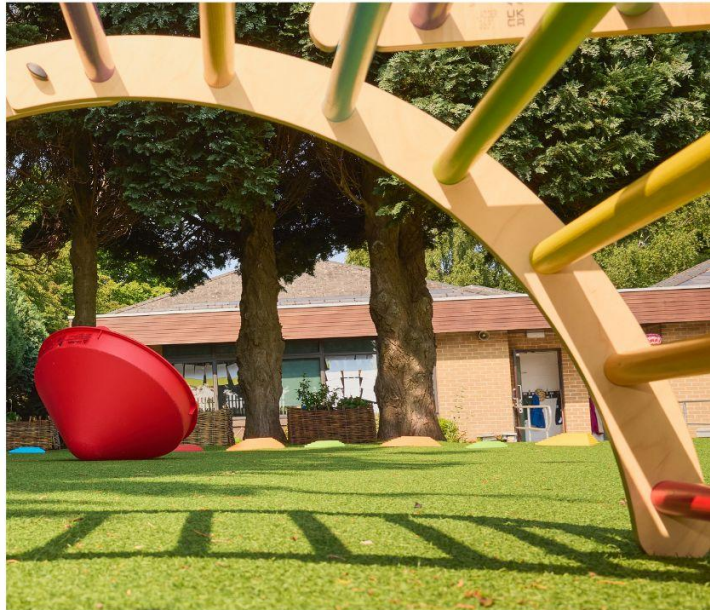




Supporting children with special educational needs in Irish-medium early childhood education outside of the Gaeltacht

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Abbreviations

Access and Inclusion Model	AIM
Continuing Professional Development	CPD
Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth	DCEDIY
Early Childhood Care and Education	ECCE
Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004	EPSEN
Irish-medium	IM
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment	NCCA
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development	OECD
Special Educational Needs	SEN

Note on Terminology

Several terms are used to describe a person who works with preschool children in the context of the IM preschool. The terms employed depend on the context and on the choice of the organisation or the particular practice:

- *Educator* – a general term referring to the person engaged in the education and development of children.
- *Early Years Educator* – a more specific term focusing on education professionals who work with children in the early years of life, within the context of early learning and development.
- *Naíonra Teacher* – Plays a central role in the early childhood education of young children (generally ages 2 years 7 months–5 years old) through the medium of the Irish.
- *Naíonra Leader/Director* – a term often applied to the person with responsibility for the management and administration of the IM preschool setting, in addition to the educational aspect.

In this document, the term “Educator” is used primarily. It should be noted, however, that in this context it is intended as a shortened form of the term “Early Years Educator” as outlined in formal government documents.

Executive Summary

Supporting Children with Special Educational Needs in Irish-Medium Early Childhood Education Outside of the Gaeltacht

Introduction

This report, which was conducted between January and March 2025, presents the first comprehensive study of how Irish-medium (IM) preschools outside of the Gaeltacht support children with special educational needs (SEN). It focused on IM preschools that educate children from the age of 2 years and 8 months to 5 years and 6 months. It addresses a significant gap in the research on inclusive early childhood education delivered through a minority language in the Republic of Ireland (RoI). While this research explores how IM preschools outside of the Gaeltacht support children with SEN, its purpose is not to assess the performance, adequacy, or delivery of supports provided by any Government body or any other state agency.

Instead, the focus of this study lies in understanding the realities and practices within IM preschool settings outside of the Gaeltacht, particularly regarding how they accommodate and support children who are learning through Irish as a second language and who also present with additional learning needs. The research was conducted independently to capture the perspectives and experiences of IM preschool educators, with the goal of informing best practice, identifying areas of need, and contributing to the broader conversation around inclusion in minority language education. This distinction is important to ensure that findings are interpreted within the correct context, namely, an educational and linguistic lens, rather than a policy or service accountability framework.

Purpose and Aims

The study sought to:

- Determine the prevalence and types of SEN in IM preschools outside of the Gaeltacht.

- Investigate the practices used by IM preschool educators to identify and support children with SEN in these settings.
- Explore the challenges educators face in these settings when meeting the needs of all children.
- Identify existing inclusive strategies and resources.
- Identify the professional development requirements for effectively supporting children with additional learning needs as they acquire a second language.

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was adopted:

- *Stage 1:* An anonymous online questionnaire was completed by 37 IM preschools.
- *Stage 2:* In-depth focus groups and interviews with 15 educators from 11 settings.

The study adhered to ethical research practices, emphasising participant consent, anonymity, and respect for educator expertise.

Key Findings

- *Prevalence of SEN:*

5.49% of children were reported to have an official SEN diagnosis. The most common categories were emotional and behavioural difficulties, autism, and speech and language impairments. An additional 778 children were identified as presenting with SEN without a formal diagnosis.

- *Challenges in IM Settings:*

IM preschools experience significant barriers, including:

- Lack of Irish-language resources and assessments.
- Limited access to external services through Irish (e.g., SLTs, OTs).
- Large class sizes and insufficient staffing.
- Time constraints for planning and differentiation.

- Recruitment and retention of qualified educators with Irish language proficiency.
- *Professional Development Needs:*
Educators reported a strong need for the ongoing provision of continuous professional development (CPD) through the medium of Irish and contextualised for the immersion setting:
 - Bilingualism and second language learning.
 - Autism and social skills development.
 - Communication with parents regarding SEN. Inclusion strategies tailored to immersion contexts.
- *Parental Perspectives and Transitions:*
Educators noted parental concerns about the suitability of IM education for children with SEN. Questionnaire responses suggest that many parents are advised against continuing IM education, highlighting systemic issues in supporting inclusive transitions to primary school. Focus group and interview data suggest that in many instances, it was reported that parents were being discouraged by professionals (e.g., educational psychologists, doctors, public health nurses (PHN) and speech and language therapists) from sending their child to an IM preschool.
- *Bilingualism and SEN:*
The international literature emphasises, children including those with autism or speech and language difficulties can acquire bilingualism when appropriately supported (Raining-Bird et al., 2016). Research suggests that children with a variety of SEN can do well in primary immersion education (Raining-Bird et al., 2021). It is clear from the findings of this study that there are many benefits of IM education for children with SEN.

Recommendations

- It is recommended that the Government, guarantee the recruitment of qualified Irish language proficient educators (e.g., AIM early years educators) for all IM preschools. It is necessary to ensure that all supports, and intervention services are delivered by personnel proficient in Irish, with specific training in early total immersion education. This includes ensuring that all assessments, interventions, and supports for children in IM preschools are available in Irish and are culturally and pedagogically appropriate for immersion settings.
- Ensure the development and distribution of suitable Irish-language SEN resources, assessments, and interventions.
- Expand continuous professional development programmes currently available through the medium of English to ensure that they are specifically tailored to the needs of IM educators and available through the Irish language.
- Support collaborative partnerships between educators, specialists, and families.
- Launch public awareness campaigns to promote inclusion and bilingualism for all children.
- Strengthen transition supports for children moving from preschool to IM primary schools.
- Enhance workforce sustainability through recruitment strategies and retention supports.

Conclusion

This study highlights the urgent need for targeted supports, resources, professional development and investment to ensure equitable and inclusive early education in IM preschools. By addressing the linguistic and systemic barriers facing these settings,

stakeholders can advance inclusive practices that benefit all children while safeguarding Ireland's linguistic heritage.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

This study addresses the research gap relating to special education provision and the prevalence/types of special educational needs (SEN) in Irish-medium (IM) preschools outside of the Gaeltacht. To date, there has been no research undertaken specifically in IM preschools in this area. In this chapter, an overview is provided of the research aims and rationale along with an overview of the research context. At the end of the chapter, an overview of the structure of the report is presented.

Research Context

This report presents the first comprehensive study of how IM preschools outside the Gaeltacht support children with SEN. It addresses a significant gap in the literature on inclusive early childhood education delivered through the medium of Irish in the Republic of Ireland. In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of early identification and support for children with SEN. However, much of the existing research and policy guidance has focused on English-medium settings. As a result, there has been limited attention to the experiences of IM preschools operating outside the Gaeltacht—settings where children with SEN are learning through Irish as a second language while simultaneously navigating their additional learning challenges.

This study was undertaken to explore how such IM preschools support inclusion, identify educator continuous professional development needs in this area, and manage the intersection of language learning and special education. It draws on data collected from IM preschool educators working across the Republic of Ireland and seeks to highlight both the opportunities and the challenges they face.

Importantly, this study was not conducted as an assessment or evaluation of Government services or public agencies. Instead, its focus is on the practices and perspectives of educators within IM preschool settings. By centring their voices and experiences, the report aims to contribute meaningfully to the ongoing development of inclusive, culturally and linguistically responsive IM preschool education in Ireland.

Research Aims

The aims of this research project were:

- To identify the prevalence and types of SEN in IM preschools outside of the Gaeltacht in the Republic of Ireland.
- To identify the practices used by educators to identify children with SEN in these settings.
- To identify the challenges that educators in these IM preschools face in relation to the identification of children with SEN.
- To identify the positive practices in place in these settings to meet the needs of all students.
- To identify the professional development needs of educators in these settings in relation to special education.
- To make recommendations as to how the challenges faced by early childhood educators in IM settings can be overcome, with a particular focus on resources and supports available through the Irish language.

Research Rationale

There are at least 53 IM preschools outside of the Gaeltacht that offer early years education through the medium of Irish and who use Irish as their day-to-day language of communication (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), 2023).

Identification of children with SEN can be more challenging in minority language/immersion learning environments. This is particularly the case when they are being immersed in a minority language, such as Irish. This is because fewer assessments, interventions, and resources are available through the medium of Irish (Andrews, 2020). In the first stage of this study, all of the IM preschools outside of the Gaeltacht in the Republic of Ireland were invited to complete an anonymous online survey on the topics outlined in the aims above. In the second stage, IM preschool educators (N=15) undertook focus groups or individual interviews on the topics outlined above in the aims of the study to gain more in-depth data. Undertaking research around special education provision for IM preschool settings is crucial for several reasons:

- (1) Research in this area will allow for further development of the identification and implementation of effective early intervention strategies through Irish.
- (2) Research can shed light on effective strategies to create inclusive Irish language learning environments that benefit both children with SEN and children without SEN.
- (3) Research findings can inform the development of professional development training programs in SEN/inclusion for IM preschool educators. It is important that the nuances of IM and immersion education are considered in the professional development needs of these educators.
- (4) Preschool research in special education can also focus on involving and supporting parents. Providing resources, information and strategies for parents to understand and support their children's unique needs can positively impact a child's development. This is particularly important when children are being immersed in a second or minority language.
- (5) Research findings can contribute to the development of inclusive practices that promote inclusivity and support for special education in preschool settings. Advocacy for appropriate resources, funding, and policy changes based on research evidence can

have a significant impact on the overall quality of special education programmes. This is particularly important for the IM education sector, as educational policies often do not recognise the nuances of this sector and learning through a minority language.

- (6) There is limited existing research in the field of special education in IM preschool education therefore, there may be gaps in understanding the unique challenges and opportunities within IM preschool settings. Conducting research specifically tailored to this group can fill these gaps, providing a more comprehensive understanding of effective interventions and support mechanisms.

The findings of this research offer a path to assist the development of continuous professional development in special education for IM preschool educators. Findings will also provide an insight into the resources required by these settings to help them in the areas of early identification and intervention for children with SEN.

Structure of Report

In this chapter an overview was provided of the research aims and rationale of the study. In the second chapter an overview of the context of the study is presented. The methodology of the study is outlined in Chapter 3 and the results are presented in Chapter 4. Finally, a conclusion and recommendations are presented in Chapter 5.

Chapter 2: Context of the Study

Inclusion in the Republic of Ireland

Within the Education Act, inclusion is promoted as the “equality of access to and participation in education” (Government of Ireland, 1998, Section 6). The Irish government emphasises the importance of creating inclusive environments that accommodate children of all abilities, backgrounds, and needs, ensuring every child has equal opportunities to thrive.

The OECD (2024) states that all children should have equal access to high-quality learning and development opportunities in early years education. It states there has been much progress in this area as of late and that “policy makers have been shifting their focus to the quality of Early Years services as well as to strategies to enhance equity and inclusion” (OECD, 2024). In the Republic of Ireland (RoI), the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter for Early Childhood Care and Education outlines the principles of inclusive practice (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2016). The importance of an inclusive community is discussed in the charter, and it is suggested that an inclusive culture involves (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2016, p.4):

- Working in partnership and openly communicating with the child’s family.
- Working in partnership with outside agencies that may be involved with the family (Consent must be given by the child’s parents).
- Actively promoting equal opportunities and anti-bias practices, so that all children and families feel included and valued.
- Having robust policies and procedures: inclusion policy, equal opportunities policy.
- Recognising and valuing that all children are unique and will develop and learn at their own rate.

- Utilising the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) programme (2025) to meet the needs of children and recognising that not all children with disabilities will require additional support.
- Encouraging children to recognise their individual qualities and the characteristics they share with their peers.
- Actively engaging children in making decisions about their own learning.
- Respecting the diversity of the child, their family and community throughout the early childhood service.
- Understanding that children have individual needs, views, cultures and beliefs, which need to be treated with respect and represented throughout the early childhood services.
- Reflecting on your own attitudes and values.

This study will focus on the inclusion of children with SEN in the IM preschool context in areas outside of the Gaeltacht. Within the present study, inclusion is defined by the researcher as:

- valuing all children as equal,
- building relationships within the preschool community so that everybody feels like they belong and that they have something to contribute to the school community,
- the removal of barriers, and
- the undertaking of continuous professional development so that all children can reach their potential and are happy in school.

For the context of this study, the term SEN was chosen as it is the term used by the Government of Ireland in all official legal documents. For the purposes of this study, the definition of SEN

under the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 (Government of Ireland, 2004) is adopted;

“a restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition.” (*EPSEN Act 2004, Section 1*)

Preschool Education in the Republic of Ireland (RoI)

Preschool education in the RoI is an integral part of the country’s early childhood education system (DCEDIY, 2025). It focuses on providing young children with a nurturing and stimulating environment that supports their social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development during their formative years. The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme is a state-funded preschool initiative (DCEDIY, 2025). It provides two free years of preschool education for children aged between 2 years 8 months and 5 years 6 months (eligibility depends on the child’s age at the start of the preschool year). The programme runs for 3 hours a day, 5 days a week, over the school year (typically 38 weeks).

The Aistear curriculum framework (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2024) is the cornerstone of preschool education in Ireland. Aistear emphasizes play-based learning and focuses on four key themes: Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking. It encourages holistic development by integrating cognitive, emotional, and social learning through play, interaction, and exploration. Some of the benefits of preschool education are: (a) it enhances school readiness, literacy, and numeracy skills, (b) it promotes socialisation, teamwork, and emotional resilience, (c) it lays the foundation for lifelong learning and development, and (d) preschool education in Ireland

serves as a vital stepping stone for young children, preparing them for primary school and beyond while fostering a love of learning and curiosity.

The purpose of the curriculum is to support children's holistic learning and development through a rights-based, emergent and inquiry-driven approach. Within the curriculum, the children are viewed as agentic, competent and confident learners who learn through relationships, play, exploration and conversation. The curriculum also values the Irish language, diversity, sustainability and children's voices. Unfortunately, however there is little or no reference to SEN in the curriculum. Aistear is underpinned by 9 key principles:

- i. Agentic Global Citizens
- ii. Diversity, Equity and Inclusion
- iii. Relationships and Interactions
- iv. Family and Community
- v. Agentic Educators
- vi. Transitions
- vii. Holistic Learning
- viii. Play and Hands-on Experiences
- ix. Learning Environments

The Aistear curriculum has recently been updated (NCCA, 2024) to provide a stronger focus on: (a) children's rights and voices, (b) Irish language and culture, (c) outdoor learning and sustainability, (d) slow relational pedagogy and early years educator agency and (e) inclusivity, neurodiversity and assistive technologies. It has also been updated to ensure further alignment with the Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2023) for better continuity in education.

