and strengthen Irish-medium social networks and education in these areas. This is particularly important in the case of Gaeltacht areas where there is a decline in daily speakers (Ó Giollagáin and Mac Donnacha, 2007).

Continuity in the Immersion Educational Journey

The *Primary School Curriculum* (2023) focuses on managing effective transitions from early childhood education to primary school and from primary to post-primary school. Objective 6 of the *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language* relates to providing a high standard of Irish-medium education for school children whose parents / guardians wish for them to attend immersion education. However, some policies militate against establishing immersion schools, for example, the fact that they are mainly established in predominantly urban areas (Ó Duibhir et al., 2017). Ní Thuairisg and Ó Duibhir (2016) show that parents would like continuity in Irish-medium education for their children, from the naíonra to primary school, and from primary school to post-primary school.

- 61% of parents of 6th Class children in Gaeltacht schools, and
- 46% of parents of 6th Class children in Irish-medium schools

would like their children to attend an Irish-medium post-primary school (Shiel, Gilleece, Clerkin and Millar, 2011). As emerged in the public consultation on Irish-medium education outside the Gaeltacht, there is demand for Irish-medium education at the various stages of a child's educational journey (de Brún, Ó Duibhir, Ní Dhiorbháin and Ó Floinn, 2023). To ensure that continuity in Irish-medium education is an option, there needs to be access to local naíonraí, Irish-medium primary and post-primary schools, and parents must be able to find a place for their children in these settings.

Given the lack of early childhood education centres through Irish in the Gaeltacht, supports are urgently required (Department of Education and Skills, 2016). At the time of writing this report in 2024, a public consultation is underway on the role of Irish in the early education sector and after-school care. Mhic Mhathúna and Nic Fhionnlaóich (2021b) question the impact of the *Education (Admissions to Schools) Act* (2018) on Irish-medium schools when they cannot give priority to children from naíonraí, if school places are oversubscribed.

Censuses conducted in 2002 and 2006 in the Republic of Ireland show a growth in the number of young children who can speak Irish, and this increase is linked to the work of the naíonraí (Prats Porcar, 2013). Since the commencement of the Early Childhood Care and Education scheme, better known as ECCE, there has been an option for children to have two years of State-funded early childhood education prior to commencing primary school. This opportunity can provide a good basis for the child's language journey. More children are attending an early childhood setting, and a stronger emphasis has been placed on the link between this experience and children's later experiences in primary school (NCCA, 2023). There has been a significant increase in the number of schools in the Irish-medium sector in Northern Ireland in recent years, including early years settings (Mc Clure et al., 2016; Mhic Aoidh, 2021).

However, as there is a wide range of early education centres available in both jurisdictions and because these are based on different philosophies, for example, Froebel, High Scope, Montessori, and Steiner, there may be differences in children's experience in relation to Irish (Ó Ceallaigh and Ní Dhonnabháin, 2015).

Irish-medium early years education is a cornerstone of immersion education, and further developments at the primary and post-primary levels are built on this foundation (Mhic Aoidh, 2021). It is vitally important to build bridges between naíonraí and primary schools so that children's continuity of learning can be facilitated, and to assist children and their parents in transitioning from early childhood settings to primary school (Department of Education, 2022).

The quality of early childhood education supports children in their transition to primary school (DE NI, 2016; ETI, 2018). In 2018, *First 5: A Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families (2019-2028)* was published, reinforcing the importance of fostering such connections. The reporting templates available in *Mo Scéal*¹⁷ support children transitioning from a naíonra to an Irish-medium primary school. The templates help to describe the child's learning and development to date. This information is shared with parents / guardians and, with their consent, with the primary school. A transition form is also used in Northern Ireland and practitioners highlight the importance of adding information about the child's language development (DE NI, 2016). The *Education Passport*¹⁸ can be used to share information about children from primary to post-primary, and to ensure continuity from primary to post-primary.

Other Language Supports for the School Community

Several language supports are available to help children and class teachers. In Gaeltacht schools, a Language Support Teacher supports language acquisition and enrichment (Department of Education and Science, 2017; Mac Intyre Coyle and Nic Aindriú, 2023). Language Assistants also provide great support to the school community, and fair working conditions are needed to recognise this important work (Ní Thuairisg and Ó Duibhir, 2019).

In immersion schools in Northern Ireland, Classroom Assistants are considered to have a particular role in supporting children's abilities in Irish. The role that children in Northern Ireland associate with Classroom Assistants differs from that which teachers associate with the role (Rogan, 2023). Therefore, it would be worthwhile to get feedback from children on the work they would like to do, and experiences they would like to have, with Language Assistants and Classroom Assistants. Joint professional development for Language Assistants and Classroom Assistants could be provided in certain areas to foster a community of practice.