For the context of this study, it is important to note that IM preschools may follow different curriculum approaches, both Aistear and Síolta are frameworks encompassing all pedagogical approaches in early learning and care. Some IM preschools also incorporate or are based on approaches such as HighScope, Montessori, or Steiner. Likewise, not all naíonraí are part of the ECCE scheme, some operate independently. These frameworks collectively shape the standards, learning experiences, and inclusive practices within early years settings in

Ireland. However, the study does not aim to evaluate the implementation or effectiveness of the ECCE Programme, Aistear, Síolta or any other curriculum in IM preschools. They are referenced only to provide a brief overview of the national context in which IM preschool educators operate. The core focus of this research remains on exploring the perspectives, practices, and professional development needs of educators in IM preschools outside of the Gaeltacht, particularly in relation to supporting children with SEN who are learning through Irish as a second language.

Access and Inclusion Model Scheme

While the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM, 2025) plays a central role in the national strategy to support the inclusion of children with disabilities in ECCE settings, this study does not focus on the implementation or evaluation of the AIM programme. It is worthwhile noting that AIM is not exclusively available to ECCE settings, while AIM is primarily designed to support children with disabilities in accessing and participating meaningfully in the ECCE program, its supports can now extend beyond the ECCE hours for children enrolled in ECCE and attending an Early Years service (AIM, 2025). This means that children with disabilities can receive AIM supports both during and outside of their ECCE program hours, provided they are registered for ECCE.

Better Start is an Irish national initiative (hosted by Pobal for the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth) focused on improving quality and inclusion in Early Learning and Care (ELC) services for babies and children aged 0–6 across Ireland. The research acknowledges the importance of AIM and Better Start in providing structured supports to preschools and recognises that not all children with disabilities will require additional targeted assistance through the AIM model. However, only a brief overview of AIM and Better Start is provided to contextualise the wider landscape of inclusion in Irish early years settings. The study's primary focus remains on the practices, experiences, and needs

of educators working in IM preschools outside of the Gaeltacht, particularly in relation to supporting children who are learning Irish as a second language and present with diverse learning needs.

The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM, 2025) preschool programme in Ireland is a government initiative designed to ensure that children with disabilities can access and fully participate in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme. Launched in 2016, AIM promotes inclusive education by providing a range of supports to preschools and families. The scheme is managed by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), and is part of the broader government strategy to promote equality in education.

The principles of the programme include:

- (a) supporting the development of a culture of inclusion within early years and care settings;
- (b) a child-centred approach that does not require a formal diagnosis;
- (c) collaboration with specialists such as speech and language therapists and occupational therapists; and
- (d) access to funding for assistive technology or additional staff.

Preschools are encouraged to create environments that are physically accessible and promote participation for all children. This includes the use of inclusive materials, specialised equipment, and assistive technologies appropriate to various developmental stages. This includes sensory-friendly spaces, inclusive materials and equipment suitable for various developmental stages.

AIM emphasises the right of every child to participate in preschool education alongside their peers in an inclusive environment rather than segregating children with disabilities. Within the scheme, there are seven levels of support catering to varying needs of children and preschools:

- Level 1: Inclusive Culture. Focuses on creating inclusive policies and practices at the preschool level, through initiatives like the training of pre-school educators to become in-service Inclusion Coordinators who hold a QQI Special purpose Level 6 Higher Education qualification in Leadership for Inclusion in Early Years Care (LINC).
- Level 2: Information for Parents and Providers. Provides guidance and resources to help preschools and families navigate supports and services.
- Level 3: Continuing Professional Development (CPD). Offers specialized training for preschool staff to improve their skills in supporting children with diverse needs.
- Level 4: Expert Advice and Support. Includes access to Early Years Specialists who provide tailored advice to preschools.
- Level 5: Equipment and Minor Alterations. Financial grants are available to preschools for assistive equipment or small changes to facilities.
- Level 6: Therapeutic Intervention: This level provides for access to therapeutic services where they are critical to enable the child to be enrolled, and fully participate, in the ECCE Programme.
- Level 7: Provides additional funding to ELC settings who have a child requiring extra support. Providers can use this funding either to reduce the child-to-adult ratio in the pre-school room or to fund an extra early years educator as a shared resource with other children in the ECCE setting.

AIM is implemented through collaboration between parents, preschools and specialists such as Early Years Specialists from Better Start, the HSE, and other relevant agencies. Supports are tailored to the individual child and preschool setting based on assessed needs. Supports are available even without a formal diagnosis, ensuring early intervention and accessibility.

There are many benefits of this programme, for example, it promotes inclusion and equity for all children, whilst enhancing developmental outcomes for children with disabilities. However, there have been some challenges identified in a review of the AIM programme in relation to its implementation, such as early years educator recruitment and retention, funding, parental concern around enrolment in AIM, access to specialist professionals and early years educator continuous professional development (DCEDIY, 2024). AIM have developed an action plan to respond to areas for improvement, including increasing awareness of AIM, further building the capacity and confidence of educators and providers in supporting children with autism and streamlining the application process for equipment, appliances, and minor alterations. A phased approach has been implemented by AIM since the evaluation to overcome the challenges identified. More information is available on the AIM website and in other Government documents such as responses to parliamentary questions (see Appendix A).

In addition to AIM, there are other strategies that maybe important to consider in the context of inclusion such as:

- [Equal Start](#): A model to support access and participation in early learning and childcare for all children, and
- [Nurturing Skills](#): The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC), 2022–2028.

LINC Programme

The LINC Programme (Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years) is a national training initiative in Ireland that supports inclusive practice in early childhood settings (LINC Programme, 2025). This study, however, does not examine or assess participation in LINC, and it is referenced only to contextualise the wider landscape of inclusion supports available to educators. The programme is a free, part-time Level 6 Special Purpose Award funded by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) delivered by a consortium including, Mary Immaculate College (MIC), Early Childhood Ireland and Maynooth University (Froebel Department). Upon completion of the course, the LINC co-ordinator has the skills to lead inclusive practices in their setting, support the participation of children with additional needs and facilitate access to the AIM programme. The benefits of the programme are that it enhances inclusive leadership and pedagogy. Participating settings receive AIM Level 1 status, which can be helpful when applying for supports and it promotes a whole-setting approach to inclusion.

Access to Assessment of Need and Interventions

Under the Disability Act 2005 (Government of Ireland, 2005), children in Ireland are entitled to an Assessment of Need (AON) within a statutory timeframe (3 months for assessment commencement and 6 months for completion) (Health Service Executive (HSE), 2025). However, these timelines are routinely breached (Ombudsman for Children, 2020, 2022). Access to AON and delays in intervention for children with additional needs, including those in preschool settings in Ireland has been a persistent concern for many decades in the RoI. In a report by the Ombudsman for Children (2022) it was found that 92% of AONs exceeded the statutory timeline, often delaying access to critical supports such as speech and language

therapy, occupational therapy, and psychological services. Early intervention is key in preschool years but waiting times for diagnosis and services severely limit its effectiveness.

For children in IM preschools, access to assessment can be even more limited as there are few professionals who have proficiency in Irish, and the availability of standardised assessment tools in Irish are almost non-existent, creating further delays and inaccurate evaluations of the needs of children. The POBAL report (Ní Chinnéide, 2009) on inclusion in IM preschools in Northern Ireland found that professionals often lacked understanding of immersion education, leading to misdiagnosis or under-referral. This study does not examine or assess the effectiveness of the AON process, and it is referenced only to contextualise the wider landscape of inclusion supports available to educators.

IM Preschools Outside of the Gaeltacht

IM preschools, known as Naíonraí (singular: Naíonra), play a vital role in promoting the Irish language and culture among young children in the RoI (Gaeloideachas, 2025; Mhic Mathúna, 1999; Mhic Mhathúna & Mac Con Iomaire, 2022). These preschools provide early childhood education entirely through the medium of Irish (Gaeilge) or using a mixture of Irish and English, hence fostering bilingualism from an early age. In these settings, children naturally acquire the language through play, storytelling, songs, and everyday conversations. No prior knowledge of Irish is required for children to attend an IM preschool, making it accessible to families from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Like English medium preschools, these settings follow the Aistear curriculum framework as outlined above (NCCA, 2024), which emphasises play-based, holistic learning through themes such as well-being, identity and belonging, communicating, and exploring and thinking. Activities within the curriculum are tailored to promote linguistic, social, emotional and cognitive development.

Teaching through a Minority Language

To ensure that children are learning Irish in the IM preschool setting, there is a need for planning for language development by the educators in the setting (Hickey 1997). It is also suggested that educators in this setting need a particular set of skills when teaching through a minority language (Andrews, 2006, p. 33). Specifically, they need (a) to be familiar with the language programme of the setting and the sequence in which the language should be taught, (b) to understand the importance of using non-verbal cues to teach the language, (c) to recreate opportunities of repetition of the language, and (d) to ensure a language balance between language at the level of children's understanding and language which stretches their competence. Furthermore, it has been suggested that these educators need an in-depth understanding of the stages and processes of second language learning along with a deep understanding of appropriate pedagogies for the early years setting (Mhic Mhathúna, 2009, p.306). It is important to ensure that the level of language input is in the Zone of Proximal Development (Irshad et al., 2021) of the child to ensure that they are not overwhelmed.

As outlined above, there have been several factors identified that impact on the outcomes of children in preschool immersion education throughout the world. Firstly, there is a need for the children in these settings to have high quality and consistent exposure to the target language. For this high-quality exposure to occur, it is necessary for those working in the setting to have the necessary linguistic competencies in the target language along with a good understanding of the necessary immersion education pedagogies to teach the target language. It is imperative that all educators have access to continuous professional development and curriculum support.

Benefits of the IM Preschool Setting and Parental Choice

Research has found that the IM preschool setting offers children benefits in terms of social development, cognitive development and bilingualism (Mhic Mhathúna, 1999; Mhic Mhathúna & Nic Fhionnlaoich, 2021). Exposure to Irish traditions, songs, stories and customs fosters a strong connection to Irish heritage and develops the child's cultural awareness (Mhic Mhathúna, 2008). IM preschools often serve as hubs for Irish-speaking communities, encouraging families to engage with the language and culture beyond the preschool setting (Hickey, 2020).

It has been found in research that due to these benefits many parents choose to enrol their child in an IM preschool and due the fact that they had an interest in the Irish language (they either had a personal interest or wanted their child to learn Irish). They were also motivated because they intended to send their child to an IM primary school and due to the good reputation of the IM preschool setting (Mhic Mhathúna & Nic Fhionnlaoich, 2021). In a study by Mhic Mhathúna & Nic Fhionnlaoich (2021) it was found that 94% of parents planned to send their child to an IM primary school after preschool. One of the factors that influenced this was that many of the parents had previously attended IM education themselves (21% at primary level, 19% at post-primary). This highlights a strong desire for continuity in Irish-language education. IM preschools provide a vibrant, enriching environment where children can develop a love for the Irish language and culture. By fostering bilingualism and cultural awareness, IM preschools contribute to the preservation and growth of the Irish language while giving children a strong foundation for lifelong learning.

The Number of IM Preschools

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth (DCEDIY, 2023) undertook a survey on IM provision of Early Years and School Age Care settings. This survey was used to assess the implementation of a five-year action plan published in 2018 that included

a series of commitments relating to Irish language provision in Early Years and School Age Care (EY and SAC) settings. For the context of the survey and report by the DCEDIY (p.7), “an Irish-medium setting is defined here as one where all the interactions with children are in the Irish language”.

Of the 283 centre-based settings (throughout the RoI) that reported using some degree of Irish, 132 describe themselves as wholly Irish-medium, 71 as mixed settings, and 80 as English-medium settings that use some Irish. Of those settings that described themselves as wholly Irish-medium, most are in the Gaeltacht areas (with 79 of the 92 settings being wholly Irish-medium). Outside of the Gaeltacht there are fewer settings which are wholly operating through the medium of Irish, with only 53 of the 192 reporting that they implement this model. It is reported in the findings of the study that many settings outside of the Gaeltacht operate a mixed model (63 of the 192) or using some Irish in a largely English-medium setting (76 of the 192). In the report, it was reported that it was not possible to ensure engagement from all Irish-medium (partial/wholly) setting, therefore, while the data has provided valuable data on IM provision, it does not provide a complete national picture of the extent of this form of education.

Preschool IM Education for Children with SEN in Northern Ireland

The research report titled "The Special Educational Needs of Bilingual (Irish English) Children" (Ní Chinnéide, 2009) includes a detailed examination of preschool education in the IM sector, focusing on meeting the needs of children with SEN. It was estimated that there is a prevalence rate of approximately 5% of children in IM preschools in Northern Ireland recorded as having SEN at the time. The most reported category was speech and language difficulties (59%). The second most reported category was partial hearing (13%). Autism¹

¹ Please see Appendix A for clarification and rationale for terms used in this report.

spectrum disorder (ASD), social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and other were all listed third (8%) and physical difficulties (4%) were listed fourth.

At the time 39% of educators rated the level of special education provision as satisfactory. Most references to the positive aspects related to the availability of external support (67%), the diligence of educators (11%), support between IM schools (11%) and support from parents (11%). However, there were also aspects that the participants thought were unsatisfactory around SEN provision in IM preschool settings. These included the lack of qualified Irish speaking educators (20%) and the lack of appropriate provision available (20%). The other areas referred to were, lack of external support (13%), lack of information (13%), lack of training for educators (7%), assessment being available through English only (7%), lack of resources (7%), lack of services in Irish (7%) and lack of funding (6%) (Ní Chinnéide, 2009, p. 135)

One of the challenges identified by the sector at the time was the ability to find educators with both childcare qualifications and Irish language proficiency. Many preschools were experiencing a high educator turnover, negatively impacting continuity and long-term planning for SEN. There was also limited access to professional development in SEN for preschool educators, particularly training tailored to IM settings. There was also a shortage of suitable resources, including educational materials in Irish, appropriate accommodations and funding. There's a strong need for additional educators and clearer access to support services, especially for voluntary IM playgroups, which can't access Education and Library Board services. Parents valued the efforts of preschool educators but voiced concerns about a lack of informed guidance when navigating SEN within IM education. Some parents were discouraged by professionals from continuing IM education due to their child's SEN, which caused frustration and disempowerment.

The Continuous Professional Development (CPD) Needs of Early Years Educators in the IM Preschools

Internationally there have been a few frameworks created for the development of professional development or teacher education programmes for teachers in immersion education contexts. Most of this research has been undertaken for primary or post-primary immersion education teachers. For example, in Māori medium education (May, Hill & Tiakwai, 2004, p.125) essential aspects of education and training identified for immersion education teachers include (a) bilingual theory and research, (b) the bilingual programme the school uses, (c) second language acquisition and development, (d) instructional strategies in second language development, (e) multicultural and educational equity training, and (f) cooperative learning strategies.

In designing a CPD course for bilingual special education teachers, it is recommended that bilingual special education teacher professional development should provide opportunities for participants to acquire theoretical and practical knowledge of bilingual education and bilingualism (Rodriguez, 2005; Rodriguez & Carrasquillo, 1997). It should demonstrate how to identify and utilise a range of appropriate assessment methods and tools. Teachers also need to gain a repertoire of skills in terms of planning and the delivery of instruction in a bilingual education context, develop an awareness of a student's cultural and linguistic diversity, and be provided with the skills that will allow for advancement within the teaching profession. This is in line with other research that suggests that teachers in immersion education contexts need to develop their knowledge in the areas of second language acquisition theory, assessment, pedagogies for teaching through a second language and research in this context (Cammarata & Tedick, 2012; May, 2013).

Studies have found that immersion education schools often find it difficult to recruit teachers who are fluent in the language of instruction of the school and that are appropriately

trained and accredited (Stiles, 1997). In the context of bilingual/immersion education internationally there are few courses available which are focused on preparing teachers to teach bilingual children with SEN. This in turn poses “major challenges for policymakers, minority language immersion schools, and ITE [initial teacher education] providers, who share the responsibility for the preparation, recruitment and support of suitably qualified teachers for these schools” (Ó Grádaigh, 2015, p. 168). A challenge that has been identified in IM education is that of ‘providing well-trained and linguistically competent teachers is a central priority as they form the backbone of the immersion experience ... A more coherent and wide-ranging programme of training needs to be put in place at several third-level institutions’ (Ó Baoill, 2007, p. 423). Therefore, in relation to IM preschools, it has been suggested that there is a need for the development of a more structured pathway for IM preschool educators within initial undergraduate training programmes (Nig Uidhir, 2006).

Little research has been undertaken on the CPD needs of educators in IM preschools outside of the Gaeltacht, in particular around SEN. A survey by the DCEDIY (2023) sought to identify the CPD needs of educators in IM preschool settings, however, this survey did not relate specifically to special education. In the survey by the DCEDIY (2023, p.12), settings were asked to rank their opinions on the usefulness of communities of practice (To enhance the use of Irish in daily interactions with children, what Communities of Practice would you find most useful?). The findings suggest that in total, 18% of centre-based respondents overall (across both Gaeltacht and non-Gaeltacht areas) ranked communities of practice most useful in comparison to 16% of responses which stated they were least useful. In the open-ended questions, it was reported that the respondents are interested in having the opportunities to meet in person and online with other educators. The topics of interest identified were language acquisition, interactions in the Irish language, challenges and experiences with fluent Irish

speakers and an opportunity to share practice ideas. The value of developing communities of practice to support parents was also identified.

The survey also sought to address the question; “To enhance the use of Irish in daily interactions with children, what CPD Training Opportunities would you find most useful?” (DCEDIY, 2023, p.13). All the settings (Gaeltacht and outside of the Gaeltacht) reported that they would find CPD and training opportunities most useful, 28% of centre-based settings overall said they would be most useful, whereas 15% said they would be least useful. However, there were differing needs in relation to the educational contexts when these findings were analysed further. It was found that settings outside of the Gaeltacht ranked the need for more CPD and training opportunities as most useful (36%) compared to 1% of settings from the Gaeltacht areas. The CPD needs identified by the participants in the open-ended questions were (DCEDIY, p.13);

- (a) to have any CPD and training opportunities which are currently available in English to be made available also in Irish, most notably First 5 CPD courses, in addition to Lámh, Hanen, First Aid, and Manual Handling, and
- (b) Irish language courses at various levels, were suggested to include conversational Irish, Irish language classes for potential educators along with grammar lessons, and immersion in the Irish language.

Resources and Supports through the Medium of Irish

In the survey by the DCEDIY (2023) the IM settings were asked about the provision of Irish language resources. The question asked in the survey was, “To enhance the use of Irish in daily interactions with children, what Resources would you find most useful? Of the total responses (Gaeltacht and outside of the Gaeltacht) 39% of centre-based respondents said that resources would be most useful, whereas 14% said they would be least useful. However, there was a

difference in the responses from settings inside and outside of the Gaeltacht, for example, 14% of Gaeltacht settings rank resources as most useful whereas 49% of the settings outside of the Gaeltacht rank it as most useful. Open-ended responses revealed a strong desire among participants for the resources currently available on the First 5 website in English to also be accessible through Irish. Respondents identified a wide range of resource needs, including books, posters, common phrases with pronunciation guides, games, songs, rhymes, and flashcards, with an emphasis on providing these in multiple Irish dialects. Settings also highlighted the importance of resources designed specifically for parents, such as:

- Information packs containing Irish-language materials (books, posters, phrases, games, songs, rhymes, music, and CDs),
- Booklets explaining how children learn Irish,
- Guidance on language immersion,
- Irish language classes for parents, and
- Practical suggestions for using Irish at home with young children.

Under the category of “Other Supports”, many responses reiterated earlier themes, emphasising the need for community involvement and collaboration. Suggestions included:

- Visits from fluent Irish speakers,
- Mentorship from experienced facilitators,
- Events such as storytelling sessions and puppet shows, and
- Support for parents raising children through Irish, including language classes to help them expand their vocabulary.

Recruitment of educators with Irish language proficiency and training opportunities for educators wishing to work through the medium of Irish were recurring priorities. Suggestions also included providing in-service days to promote peer networking and accredited training courses delivered through Irish.

Importantly, a substantial number of respondents stressed the need to include parents when addressing support needs across Early Learning and Care, School-Age Childcare, and childminding services. The findings clearly indicate that the responsibility for promoting the Irish language does not rest solely with the early learning settings or childminders, it must also involve families and wider communities in a comprehensive and collaborative effort.

Impact of COVID on Children's Development

The COVID19 pandemic significantly disrupted early childhood education and care throughout the world. Preschool-aged children, being in a critical period of development, were particularly vulnerable to the effects of lockdowns, social distancing, and restricted access to settings. The social and emotional development of children is one area that was negatively impacted by the pandemic due to reduced peer interaction opportunities that can lead to delays in social skills development, such as turn-taking, empathy, and conflict resolution. Since the pandemic, many children showed increased shyness, anxiety, and clinginess upon returning to group settings. Studies show increases in emotional and behavioural difficulties, especially among children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Ng & Ng, 2021). There was also a negative impact on the development of some children's language and communication skills. Language development suffered due to limited verbal interaction with peers and educators, particularly for children in bilingual settings like IM preschools. A UK-based study found children had less vocabulary growth during the pandemic, especially in households where English was not the primary language (Education Endowment Fund, 2021). Interruptions to structured learning and reduced

exposure to play-based learning affected foundational skills in literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving. Furthermore, the research suggest that regression in attention span, memory, and executive functioning, as noted in reports by early years professionals (Barnett & Jung, 2021). Physical activity in children also declined due to restrictions on outdoor play and closure of play parks, contributing to delays in gross motor skills like coordination and balance, especially in urban areas without outdoor space (UNICEF, 2021). Inequalities were further exacerbated for children from lower-income families, as they were disproportionately affected due to less access to digital learning, fewer resources at home, and less parental time due to essential work roles. Vulnerable groups, such as children with SEN, often lost access to early interventions, further widening developmental gap (UNICEF, 2021).

Benefits of Bilingualism for Preschool Children

Bilingualism and immersion education in the preschool years offer a range of cognitive, linguistic, social, and cultural benefits. Young children are particularly well-suited to acquiring multiple languages due to the neuroplasticity of their developing brains, allowing them to build strong foundations in both languages through naturalistic, play-based learning (Petitto et al., 2001). Research shows that bilingual children often demonstrate enhanced metalinguistic awareness, problem-solving skills and cognitive flexibility, which are associated with improved executive functioning (Bialystok, 2009). For children in immersion education, particularly in minority language contexts such as Irish-medium settings, early exposure supports strong oral language development in the target language while maintaining or even enhancing performance in the majority language (Cummins, 2000; Ó Duibhir, 2018). Importantly, children with SEN are not disadvantaged by bilingualism; on the contrary, studies have shown that bilingual children with autism spectrum disorder, Down syndrome and language impairments can thrive in dual language environments without negative effects on language or cognitive outcomes (Hambly & Fombonne, 2012; Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2005;

Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2016). Bilingualism may also foster greater social inclusion, cultural identity, and family cohesion especially when the child's home language is supported (De Houwer, 2009). These findings underscore the value of supporting immersion and bilingual education from the earliest years for all children including those with SEN.

Misconceptions about Bilingualism

Despite a growing body of research supporting bilingualism for children with SEN, some professionals, including educational psychologists and speech and language therapists, have historically advised against it. Concerns often stem from the belief that bilingualism may confuse children or delay language development, particularly for autistic people, or people with language impairment or developmental delays. This caution is often based on outdated or monolingual-focused models of language acquisition. For example, Kay-Raining Bird et al. (2005) found that clinicians frequently recommended monolingualism for children with language impairments, despite evidence showing no disadvantage in bilingual exposure. Similarly, Yu (2013, 2016) highlighted that speech-language pathologists sometimes discourage bilingualism due to fears of overburdening the child's cognitive and linguistic processing. However, recent research contradicts these assumptions, showing that bilingual children with SEN can develop both languages successfully and may even experience social, cognitive, and cultural benefits (Hambly & Fombonne, 2012; Paradis, 2016). This disconnect between evidence and practice underscores the need for better training and updated guidelines for professionals working with bilingual children with SEN.

Chapter 3 Methodology

Introduction

This study incorporated a mixed methods approach, using an anonymous online questionnaire in stage one and focus group interviews in stage two. The research questions addressed by this study were:

- How do educators in IM preschools outside of the Gaeltacht meet the SEN of children in their setting?
- What are the prevalence and types of SEN in IM preschools outside of the Gaeltacht?
- What are the practices in place to meet the needs of all students in IM preschools outside of the Gaeltacht?
- What are the CPD needs of educators in IM preschools outside of the Gaeltacht in the areas of inclusion and special education?

Research Context

This study was undertaken to explore how IM preschools support inclusion, identify training needs, and manage the intersection of Irish language learning and special education. It draws on data collected from preschool educators working in IM settings across the country and seeks to highlight both the opportunities and the challenges they face. The research was conducted from January and March 2025. It focused on IM preschools that educate and care for children from the age of 2 years and 8 months to 5 years and 6 months. Importantly, this study was not conducted as an assessment or evaluation of Government services or public agencies. Instead, its focus is on the practices and perspectives of educators within IM preschool settings. By centring their voices and experiences, the report aims to contribute meaningfully to the ongoing development of inclusive, culturally and linguistically responsive early years education in Ireland. The research was conducted independently to capture the perspectives and experiences

of educators, with the goal of informing best practice, identifying areas of need, and contributing to the broader conversation around inclusion in minority language education. This distinction is important to ensure that findings are interpreted within the correct context, namely, an educational and linguistic lens, rather than a policy or service accountability framework.

Methodology

Stage One: Anonymous Online Questionnaire

Anonymous online questionnaires were completed by educators in IM preschools outside of the Gaeltacht in the Republic of Ireland. It is estimated that these questionnaires took 15-30 minutes to complete. The statistical data gathered was analysed using the data analysis package SPSS and the results of open-ended questions were interpreted through thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017). The questionnaire gathered data on the following topics:

- Background information (age range, position held etc.)
- The prevalence and types of SEN of the children attending IM preschools.
- The strategies in place by educators to identify children with SEN in these settings and to meet their needs.
- The challenges faced by IM preschools when identifying students with SEN and meeting their needs.
- The CPD requirements of IM early childhood educators in this area.

Stage 2: Focus Group and Individual Interviews

Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted with 15 educators from IM preschools outside of the Gaeltacht. These focus groups and interviews which were conducted in-person and online enabled the researcher to collect in-depth knowledge on the findings from the questionnaire stage, and they provided a context in terms of the needs of these educators around

SEN identification and intervention. Focus groups were chosen as a research method, as they will enable the researcher to gain a deeper understanding and clarity of information gathered in stage one (Gibbs, 1997, 2012; Krueger, 2014). This was important as to understand educational practices you need “the careful analysis of the social situation-the underlying social rules, the interpretation of the participants, the values and aims embedded within the practice” (Pring, 2000, p. 258). The rationale for undertaking in-person focus groups is that participants can interact with one another, building on each other's ideas, leading to more in-depth discussions and richer data (Guest et al., 2023). This interaction often brings out viewpoints and insights that may not emerge in one-on-one interviews. With multiple participants, focus groups allow for a broader range of opinions and experiences to be expressed, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the topic (Guest et al., 2023). Also, some participants may feel more comfortable speaking in a group setting, where they can bounce ideas off others rather than being the sole focus of attention in a one-on-one interview. Focus groups can be more time-efficient, as they allow you to gather data from multiple participants simultaneously, rather than conducting multiple individual interviews. This can be particularly beneficial when working with limited time or resources, this is particularly important for this study as there was only one researcher working on this project. The focus groups lasted one hour and were audio recorded on a password encrypted laptop and transcribed with the consent of participants.

Participant Recruitment

Stage One:

All IM preschools outside of the Gaeltacht were sent a plain language statement, informed consent form, and a link to the questionnaire via email by Gaeloideachas. In order to access the online questionnaire, all preschools provided electronic consent at the start of the online questionnaire. Those who did not provide consent were not allowed to access the questionnaire. A hard copy of the questionnaire and informed consent form were also posted to the preschools

along with a stamped addressed envelope. Anyone who wanted to complete the hard copy could do so and return the completed questionnaire and informed consent form to Gaeloideachas by post.

Stage Two:

At the end of the questionnaire in stage one, participants were asked whether they wished to participate in the focus group interviews. Those that were interested in participating in the interviews were asked to email the researcher expressing their interest and providing their contact details. They were then emailed the aims of the study which are outlined in the plain language letter and informed consent by the researcher. Those who decided to participate in the study were asked to sign the informed consent form and return it to the researcher before the interview took place. For this stage every attempt was made to include educators from a broad range of age groups, with varying levels of experience, and from different teaching roles within preschools.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were always to the forefront of this study. First and foremost, the following basic ethical principles applied to this research: commitment to the well-being, protection and safety of participants, a responsibility to conduct high-quality research, and a duty to respect the rights and wishes of those involved. With this in mind, no aspect of the study was completed by any participant without the researcher receiving their signed informed consent. All participants were given a plain language statement letter and an informed consent. The information provided on the forms was explained in an open discussion with all participants before the focus groups commenced, and they were encouraged to ask questions they may have about the study. All participants were given sufficient time to process the information about the study and were not pressured or expected to sign the forms immediately. All participants had the freedom to withdraw from the study at any stage, as outlined in the

plain language statements and informed consent forms. The researcher engaged with the participants during the focus groups and gave them the opportunity to check their responses (member checking) if they wished.

Limitations

This study, while offering valuable insights into SEN provision in IM preschools outside the Gaeltacht, is subject to several limitations. Firstly, the geographic representation of participants was uneven, with no responses from Ulster and limited input from Connaught, which may affect the generalisability of the findings across all regions of Ireland. Secondly, the sample size, particularly for the qualitative phase (15 participants across 11 settings) was relatively small due to the limited number of IM preschools outside of the Gaeltacht. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data through questionnaires and interviews, which may be influenced by personal bias or varying interpretations of key terms such as “SEN.” Another limitation lies in the absence of parental voices, which would have provided a broader perspective on inclusion and transitions to primary school. Furthermore, while the study identifies significant challenges in accessing services through Irish, it does not include direct input from professionals such as speech and language therapists or educational psychologists whose perspectives could offer further depth. Finally, the research was conducted by a single researcher, which may have limited the scope for triangulation and broader analysis.

Conclusion

This section reviewed the methodology and ethical considerations of the present study along with the strategies used for participant recruitment, ethical considerations and the limitations of the study. In the next chapter, the research findings are presented.