In order to meet the needs of children with special or additional needs, particular supports must be available in the school and in the community, for example, psychologists and therapists with proficiency in Irish who understand the context of bilingualism / plurilingualism. The Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) emphasises the need for proficiency in Irish to enable psychologists to meet the needs of Gaeltacht and Irish-medium schools (PSI, 2017, p.14). While there is generally a low number of therapists proficient in Irish, more speech therapists in the Republic of Ireland report proficiency in Irish.

¹⁷ Information on My Story is available here: [My Story? NCCA reporting templates](#)

¹⁸ Information on the Education Passport is available here: [Education Passport? NCCA](#)

The report *Plean Gníomhaíochta 2018-2022: Tuairisc ar an dul chun cinn* (v) discusses the progress achieved in the *20-Year Strategy for Irish*. The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) reports that "all efforts are being made to assign highly competent psychologists in Irish to Gaeltacht schools where possible," and that work is ongoing on the development of resources for parents, teachers and children in the Irish-medium context (Government of Ireland, Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, p.21). Murtagh and Seoighe (2022) suggest that a glossary of terms relating to special educational and psychological needs be provided as an initial step. This suggestion could draw on the list of psychological terms provided by the Department of Education and Skills in the 2000s.

However, teachers and parents point out that there are still other gaps in the support services available to children with special and additional needs. In their study of speech and language therapists' attitudes and practices, Mulgrew, Duffy and Kennedy (2022) show that there are few assessments available to assess Irish-language skills and that some misunderstandings exist regarding best practice guidelines in Irish-medium education.

Some of the available supports are so focused on the English-medium context that the bilingual and / or Irish-language context in which Gaeltacht children live is being completely ignored (Mac Donnacha, 2005). Stronger cooperation is required between the school community and other support services to provide evidence-based advice and reflect on the best interests of the child.

Unfortunately, no specific guidelines are available for educational psychologists working in Gaeltacht and Irish-medium schools (Murtagh and Seoighe, 2022). As discussed in the section "The Suitability of Irish-Medium Schools for Children with Special and Additional Needs" in the chapter *Including Every Child in Immersion Education*, unless experts have a clear and accurate understanding of the sociolinguistic context of Irish-medium education, they may provide inaccurate information and advice to parents (Muckley, 2015). There is a risk that there have been, or are, misunderstandings among experts and that this has negatively influenced the advice given to parents regarding the suitability of immersion education.

Conclusion

The effectiveness of immersion education is linked to the other supports available in the home and community, as well as national language planning efforts. Opportunities for Irish-medium education are required throughout the entire education continuum. At every stage of the educational journey, language and other supports are needed in the classroom and beyond so that children can benefit from immersion education and realise their full potential.

11

Conclusion

Conclusion

Immersion education in Ireland has a rich and interesting history, and there continues to be an interest in and demand for Irish-medium schools. Some parents even have personal experience of the immersion education system themselves. Children in Irish-medium schools have the opportunity to engage in all areas of the curriculum, as well as acquiring Irish and enriching their language skills. Irish-medium schools support the development of language and literacy skills in English, and in Irish in particular. On the whole, children in immersion education perform as well or better in terms of English, than children in English-medium schools. In addition to this, children acquire the Irish language and develop positive attitudes towards the language.

Irish-medium schools contribute to linguistic diversity in Ireland by creating a space in which children can have regular contact with the Irish language. This experience helps children to become part of the contemporary international bilingual / plurilingual community. It is acknowledged in the research and in the *Primary Language Curriculum* (2019) that there is a continuum of bilingualism / plurilingualism and that people use their language repertoire in different ways and in different contexts.

To get the most out of Irish-medium education, it is necessary to foster strong links between the school, the home, and the community, and to work together to promote a whole-school approach. At each stage of the educational journey, language support and other types of support are required, both inside the classroom and outside of it, so that children can benefit from immersion education and realise their full potential.

Children in Irish-medium schools, like all children, have a variety of talents, needs, interests and personalities. They need some of the same supports as children in English-medium schools, but they also need special supports in terms of the Irish language. Irish-medium education can support all children on their educational journey, provided there are inclusive pedagogies, effective whole-school planning, as well as suitable resources available.



12

Recommended Reading

- An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta (2023). *Curaclam na bunscoile*. Údar.
- An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta (2019). *Curaclam teanga na bunscoile*. Údar.
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