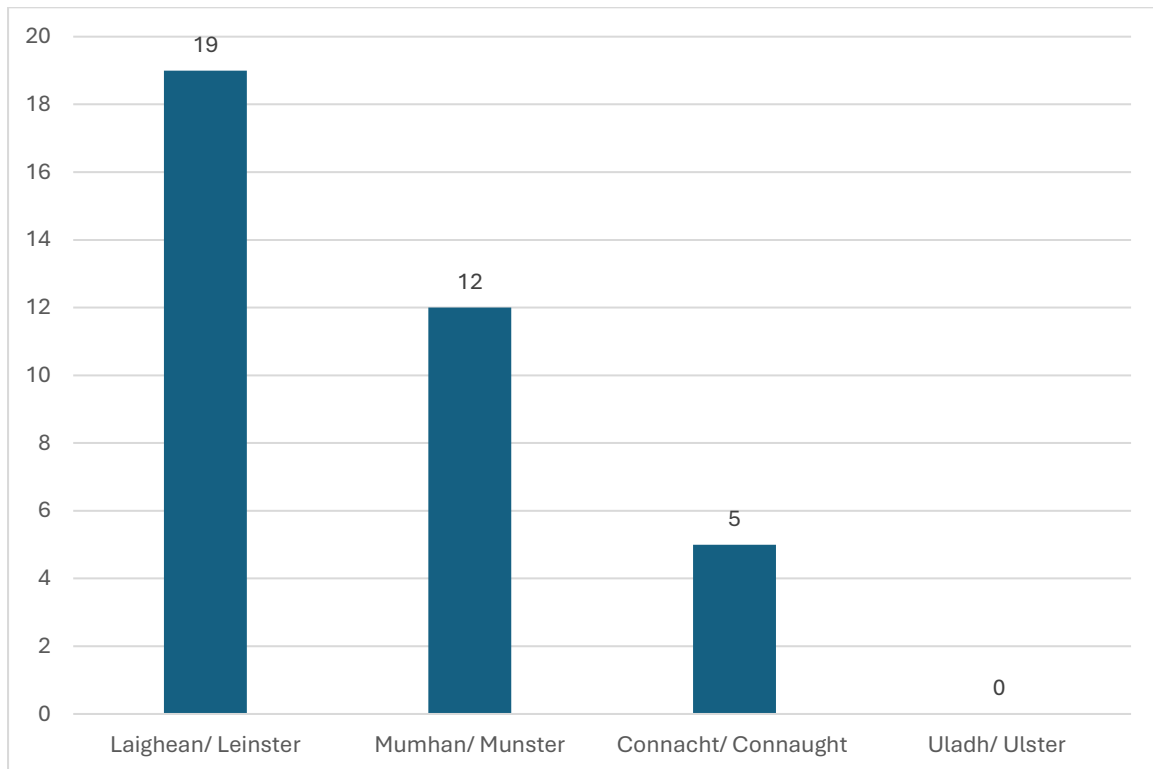
Chapter 4: Findings

Questionnaire Participant Profiles

IM Preschool Locations

Of those who completed the survey, 19 (51.35%) of the settings were in Leinster, 12 (32.43%) were in Munster and 5 (13.51%) were located in Connaught. No IM preschool from the province of Ulster participated in the study (see Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1. *The locations of the IM preschools who completed the survey.*



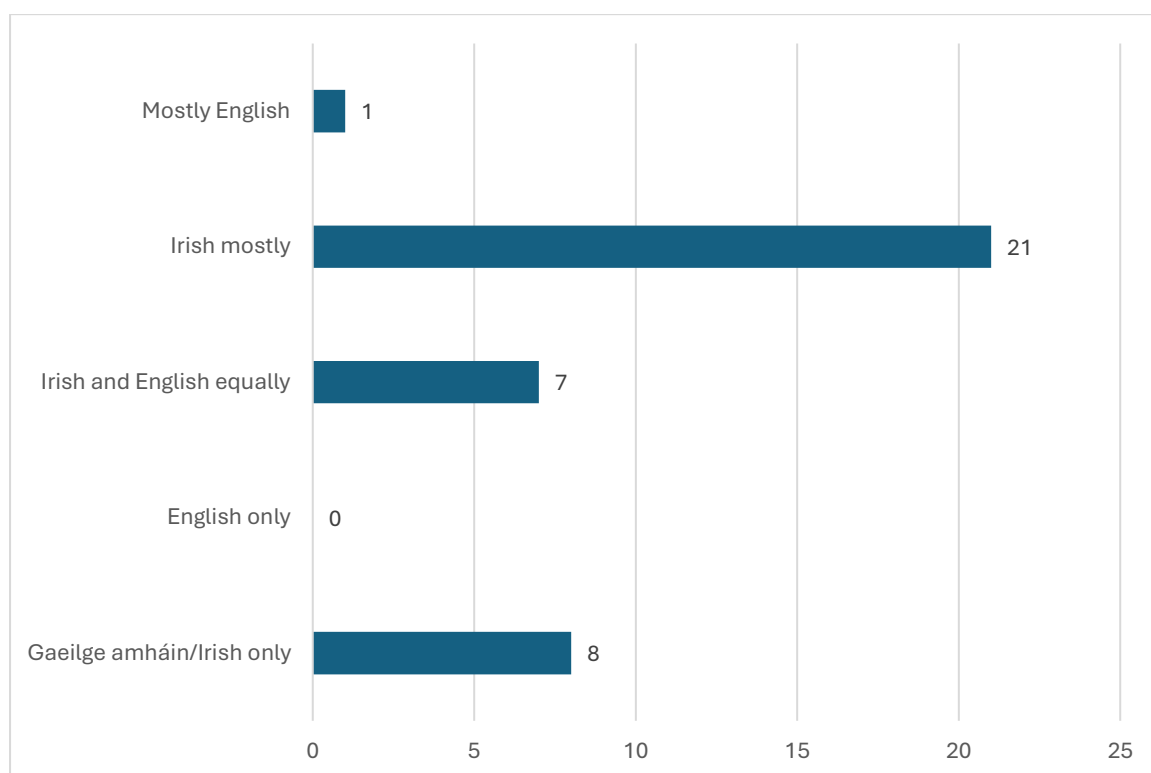
Type of Service Provided

Almost all of the settings that undertook the survey (84%, n=31) operated a sessional service. Only one service offered a full day service, and the remaining five settings offered a half day/part-day service.

Language of Instruction in the Settings

Over half of the settings (n=21, 58%) used mostly Irish as the language of instruction and communication in their setting (see Figure 4.2). Eight of the participants (21.62%) used Irish exclusively in their setting. Only one setting (2.7%) used mostly English and the remaining settings (n=7, 19%) stated that they used English and Irish equally.

Figure 4.2. *The language of instruction and communication used in the IM preschools.*

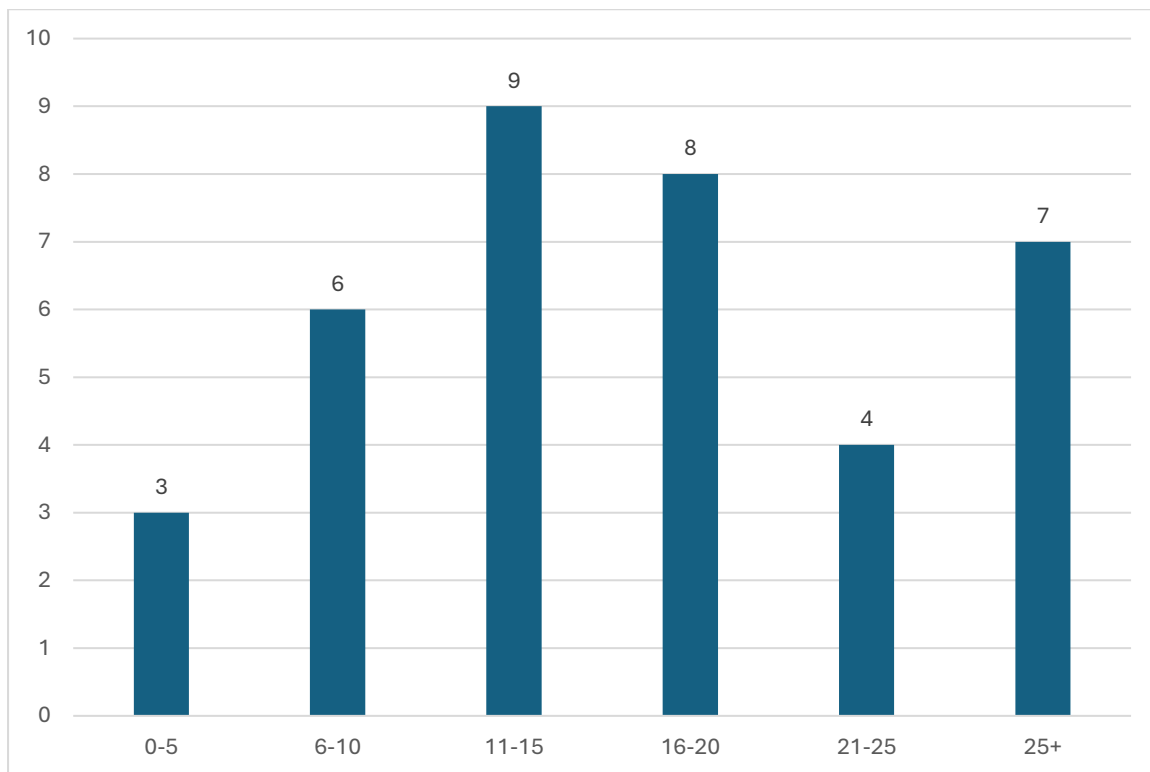


Participant Roles and Experience

Participants were asked what their role was in their setting. Most of the participants (59%, n=22) held the role of manager and 30% (n=11) were owners of the IM preschool. The remaining participants were directors (27%, n=10) or educators (16%, n=6). Those who undertook the survey on behalf of their setting were also asked how many years they have spent working in an IM preschool. Over half of the participants (51.35%, n=19) said they had been working in an IM preschool for more than 16 years (see Figure 4.3). Three participants (8.1%)

had worked in an IM preschool for five years or less, six (16.21%) had worked for between six and ten years and nine (24.32%) had worked for between 11 and 15 years in an IM preschool.

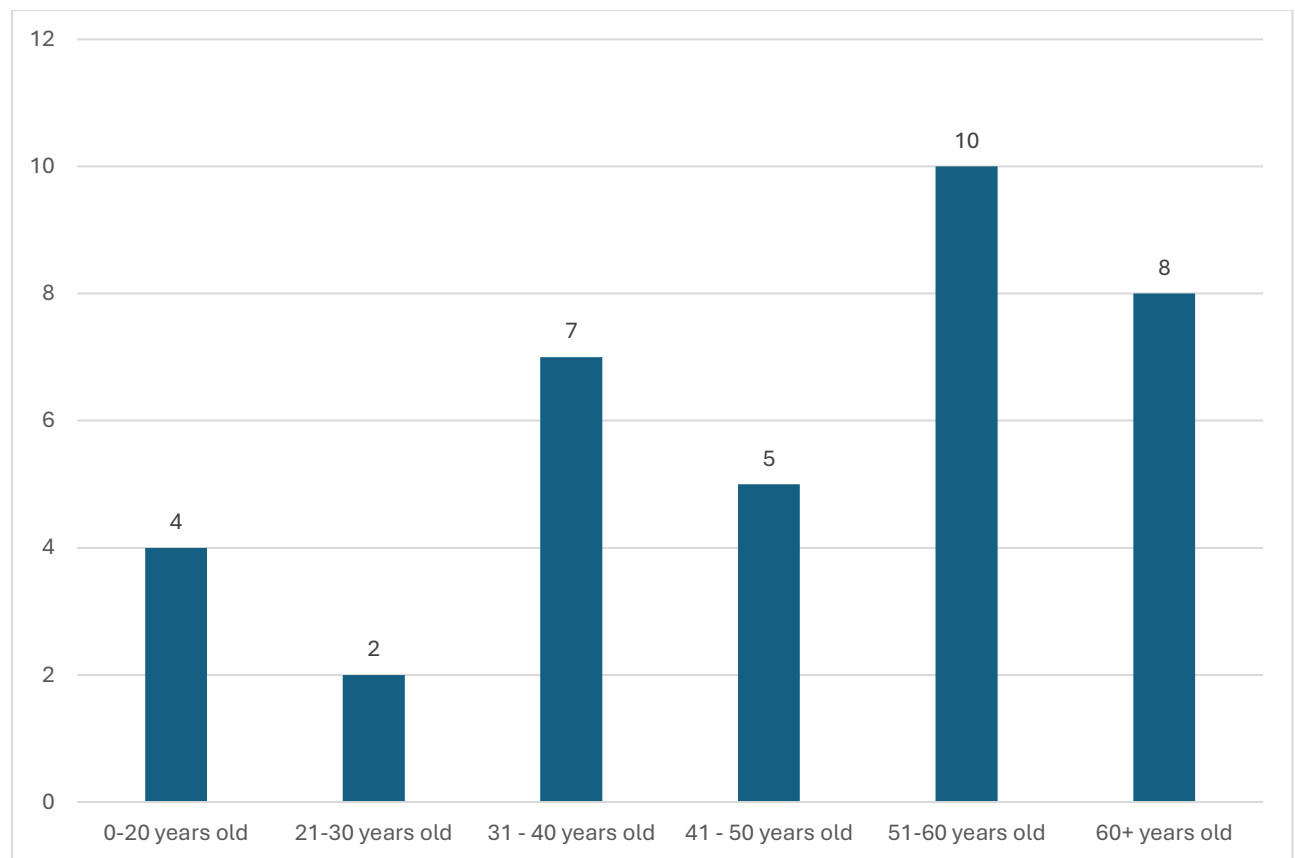
Figure 4.3. *The number of years participants who completed the survey had worked in an IM preschool.*



Age Range

Most of the participants (n=18, 48.6%) were aged over 51 years of age (see Figure 4.4). There were only four participants who were less than 20 years old and two aged 21-30 years old. The remaining participants were aged 31-40 years old (n=7, 19%) and 41-50 years old (n=5, 13.51%). The findings show that 62% (n=23) of those who answered the survey on behalf of their setting were ages 41 years old or older.

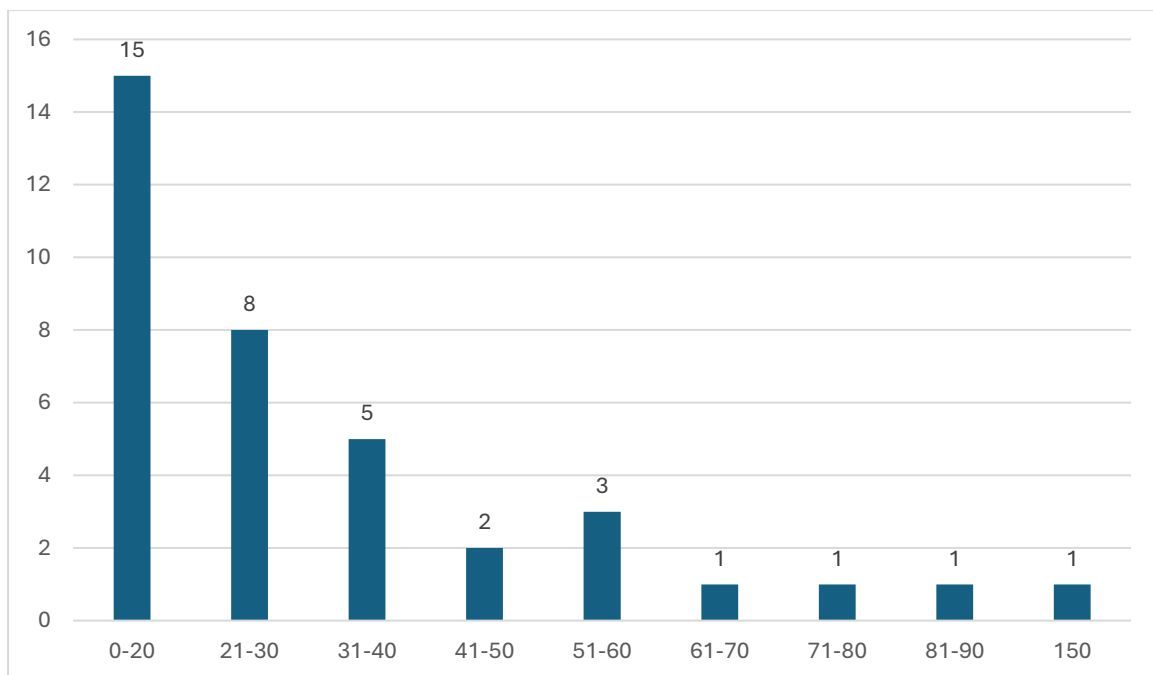
Figure 4.4. *The age range of those who completed the survey on behalf of their setting.*



Number of Children Enrolled in IM Preschools

In total there were 1,275 children enrolled in the IM preschools that took part in the survey stage of the study. However, the settings were of different sizes with the largest setting having 150 children enrolled and the smallest having 11 children enrolled (see Figure 4.5). Most of the settings (41%, n=15) had 20 or less children enrolled. A fifth (22%, n=8) had between 21 and 30 children enrolled. The remaining participants worked in an IM preschool with 31-40 children enrolled (14%, n=5), 41-50 children enrolled (5.4%, n=2), and 51-60 children enrolled (8%, n=3). There was one setting with 61-70 children, one with 71-80 children, one with 81-90 children and one with 150 children enrolled.

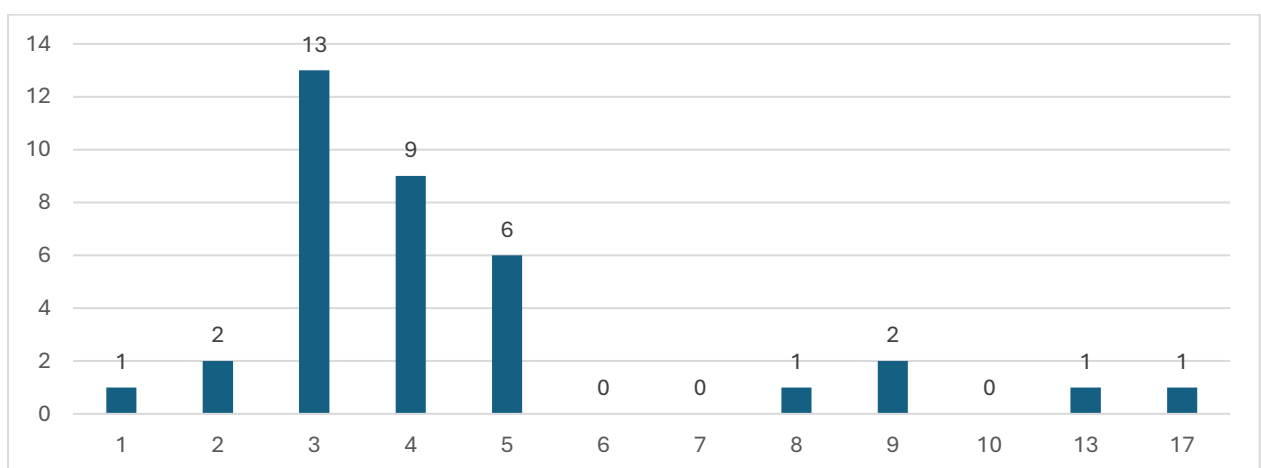
Figure 4.5. *The number of children enrolled in the IM preschools surveyed.*



The Number of Early years Educators in the IM Preschools

Of those who completed the survey, 36 participants provided information on the number of educators employed in their setting (see Figure 4.6). The highest number of educators employed in a setting was 17 and the lowest number employed was one. Most settings (36%, n=13) had three educators, a quarter (n=9, 25%) had four and 17% (n=6) had five.

Figure 4.6. *The number of educators employed in the IM preschools surveyed.*



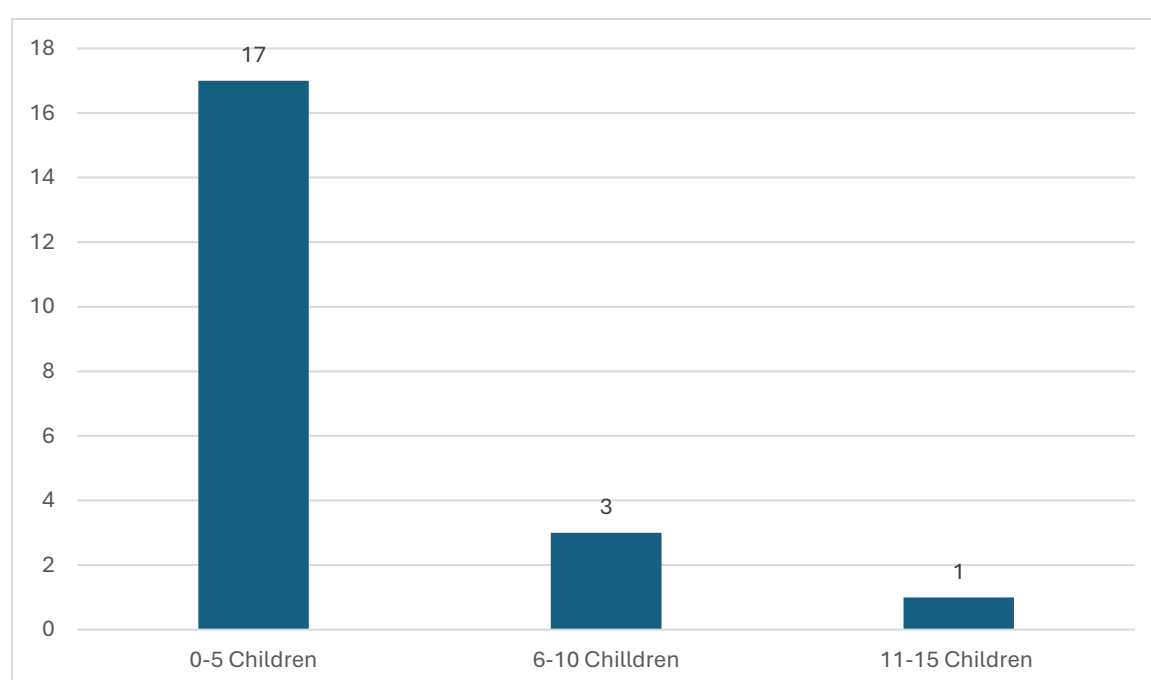
Questionnaire Results

Number of Children with an Official Diagnosis of SEN

Of those who completed the survey, 21 (57%) preschools had children with an official diagnosis of SEN enrolled. In total there were 70 children with an official diagnosis in the IM preschools that completed the survey. This equates to 5.49% of the total enrolment (N=1,275) of the settings that participated in the survey having an official diagnosis of SEN. Information was not provided on whether the assessments of SEN occurred before the children entered the IM preschools or if they happened when the children were enrolled in the settings. This figure is similar to that of 5% as estimated for children attending an IM preschool in Northern Ireland (Ní Chinnéide, 2009).

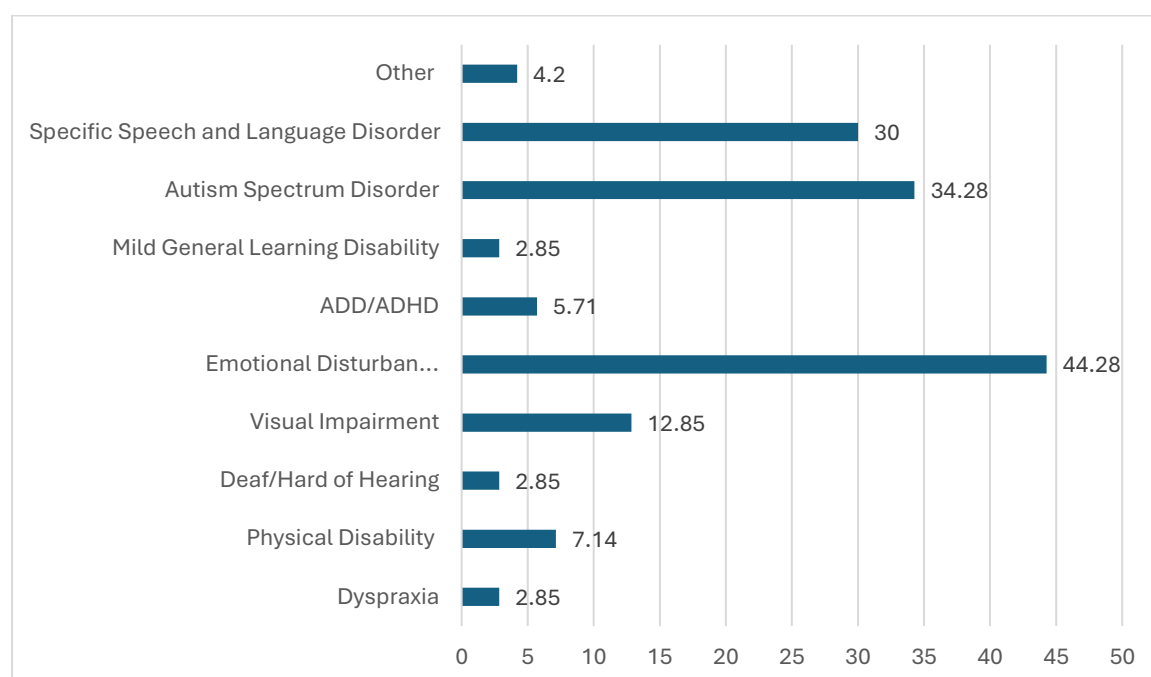
When this is analysed by the number of children with an official diagnosis of SEN per setting (see Figure 4.7), most (46%, n=17) settings had less than five children with an official diagnosis enrolled. Three settings (8.1%) had between 6 and 10 children with an official diagnosis and only one had 14 children with an official diagnosis.

Figure 4.7. *The number of children with an official diagnosis attending an IM preschool.*



The prevalence and types of SEN diagnosis were also analysed (see Figure 4.8). The most prevalent category of SEN was emotional and behavioural difficulties with 44.2% of those with a diagnosis of SEN presenting with these difficulties. The second most prevalent category was autism and the third was specific speech and language disorders/developmental language delay.

Figure 4.8. *The most prevalent categories (%) of officially diagnosed SEN in IM preschools.*

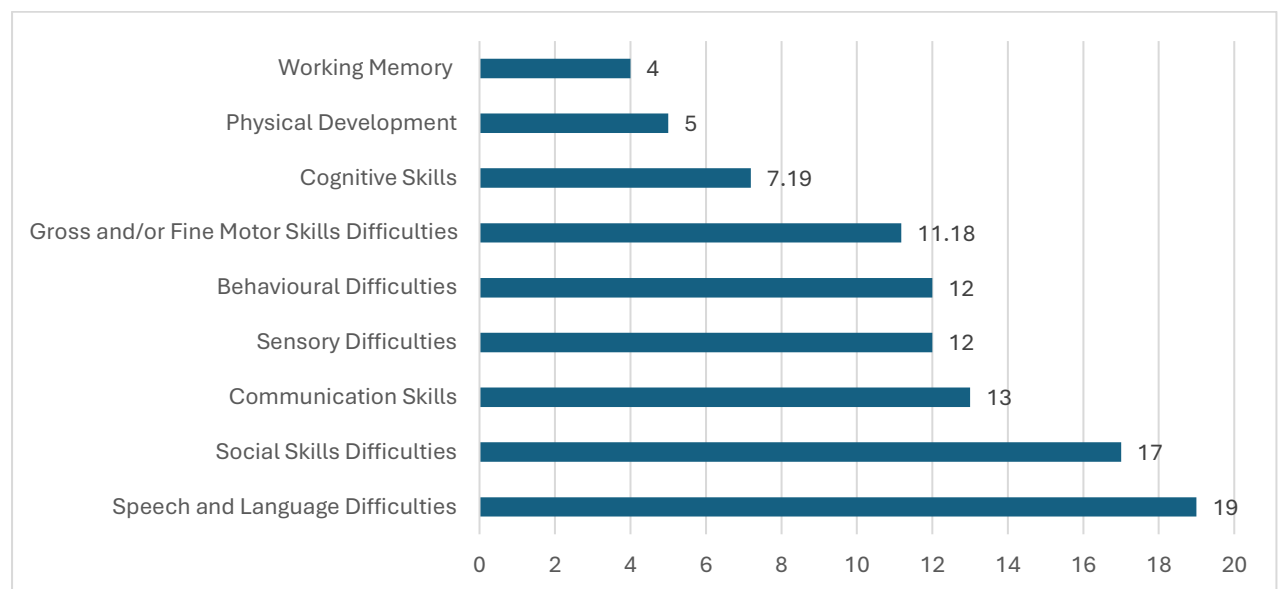


Children with SEN without a Diagnosis

Within the survey participants were asked, in their opinion, what the SEN of children without an official diagnosis in their settings are. This question is important as there are many instances where assessment services are unavailable to children of this age due to long waiting lists or due to their young age (Ombudsman for Children, 2020, 2022). Figure 4.9 below provides a breakdown of the areas in which children without an official diagnosis are presenting with additional needs. In total there were 778 children identified in the categories below with SEN but without a formal diagnosis. It is important to be mindful when analysing this figure that it does not consider children presenting with more than one difficulty, therefore, no accurate

estimate of prevalence can be provided for those without an official diagnosis. However, the most prevalent area of difficulty is speech and language difficulties (n=153, 19%). Difficulties² with social skills is the second most prevalent category at 17% (n=130). Communication skills (n=99, 13%), sensory difficulties (n=95, 12%) and behavioural difficulties (n=90, 12%) were also listed in the top five most prevalent categories. The least prevalent categories were physical development (n=38, 5%) and working memory (n=30, 4%).

Figure 4.9. *The percentage of children presenting with undiagnosed difficulties in various areas.*



Challenges faced by IM Preschools

In the survey, the participants were asked about the challenges their IM preschool faced when meeting the SEN of children. This dataset examines various challenges in education, particularly in an Irish-language setting, and their perceived severity based on mean scores initially. Following on from this, a breakdown by category is provided. The key observations are as follows:

² Please see Appendix B for rationale on the terminology used.

The biggest challenges (Highest Mean Scores) faced by settings are:

- a) Lack of time (*Mean: 3.55, SD: 0.50, 117 responses*): This was identified as the most significant issue, indicating that time constraints are a widespread concern.
- b) Class size (*Mean: 3.51, SD: 0.69, 123 responses*): Large class sizes are a notable challenge for all those who completed the survey.
- c) Lack of Irish language resources (*Mean: 3.23, SD: 0.83, 113 responses*): This finding highlights a gap in educational materials available through Irish.
- d) Lack of professional development in special education (*Mean: 3.17, SD: 0.70, 111 responses*): It is clear that many educators feel they need further training in this area. The need for more professional development is further discussed below.
- e) Planning for special education (*Mean: 3.14, SD: 0.71, 113 responses*): This is also a key issue affecting special education provision in IM preschools and it is thought that this factor relates to a lack of time as identified above.

The moderate challenges (Mid-range Mean Scores) faced by settings are:

- a) Lack of Irish-language assessments (*Mean: 3.19, SD: 0.85, 102 responses*): This finding suggests a difficulty in assessing students due to a lack of resources available through Irish.
- b) Lack of support from external services through Irish (*Mean: 3.12, SD: 0.95, 103 responses*): This finding suggests that professionals like speech therapists or educational psychologists may not be providing their services through Irish

which is the day-to-day language of communication and instruction in many IM preschools.

- c) Premises and school resources (*Mean: 3.03, SD: 0.98, 103 responses*): This indicates concerns about infrastructure and school facilities, which can impact on the settings ability to implement inclusive practices to meet the needs of all children.

The lesser challenges (Lower Mean Scores) experienced by the settings were:

- a) Lack of support from home (*Mean: 2.74, SD: 0.97, 96 responses*); This factor could relate to parental constraints such as limited time, work commitments, or lack of Irish at home. While it has been identified as an issue, it is rated lower compared to other factors.
- b) Differentiation (adapting lessons for different student needs) (*Mean: 2.59, SD: 0.74, 83 responses*): This was rated the lowest challenge among the factors presented to the participants and suggests that the Aistear curriculum is one of an inclusive nature.

In summary, the lack of time and large class sizes are the most pressing concerns and challenges for IM preschool educators. Resource and support gaps in the Irish language (materials, assessments, external services) are significant barriers for the inclusion of all students. IM preschool educators feel a strong need for more professional development and structured planning for special education, however the need for more time to complete these activities may also be a challenge. It is clear that parental support and differentiation, while challenges, are less pressing than logistical and resource-based issues.

Breakdown of Challenges by Categories

Class Size

Participants were asked to how challenging the issue of class size was in their setting. This question was answered by 35 participants. Class size was reported as very challenging for over half of the participants who answered this question in the survey (60%, n=21). A further 34% (n=12) stated that this aspect was challenging. The remaining participants (n=2) either found this aspect somewhat challenging (n=1) or not a challenge at all (n=1). This relates to the ratio of educators to students in terms of implementing inclusive education and meeting the needs of all children.

Lack of Support from Home

Participants were asked to rate how challenging the lack of support in the home was for meeting the needs of all children in their setting. There was a mixed response to this question, with 35 participants completing the question. Most of the participants found this aspect somewhat challenging (34%, n=12). Just over a quarter of participants (26%, n =9) found it very challenging whilst only 11% (n=4) did not find this a challenge at all.

Differentiation of Curriculum

Differentiation of activities for the inclusion of all children was challenging for 60% (n=12) of the participants (N=35) who answered this question. Only one participant found this aspect to be very challenging, and four participants (11%) found it not to be a challenge at all.

Lack of Time

A lack of time to meet the needs of children due to factors such as large class sizes and additional administrative work was deemed as very challenging (n=18, 55%) or challenging (n=15, 45%) by all 33 participants to this question.

Lack of Irish Language Resources

The lack of Irish language resources was identified as very challenging by almost half of those who answered this question (n=16, 45%). A further 34% (n=12) found this aspect to be challenging or somewhat challenging (n=6, 17%).

Lack of support from external services through Irish (e.g., educational psychologist/SLT/OT)

Access to external services provided through the medium of Irish was deemed as challenging at some level by almost all participants who answered this question (n=31, 94%). Almost half (n=15, 45%) found the lack of availability of services through Irish as very challenging. Over a quarter (n=9, 27%) found it challenging and 21% (n=7) identified this aspect as somewhat challenging. Only two participants did not find this lack of support challenging.

Premises and School Resources

Access to an appropriate premises and school resources is fundamental for the inclusion of all students. Most of the participants who responded to this question (n=31, 91%) found this aspect challenging at some level. It was identified as very challenging by 41% (n=14) of participants and challenging by a further 29% (n=10). Of the remaining participants 21% found the aspect somewhat challenging and only three participants (9%) did not find it a challenge at all.

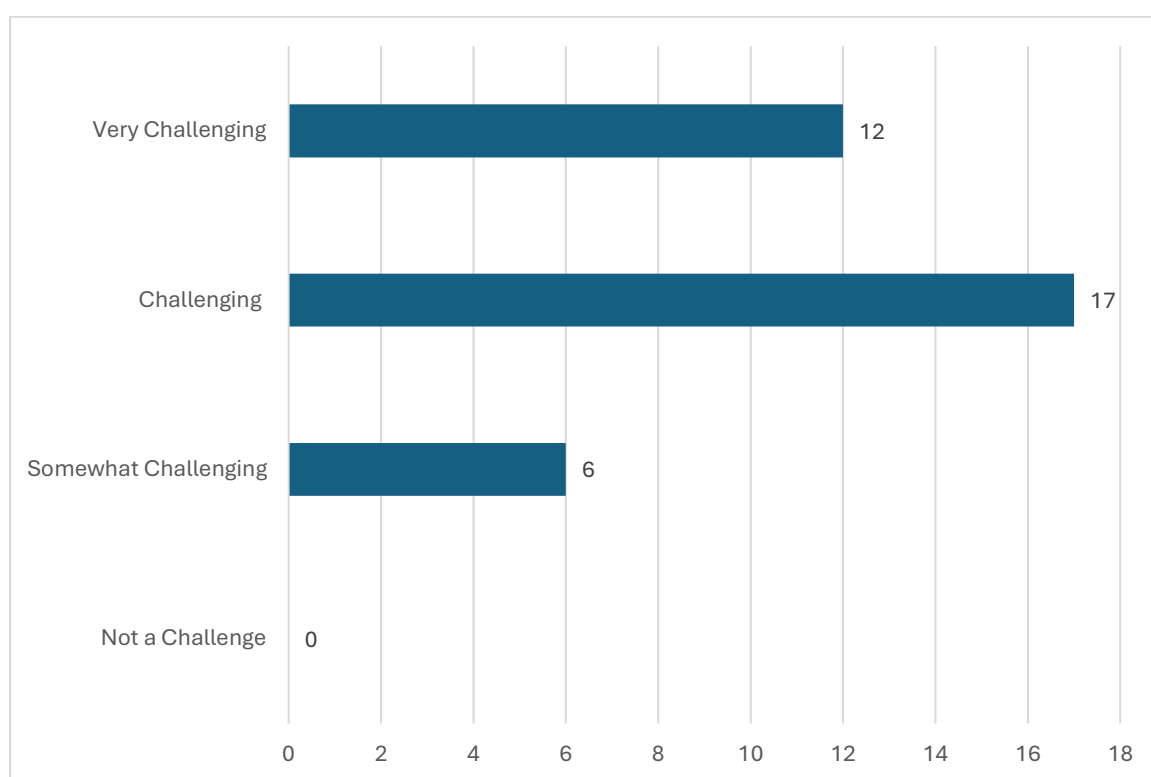
Planning for Special Education Provision

Planning for special education provision was deemed as challenging at some level for all the participants that responded to this question (N=36). Almost half of the participants (n=17, 47%) cited that this aspect was challenging. A third of the participants (n=12, 33%) found this to be very challenging and the remaining participants (n=7, 19%) found this to be somewhat challenging.

Continuous Professional Development (CPD) in Special Education

Accessing professional development in special education and inclusion was challenging on some level for all the respondents to this question (N=35) (see Figure 4.10). Almost half found that accessing this form of education was challenging (n=17, 49%) and a further 34% (n=12) found it to be very challenging. The remaining participants (n=6, 17%) found it to be somewhat challenging.

Figure 4.10. *The challenge of accessing CPD in special education.*



The areas in which educators wanted more professional development in inclusion and special education for IM preschools were also identified. Survey participants were asked to rank several options in terms of how important further professional development is for them in this area. The topics identified in order of preference are:

- (1) *Bilingualism and Second Language Learning* (205)
- (2) *Well-being* (195)

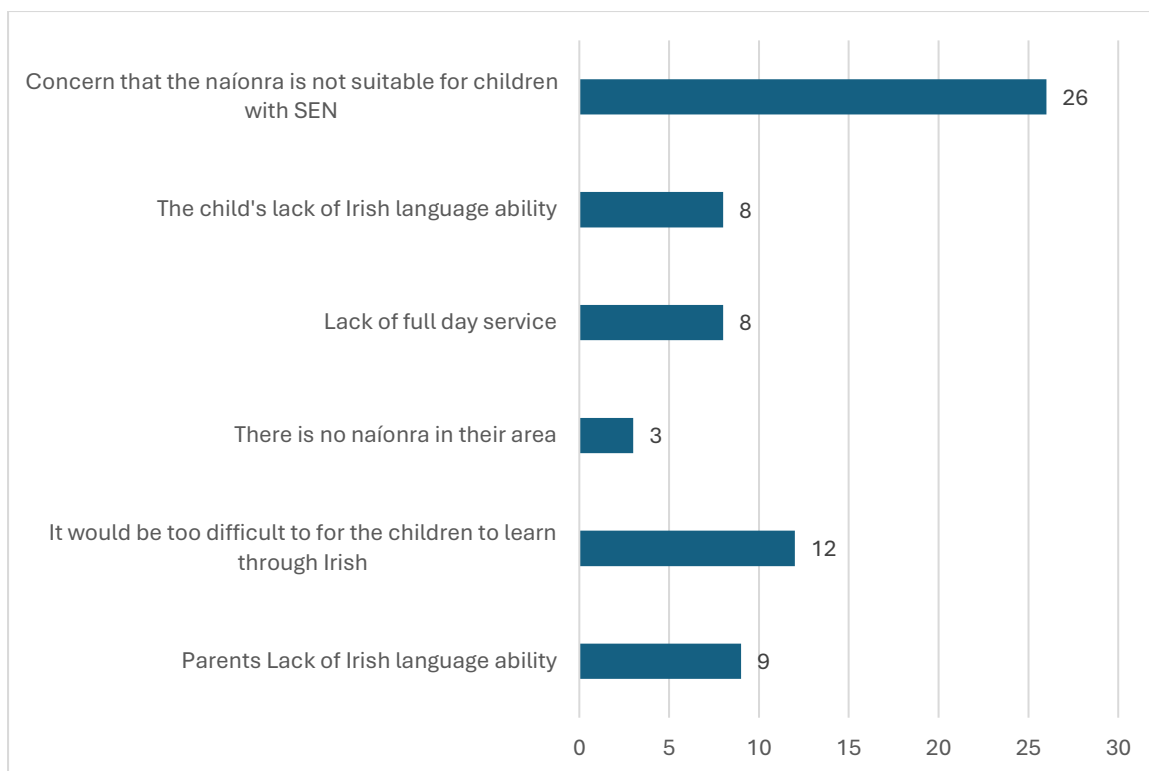
- (3) *Social Skills* (190)
- (4) *Assessment* (184)
- (5) *Language and Communication* (178)
- (6) *Sensory Processing* (147)
- (7) *Identifying Students with Additional Needs* (131)
- (8) *Challenging Behaviour* (133)
- (9) *Autism* (106)

In the other category, participants said that they wanted to learn more about how to speak to parents about the difficulties that their child experiences and putting them forward for assessment. One participant stated that personal and professional development was essential for all the educators in the IM preschool and one participant wanted to learn more about Irish language resources and the translation of resources.

Challenges faced by Parents

Participants were asked what, in their opinion, were the challenges parents of children with SEN faced when sending their child to an IM preschool (see Figure 4.11). The most referenced challenge (n=26, 70.3%) was parental concern that an IM preschool was not a suitable choice for their child. Over a quarter (n=12, 32.43%) felt that parents were worried that learning through Irish would be too difficult for their child with SEN. Parents' lack of Irish language ability was cited as a challenge by almost a quarter of participants (n=9, 24.3%). The lack of a full day service through Irish was also cited by participants (n=8, 21.6%). The lack of children's Irish language proficiency ability was viewed as a challenge by over a fifth of participants (n=8, 21.6%).

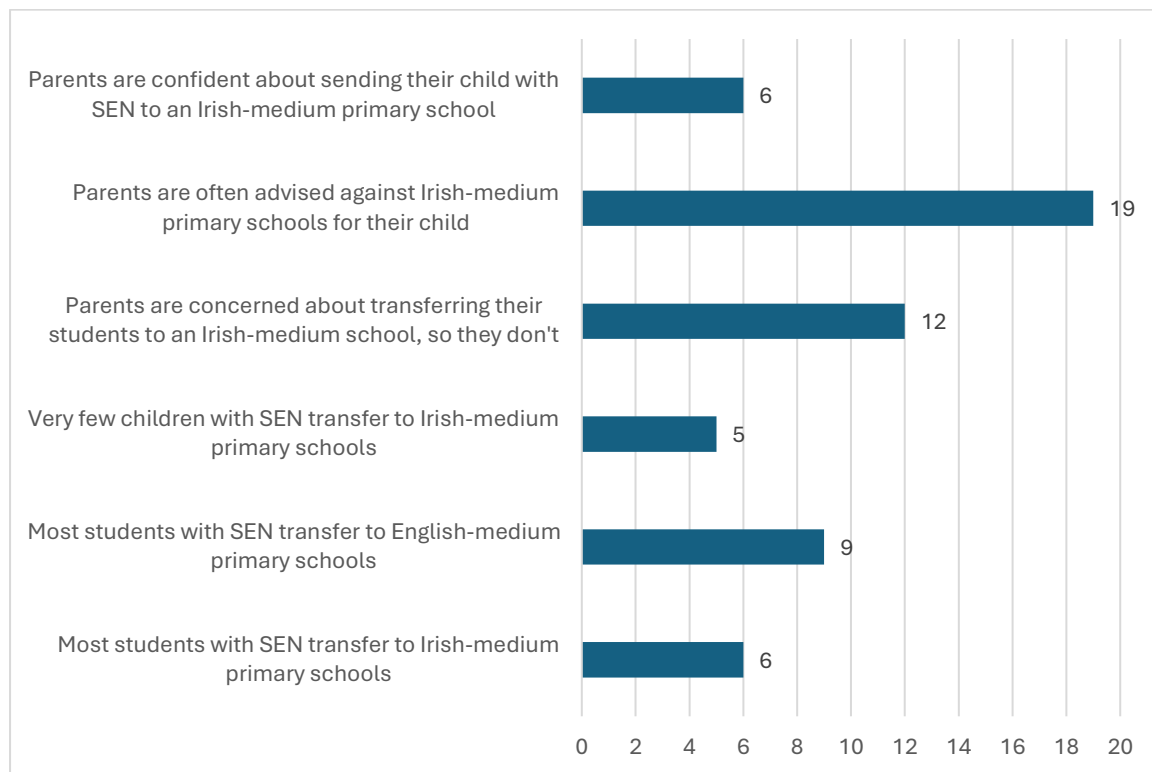
Figure 4.11. *The challenges faced by parents of children with SEN when accessing naíonra education for their child.*



Transfer to Irish-medium (IM) Primary Schools

Participants were asked about their experiences of children with SEN transitioning from IM preschools to IM primary schools (see Figure 4.12). Over half (51%, n=9) of the participants stated how parents were often advised against IM primary education for their child with SEN. Almost a third (32%, n=12), said that parents are concerned about transferring their child to an IM primary school, so they often decide against their child continuing in IM education. Only 16% (n=6) said that most children with SEN transfer to IM primary schools. The same amount stated that parents are confident about sending their child with SEN to an IM primary school. Almost a quarter (24%, n=9) of participants said that most children with SEN transfer to an English-medium school.

Figure 4.12. *Participants' experiences of children with SEN transferring to IM primary schools.*



Early Years Educator Confidence

Participants were asked to self-rate their level of confidence and ability to identify SEN and discuss this topic with parents. Each individual category is discussed below; however, a broader overview is provided in this section.

- Confidence in identifying children with SEN (Mean 1.57): Responses to this question were relatively consistent (SD 0.68) and findings indicate that most participants feel fairly confident in this area.
- Confidence in discussing a child's additional needs with parents (Mean 1.75): There was slightly more variation in the response to this question (SD 0.83). Responses suggest that a significant number of IM preschool educators engage in these discussions but may experience some uncertainty when doing so.

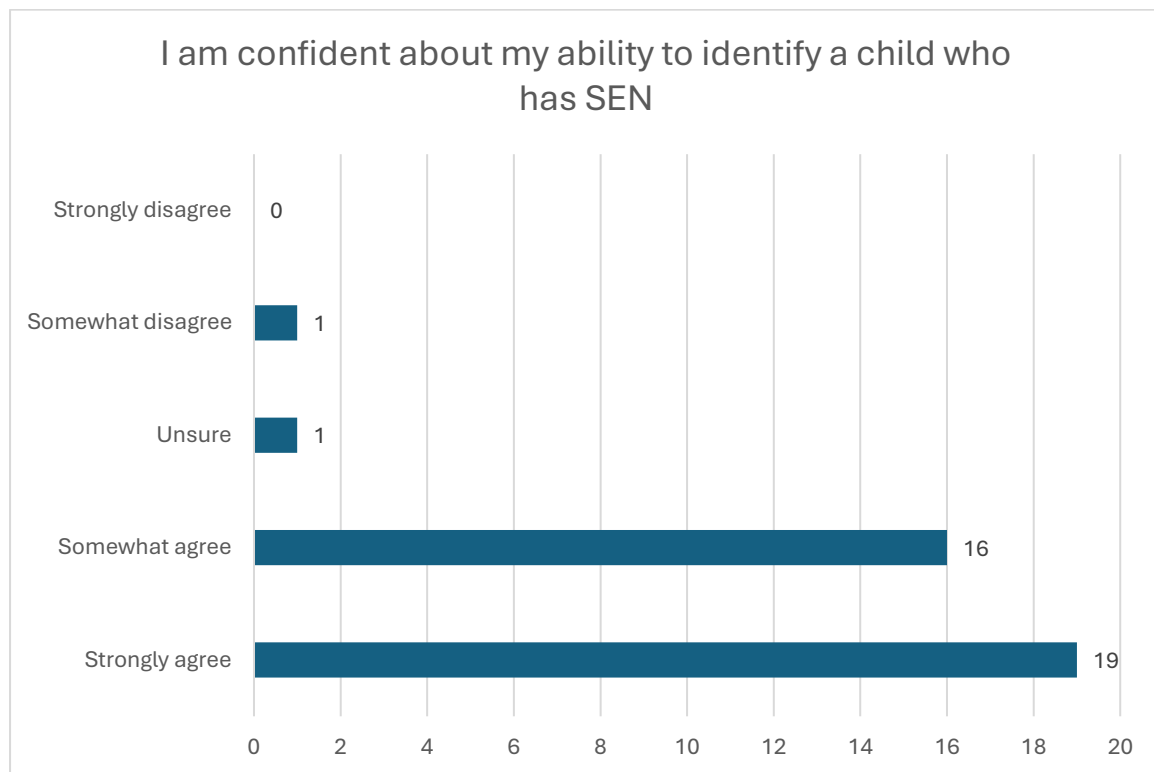
- Difficulty in discussing SEN with parents (Mean: 2.54): A moderate level of difficulty was reported by participants in this area (SD 1.18); however, responses did vary throughout the sample. Nevertheless, it did receive the highest number of responses and thus, this suggests that it is a notable challenge for participants.
- Need for more education/training to identify SEN (Mean: 2.22): Many participants feel they need additional training in inclusion and special education (SD 1.30), with a strong demand for further professional development.
- Need for more education/training to feel confident discussing SEN with parents (Mean: 2.31): Many participants are seeking more training in this area to help them feel more comfortable and confident, however, there was some variability in confidence levels (SD 1.17). Nevertheless, the responses show consistent concern about this topic.

Overall, most participants feel somewhat confident identifying SEN but lack confidence in discussing this issue with parents. There is a strong need for additional training, especially in discussing SEN with parents. Many find discussions with parents difficult, highlighting an area in need of professional development. The variation in responses suggests different levels of experience and training among participants.

Identifying Special Educational Needs

In the survey, participants (N=37) were asked to rate how confident they feel about their ability to identify children with SEN (see Figure 4.13). They were given a Likert scale to rate the following statement, 'I am confident about my ability to identify a child who has SEN'. Most of the participants (n=19, 51%) strongly agreed that they were confident in this area and a further 43% (n=16) said that they somewhat agreed with the statement. Only one participant was unsure, and a further participant somewhat disagreed with the statement.

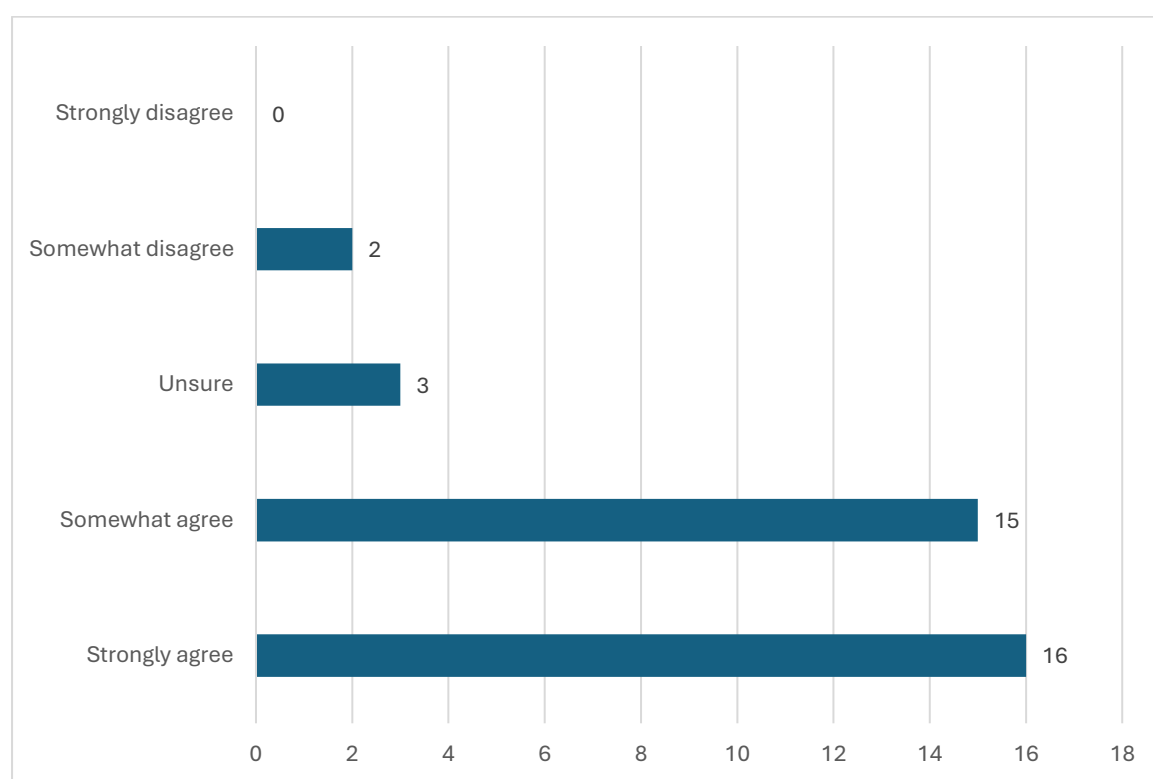
Figure 4.13. *Participants self-rated confidence levels of their ability to identify a child who has SEN.*



Dealing with Parents

The participants were asked to rate how confident they are when discussing the additional educational needs of a child with a parent (see Figure 4.14). Almost half (43%, n=16) of participants stated that they strongly agree with the statement, 'I am confident when discussing the additional needs of a child with a parent'. A further 41% (n=15) stated that they somewhat agree with this statement. This means that 84% of participants felt confident or fairly confident in this area. Only 8% (n=3) were unsure about their ability and 5% (n=2) somewhat disagreed with this statement.

Figure 4.14. *Participants' perceptions of their confidence when discussing a child's additional needs with parents.*



Early years Educator Recruitment/AIM Programme

While an evaluation of the AIM programme was not the focus of the study, it was deemed valuable to invite participants to share their experience of how the programme is implemented in their setting. To this end, participants were asked an open-ended question in the survey on their experience of accessing supports through the AIM programme. Several common themes emerged as outlined in Table 4.1 below. The data reflects a variety of perspectives and challenges reported by early years settings in implementing the AIM programme. The researcher acknowledges that some of the responses do not specifically relate to the AIM programme, nonetheless, they are captured as lived experiences of participants and they are also the responses provided to the open-ended question on AIM.

- The most frequently cited challenge was “Hiring early years educators with Irish” (13 mentions), indicating a significant shortage of qualified Irish-speaking personnel to support inclusion. A related concern is “No staff available to work with children” (n=5), further highlighting general recruitment difficulties, particularly for roles requiring Irish fluency.
- 8 responses noted that the challenge of meeting children’s needs in the IM preschool setting, citing both issues of staffing numbers and lack of training for the workers to help them meet the needs of children.
- Some participants called for the needs of the whole class to be assessed (n=7), pointing to a possible misalignment between individual and group needs. Pay (n=4) was also raised as a challenge, possibly reflecting difficulty in retaining skilled AIM early years educators due to low wages. “Too long to access supports / challenge of paperwork” (4) and “Lack of funding” (3) were also reported highlighting concerns with the bureaucratic and financial aspects of the programme.
- Participants identified a need for more CPD (n=4) and greater input from qualified professionals (n=4), suggesting a demand for ongoing, expert-led training and guidance.
- Parental buy-in (n=3) was identified as a theme, showing the need for stronger communication and collaboration with families to support inclusion

Table 4.1. The theme identified in relation to the implementation of the AIM programme.	
Hiring educators proficient in Irish	13
No educators available to work with children	5
AIM early years educators not sufficient to meet children's needs (NUMBERS AND TRAINING in Immersion education/Irish)	8
No Collaboration between Preschool/Primary School	1
Needs of whole class should be assessed	1
Too long to access supports/Challenge of Paperwork	4
Lack of Funding	3
AIM as a Positive Aspect	1
More CPD	4
Parent Buy-in	3
Pay	4
Need for input from qualified professionals	4

Focus Group and Interview Results

Participant Backgrounds

Due to the small sample size available of IM preschool settings, a brief and limited overview of the participants backgrounds will be provided to maintain their anonymity. There were 15 participants who took part in this stage from 11 different IM preschools located in Leinster and Munster, there were no participants from settings in Ulster or Connaught even though all settings were contacted and invited to participate. The size of the settings ranged from having one session to having multiple sessions daily. All the participants worked in sessional settings. Participants had a range of teaching experience working in an IM preschool from a few years to up to 40 years. The language used in the settings that participated in the study was either entirely Irish or a mix of both Irish and English. For the direct quotes that are provided in the findings section, the Irish text has been directly transcribed and not grammatically corrected.

SEN of the Children Enrolled

Challenging Behaviour

The participants were asked about the SEN that the children in their settings presented with. Nine of the participants spoke about how there were children enrolled in their settings who exhibit emotional and behavioural difficulties. However, many participants spoke about being unsure as to whether the behavioural difficulties were due to the SEN of the child or other factors.

Ní féidir leat saghas an lipéad sin a chur ar gach páiste atá saghas ag dreapadóireacht timpeall an seomra agus ag rith agus ag rásaíochta agus a leithéid.

You can't kind of put that label on every kid who's kind of climbing around the room and running and racing and stuff.

Agallamh 10

This point was reinforced by another participant who spoke about how the behaviour of children was becoming more challenging year by year.

*Tá sé an deacair like gach aon bhliain
éiríonn sé beagáinín níos deacra agus tá a
lán páistí freisin, defiance is like an all-time
high agus tá sé deacair le rá go bhfuil sé sin
an rud éigin breise ansin, you know mar
bíonn a lán fuinnimh ag na páistí seo
freisin.*

*It's hard, like every year it gets a little
harder and there are a lot of kids too,
defiance is like an all-time high and it's
hard to say that there is an extra something
there, you know because these kids have a
lot of energy too.*

Agallamh S

Autism

Nine of the participants spoke about how children in their setting either had a diagnosis of autism or that they presented with difficulties that were characteristic of autism (e.g., behavioural, social skills and sensory needs). For those without a formal diagnosis, the educators were mindful of the fact that they are not qualified to give a child a diagnosis but that they were just comparing their observations to what their education had taught them in relation to identifying children with autism.

*Ach ní féidir linn diagnóis a dhéanamh ar
duine ar bith mar sin inár dtaithí a
dhiagnóiseadh, shilféa, an mbeadh
deacrachtaí acu, an mbeadh fadhbanna
uathachais agus céadfacha acu?*

*But we can't diagnose anybody like so in
our experience, we would think, would they
have difficulties, would they be autistic and
sensory issues?*

Agallamh K1

Three participants also spoke about the fact that some children were presenting with anxiety in their settings. However, they were often unsure if the difficulties the child presents with relate to anxiety alone or whether there is a link there to some characteristics of autism.

*Uathachas a d'fhéadfadh a bheith ann,
b'fhéidir imní sóisialta beagán nó díreach
fadhbanna sóisialta ginearálta.*

*Tentatively possible autism maybe social
anxiety a little bit or just kind of general
social issues.*

Agallamh AJ1

Speech and Language Difficulties

Participants from settings discussed how there were many children presenting with speech, language and communication difficulties. This category of difficulty they said has increased greatly over the last few years. Many participants spoke about how they cannot understand some of the children in their settings, that they cannot interpret what they are saying and that this is very challenging and stressful. This can be particularly difficult as educators do not know what the children want or need in this instance and that this can lead to the child getting upset.

*Níl mé ábalta é a thuiscint ar chor ar bith.
Ní raibh an cailín a d'fhág ábalta é a
thuiscint. Níl an bhean nua ábalta é a
thuiscint.*

*I can't understand him at all. The girl who
left couldn't understand him. The new
woman can't understand him.*

Agallamh 7

Another setting gave a practical example of the number of children waiting for an assessment due to difficulties in this area.

*Tá seisear leanaí againn atá ag fanacht le
teiripeoir urlabhra agus teanga a fheiceáil.*

*We have six children who are currently
awaiting or seeing a speech and language
therapist.*

Agallamh K3

Physical and Medical Needs

Children with a range of physical and medical needs were reported to attend IM preschools. These needs include hearing impairments, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, Down syndrome, renal issues and physical disabilities (e.g., being in a wheelchair). No further information on the needs of these children will be presented to maintain their anonymity and that of their settings.

However, it was stated by the participants that these children did well learning through Irish, in an IM preschool and that they were included in all of the activities.

Sensory Needs and Social Skills

Five of the participants spoke about the sensory needs of the children and their difficulties with social skills. A lot of the sensory needs of the children related to not liking loud noises or undertaking certain activities. One participant spoke about how one of the children did not like to sing or hear the other children sing. Examples of social skills difficulties provided included children not wanting to interact or play with others in the class. They did not want to be involved in group activities, and this was challenging for the educators who were trying to implement an inclusive environment for all children.

*So bíonn sé sin i gcónaí ag rith taobh
amuigh den ghrúpa nó bíonn sé ag súgradh
leis féin.*

*So, he's always running outside the group or
playing by himself.*

Agallamh 7

Benefits of IM Preschool Education

Bilingualism and the Irish Language

All the participants (N=15) spoke about how bilingualism and learning Irish were a benefit of IM preschool education, for example, the linguistic and cognitive benefits that they got from being bilingual.

*Tá foghlaimoirí mionteanga i suíomh
oideachais in ann fadhbanna a réiteach níos
fearr nuair a bhíonn siad sa choláiste, bíonn
siad níos fear sa mhatamaitic. De ghnáth
bíonn siad níos fearr, cineál, níl a fhios agam
conas, ach níos tairbhí don tsochaí. Agus
sílim go bhfaigheann gach leanbh na*

*Minority language learners in an
educational setting are better problem
solvers when they're in college, they are
better at maths. They usually turn out to be
better, kind of, I don't know how, but more
beneficial to society. And I think all children
get those benefits unless they have a
processing issue.*

*buntáistí sin mura bhfuil fadhb próiseála acu
i ndáiríre.*

Agallamh K2

All the participants spoke about how children with and without additional needs could acquire varying levels of Irish. The benefit of attending an IM preschool discussed by almost half of the participants (n=7) was the immersion of the child in the Irish language. This made it easier for the children to acquire the language without it being forced on them or them feeling under pressure. The educators discussed how they create a relaxed immersive learning environment, which was a positive aspect for Irish language acquisition. All of the settings also discussed how they use songs to teach the language and that this is a positive way to teach the language in a fun way.

<i>Is trí amhránaíocht agus spraoi a dhéantar é. Mar sin, sílim go bhfuil spraoi ag na páistí.</i>	<i>It's all through singing and Fun. So, I think the kids are having fun.</i>
--	---

Agallamh A

Learning through song and repetition helped with the language acquisition and gave the children multiple opportunities to practice the language that they have acquired. Some of the participants spoke about how the children were practicing and using the language outside of the IM preschool context.

<i>Deir na tuismitheoirí ó bhí sé ag seasamh ag an doirteal ar maidin ag rá nigh na lámh agus seo páiste b'fhéidir nach bhfuil go maith ag labhairt amach but leis an repetition leis na amhránaíocht go léir a dhéanamh naíonra just ceapaim go bhfuil buntáiste ann.</i>	<i>The parents say he was standing at the sink this morning saying, "wash your hands" and this child may not be good at speaking out, but with the repetition and all the singing in the naíonra, I just think there's an advantage.</i>
--	--

Agallamh AJ1

Interestingly, some of the participants (n=3) spoke about how the children would sing these songs at home and in some cases, this would lead to the parents learning some Irish.

Agus is dóigh liom go bhfuil sé iontach nuair a théann siad, na páistí abhaile, agus an lá dár gcionn agus na tuismitheoirí ag teacht isteach ag rá 'Níl a fhios agam cad a dúirt sé. bhí sé as Gaeilge.' Ach tá siad ag foghlaim as na páistí, rud iontach é sin.

And I think it's great when they, the kids go home, and the next day and the parents come in saying 'I haven't got a clue what he said, it was in Irish.' But they're learning off the kids, which is a great thing.

Agallamh A

It was suggested by some participants that learning through Irish did not cause any confusion or put any additional stress on the children.

Le páistí go bhfuil aon deacrachtaí acu, tá sé dar liom féin, tá teanga eile á labhairt againn, ach ní chuireann sé sin isteach ná amach orthu, de bharr an curaclam atá leagtha amach.

With children who have any difficulties, it's my opinion, we speak a different language, but it doesn't bother them, because of the curriculum that has been set out.

Agallamh AJ2

The participants spoke about how the children could identify what language was used in the IM preschool, for example, Irish in the IM preschool and English at home.

Go teicniúil (tá sé) neamhbhriathartha ach tá tuiscint aige ar Spáinnise, ar an mBéarla agus tuiscint ar an nGaeilge agus tá sé saghas ag rá focal amháin anseo 's ansúid ach tá a fhios aige conas idirdhealú a dhéanamh idir an méid a deir sé le mamaí agus an méid a deir sé liom, mar sin déarfadh sé cibé rud atá oscailte don Spáinnis do mhamaí. Tiocfaidh sé chugam ag rá oscail.

Technically (he is) nonverbal but has understanding of Spanish, understanding of English and understanding of Irish and is now sort of saying one word here and there but knows to differentiate what he says to mom to what he says to me, so he'll say whatever open is in Spanish to mom. He'll come to me, he'll come and say oscail.

Agallamh K2

In one instance, an example was given of how children with SEN can acquire another language regardless of their level of first language development. The example given is one of a child

with limited language ability, maybe five words in total in their vocabulary and they spontaneously spoke Irish. This coincides with the reports by the participants about children with SEN having the ability to follow their instructions in class and being able to participate in class on a receptive level in Irish as they may not have the language of ability to reply in Irish based on their needs.

Tá páiste amháin fiú inné agus mar sin, i ndáiríre, níl ach thart ar 5 focail a rá aici ó thosaigh sí sa naíonra, ach inné bhí sí ag an doras, mar bhí mé ag iarraidh leanbh eile a fháil amach ag an doras. Bhí páiste eile ag imeacht agus dúirt mé slán, agus dúirt sí SLÁN...

There's one child even yesterday and like that, she really has only got like about say 5 words since she started in the naíonra but yesterday she was at the door, so I was trying to get another child out at the door. There was another child leaving and I said slán and she went SLÁN...

Agallamh K1

Experience of Early Years Educators

One of the main benefits discussed by all of the participants was the range of experience of the educators in the IM preschool setting in comparison to maybe English-medium preschools or crèches where educators tend to be younger and less experienced. This factor was discussed by one participant who had experience of working in both an IM and English-medium preschool during their career. It was suggested that their professional and personal experiences of life give IM preschool educators a high level of experience, which set them apart from other ECCE sectors.

Ceapaim aon naíonra is áit iomlán difriúil é ón réamhscoil eile. Tá siad an difriúil. Tá curaclam difriúil againn agus tá na daoine a oibríonn i naíonraí tá an ardchaighdeán acu ó thaobh. Is daoine, now níl mé chuir muidne síos, but it's daoine atá níos sine de gnáth. Tá clann acu, tá clann imithe isteach tríd an córas oideachas, tá taithí saoil acu.

I think any naíonra is a completely different place from other preschools. They are very different. We have a different curriculum and the people who work in naíonra are of a high standard. They are people, now don't want to put us down, but it's people who are usually older. They have children, they have children who have come through the education system, they have life experience.

Agallamh AJ2

The participants also discussed how this experience helped them when identifying children with additional needs at a young age and when working collaboratively with parents. It was thought that this experience helped them work collaboratively with first time parents and helped them to understand the challenges of being a parent for the first time.

Sea gan dabht agus is tuismitheoirí iad don chéad uair an chuid is mó acu. Sea. Féach, táimid ag déanamh é corr is 20 bliain. *Yeah, without a doubt and most of them are only first-time parents. Yeah. See, we're doing it 20 odd years.*

Agallamh A

A common subtheme was the participants ability to give the children time to settle in and become comfortable. This they felt was a positive practice as they knew how the naíonra works and how long it takes children to settle into a new setting. This observation period was important to ensure that the needs of all children were identified appropriately.

B'fhéidir toisc go bhfuil mé ar an dtalamh tamall fada anois agus na páistí nua á thabhairt isteach agus bíonn ort dul i dtailí ar na bpáistí agus bíonn ar na páistí dul i dtailí ar an suíomh agus a leithéad agus an chéad bhliain. *Maybe because I've been on the ground for a long time now and the new kids are being brought in, and you have to get used to the kids and the kids have to get used to the location and stuff like that and the first year.*

Agallamh 10

Inclusive Community and Culture

All of the participants spoke about how they implemented an inclusive culture in their settings where every child was made feel included. The participants spoke about all the time that they invested in getting to know the children individually and helping them to feel included and like they belong.

Caithimid go leor ama ag iarraidh muinín a thógáil agus ag iarraidh a thuiscint cad a spreagann iad nó cén áit a bhféadfadh *We spend a lot of time trying to kind of you build a bond trust and trying to understand what motivates them or where they might*

cúnamh a bheith ag teastáil uathu, agus cad iad a leasanna agus a láidreachtaí den chineál sin. *need help, and what their interests are and strengths of kind of.*

Agallamh AJ1

They spoke about the warm loving environment of the setting and how the smaller community of the setting made the children feel loved and included.

Sílim go bhfaigheann siad mórán buntáistí. Bhuel, measaim in sna naíonraí go háirithe sílim go bhfuil muid iontach grámhar agus go bhfuil muid iontach dáiríre faoi páistí agus sílim go bhfuil sin mar gheall go bhfuil muid fós beag. *I think they get a lot of benefits. Well, I think in the naíonra especially I think we are very loving, and we are very positive about children, and I think that's because we are still small.*

Agallamh 7

This was reiterated by some participants who spoke about how difficult and tiring the job can be but that they continue to work in the area because it is a job that they love.

Sea, tá sé ar fheabhas. Sea, ní dhéanfá an post seo murar thaitin sé leat. Tá sé chomh simplí leis sin mar ní bheidh tú in ann. Ní fhéadfá. *Yeah, it's great. Yeah, you wouldn't do this job if you didn't like it. Plain and simple like you just couldn't. No, you couldn't.*

Agallamh A

Más rud go bhfuil tú cineálta agus i ngrá leis an páiste, they don't see any of that as a negative ó thaobh an teanga is cuma sa tsíoc leo. *And you know, if you're kind and loving to the child, they don't see that as negative in terms of language, they don't care.*

Agallamh 10

The community feel in the IM preschool was discussed by all participants. They gave practical examples of how their settings were like small communities where everyone belonged and was included. One participant gave an example of how this inclusive culture promoted kindness,

understanding and empathy amongst the children in their setting as they saw that everyone has a place in IM preschools.

Is pobal beag muid nuair atá muid sa naíonra agus leanann sé sin ar aghaidh go dtí na scoileanna (lán-Ghaeilge) áitiúla.

We are a small community when we are in the naíonra and that continues to the local (IM) schools.

Agallamh S

An example of the link between the IM preschool and local community was provided by one participant. In their opinion this link was very important from a community and setting perspective as it helped develop a deep sense of community and belonging.

Tá aithne againn ar go leor de na teaghlaigh mar is as an gceantar sinn go léir..... Agus mar sin is cineál rud áitiúil é go mór agus tá aithne againn ar a dteaghlaigh agus tá níos mó i gceist ná sin, má chuaigh siad áit éigin eile, seans go mbraithfaidh siad beagán caillte.

We know a lot of the families because we're all from the area..... And so it's very much a kind of local thing and we know their families and also it's more, that if they went somewhere else. They might feel a little bit lost.

Agallamh K1

IM Preschool Connected to an IM Primary School

There were several participants who spoke about the IM preschool being on the grounds of an IM primary school and this they felt was a positive aspect in terms of feeling like they were part of a community and in relation to the smooth transition of children to primary school. The primary factor in this smooth transition was that the children were familiar with the location and had opportunities to visit the school for familiarisation before starting school there.

Má bhíonn deis acu leanúint ar aghaidh tríd an scoil, tá an nasc sin ann agus freisin do leanaí a d'fhéadfadh a bheith ag streachailt

If they have the chance to continue through the school, there is that link and also for children who might struggle with that

leis an aistriú sin, tá a fhios agat go ndéanann sé sin beagán níos éasca.

transition, you know that it makes that a little bit easier.

Agallamh AJ1

Another example given by one of the participants is the link between the educators in the IM preschool and those working in the school and that this is a positive in relation to transitioning for children as the two educators can discuss the needs of the child with the parents' permission.

Nuair a théann an páiste isteach i naíonáin bheaga, tá cineál leanúint leis an cabhair mar is féidir linn labhairt leis an múinteoir; obviously, caithfimid cead a fháil ó na tuismitheoirí but agus tá sé sin an tábhachtach. You know gur féidir leanúint leis an cabhair agus you know collaborative work arís a bheith leis an múinteoir agus chun cur in iúl dí áiteanna go raibh muidne ag obair air.

When the child goes into junior infants, I'm kind of continuing with the help because we can talk to the teacher; of course, we have to get permission from the parents but that's important. You know that the help can continue, and you know to have collaborative work again with the teacher and to let her know what we were working on.

Agallamh AJ2

Class Size and Early Years Educator Ratios

The smaller class sizes and number of children enrolled in the IM preschool was also seen as a benefit. The fact that the participants in the study were not part of a large company was seen as a benefit in relation to getting to know the children on a personal level.

Ní comhlacht mór muidne so ní uimhir na páistí is duine an páiste agus duine iad i mo naíonra go hiomlán so agus tá a lán, a lán buntáistí tá na dhá bhliain iontach.

We are not a big company, the children are not a number, each child is an individual and they are all one in my naíonra, and there are many, many advantages, the two years are great.

Agallamh 7

The child: educator ratio was also lower in the settings and this was of benefit to the children. This was since all of the settings in which the participants worked employed extra educators privately to deal with the needs of the children. Whilst this is a positive practice, it means that some settings are under financial pressure due to this.

Inclusive Strategies

The participants within the study implemented a range of inclusive teaching strategies to ensure the inclusion of all children in the setting.

Bhuel bíonn tú ag obair i gcónaí, ag déanamh do ghnáth rudaí le páistí eile. Bíonn siad included in gach rud so. Níl aon difríocht ann.

Well, you're always working, doing your normal things with other kids. They're included in all this. There's no difference.

Agallamh K1

In order to implement an inclusive environment all, the participants spoke about how they took the time to get to know the children individually as best they can to ensure that their areas of interest and strengths are identified. Eight of the participants spoke about the one-to-one time that was given to children with SEN in their setting to help them be included in the day-to-day activities of the setting. This was important to get to know the child on an individual level and identify their needs.

De ghnáth, déanaimid duine le duine leo agus déanaimid amach cad a oibríonn leo. Mar a d'fhéadfadh go mbeadh cúnamh ag teastáil ó roinnt leanaí lena dteanga.

Usually, we do one to one with them and figure out what works with them. Like some children might need help with their language.

Agallamh D

Challenges

Early Years Educator Burnout and Retention

Four of the participants spoke about the challenges they face in their work with children who have SEN. One participant gave an example of how challenging meeting the SEN of children can be.

Mar sin, sin an áit a rachadh go leor dár gcuid fuinnimh ag brath ar na riachtanais bhreise, más féidir leo ionsaí a thaispeáint do leanaí eile, tá go leor dár gcuid oibre ar siúl ag iarraidh an ionsaí sin a chosc agus ag iarraidh iad sin a atreorú chuig áit éigin eile. Nó ag iarraidh é a ghlacadh orainn féin ionas nach dtéann sé i dtreo leanaí eile.

So that's where a lot of our energy would go depending on the additional needs, if they can show aggression to other children, a lot of our work is being around trying to prevent that aggression and trying to redirect those to somewhere else. Or trying to take it on us so that it doesn't go to towards other children.

Agallamh K3

This one-to-one supervision was required to ensure the safety of the child with SEN and the safety of the other children and the educators. It was not specified by participants what educator provided this one-to-one support and whether they were an AIM early years educator. The researcher is conscious that the AIM early years educator is for the benefit of the whole setting and is not employed in a special needs assistant model. This practice places a heavy drain on the resources in the IM preschool and often meant that other children in the settings may experience less time with an educator time. However, this was unavoidable as the safety of all the children had to come first.

Nílimid ach ag iarraidh a bheith cothrom leis na páistí eile ar fad. Is léir go dtagann sábháilteacht ar dtús.

We're just trying to be fair to all the other children. Obviously, safety comes first.

Agallamh K1

Many of the participants spoke about how exhausting and challenging this aspect of the job was and how it can lead to burnout for the educators.

Bhí sé diana. Bhí, bhí, agus go háirithe uaireanta is féidir leo greim a bhaint.

It was tough. It was, it was, and especially sometimes they can bite.

Agallamh A

*Tá beirt múinteoirí againn istigh you know
beirt oiditheoirí istigh ansin leo agus
tagann siad amach frazzled beagnach gach
aon lá.*

*We have two teachers in there, you know,
two educators in there with them, and they
come out frazzled almost every day.*

Agallamh 8

It was also reported by several participants that the level of the one-to-one support that is required and the demands it places on educators who are low paid for the challenging work that they do is leading to educators leaving the sector with some reports of many leaving to work as a special needs assistant in primary schools.

*Táimid ag cailliúint na daoine is fearr nuair
a thagann post suas in san scoileanna.
Cuireann siad isteach do cúntóirí (CRS). Tá
siad ag iarraidh dul i dtreo na cúntóirí, pá
agus pá i rith na laethanta saoire. Má
fhaigheann tú post lán aimsire sa scoil,
gheobhaidh tú an t airgead i gcóir an
samhradh. Agus gheobhaidh tú pá agus
beidh tú ar scéim phension.*

*We are losing the best people when jobs
come up in schools. They put in as
assistants (SNA). They are looking to go in
the direction of assistants, pay and pay
during the holidays. If you get a full-time
job in school, you will get the money for the
summer. And you will get pay and you will
be on a pension scheme.*

Agallamh 10

The factor of poor pay and working conditions was referred to by all the participants as a challenge and that this was leading to many workers leaving the sector.

Giving time to children without SEN

One of the themes that arose from the data was the challenge that educators faced when trying to give all children the time they need to learn and grow in the IM preschool. Unfortunately, in many instances, it was reported that educators were unable to give children without SEN the time that they require and deserve because of the severity of the needs of other children in the setting. This is an aspect that they were unhappy with and felt guilty about. This was referred to by 11 of the 15 participants.

Tá na páistí gan RSO, tá siad ag cailliúint rudaí mar níl siad ag foghlaim nuair atá an múinteoir ag déileáil le duine amháin sa chúinne, you know or whatever sa seomra, níl sé féaráilte.

Agallamh C

Mothaíonn siad chomh dona sin nach bhfuil siad in ann do na páistí nach bhfuil aon RSO breise acu. Nach bhfuil siad a thabhairt i ndóthain ama dóibh.

Agallamh S

Motháim ciontach do na páistí ar fad, ní fhaigheann siad an t-am céanna agus an aird is a d'fhéadfá a thabhairt dóibh.

Agallamh K3

Some examples are given below of how the difficulties of some children can impact on the education of other children.

Ach tháinig siad isteach i gcónaí ag screadaíl, ag screadaíl agus ag caoineadh, agus thóg sé timpeall leathuair, 3/4 uair an chloig chun iad a réiteach. Agus is dóigh liom go raibh tionchar aige seo ar na páistí eile agus ar roinnt leanaí eile nach mbeadh ag iarraidh teacht isteach sa scoil agus bhí sé seo ag tarlú.

Agallamh D

Mar sin bhí na páistí eile ag fulaingt mar b'éigean dúinn gach rud a bhogadh as a mbealach mar bhí a fhios againn go raibh siad ag teacht isteach. Páistí álainn, ach bhí ort gach rud a bhogadh.

Agallamh A

The children without SEN, they are missing out on things because they are not learning when the teacher is dealing with one person in the corner, you know or whatever in the room, it is not fair.

They feel so bad that they can't do it for the kids who don't have any additional SEN. They can't give them enough time.

I feel guilty for all the children, they don't get the same time and attention that you would be able to give them.

But they constantly came in screaming, screaming and crying, and it took around half an hour, 3/4 of an hour to settle them down. And I do feel this had an impact on the other children and some other children wouldn't want to come into school and this was happening.

So, the other kids were suffering because, yeah, everything had to be moved out of their way because we knew they were coming in. Lovely kids, but you had to move everything.

In one case a participant spoke about how children without SEN often notice that they are not getting the same attention as a child with SEN. Interestingly, in this instance the child was able to subtly raise the point with the educator.

Ach thuig mé le déanaí an cailín beag a thosaigh ag an am céanna. Bionn sí ag teacht suas, agus motháim ar bhealach go mbíonn sé an-soiléir di, tugaim aird dó agus ní fhaigheann sí aird ar bith, agus díreach thuig mé le déanaí nach deas an rud é sin di. Mar sin caithfidh mé iarracht a dhéanamh, an bhfuil a fhios agat, mar déanaimid iarracht a bheith féarailte do na leanaí eile. Gan amhras, tugaimid tús áite don tsábháilteacht, má thuigeann tú leat mé.

But I just realised recently that the little girl who started at the same time. She's kind of coming up to I just I I kind of feel that she's it's really obvious to her, I'm giving him attention and that she's not getting it and I just kind of just kind of just dawned on me lately that that's not very nice for her. So, I have to try, and you know, kind of like we're just trying to be fair to all the other children. Obviously, safety comes first if you know what I mean.

Agallamh K1

One participant spoke about how they were torn in their daily work due to this challenge and that they felt bad for all of the children in the setting.

Tá muid stróicthe go mór ag iarraidh freagra a thabhairt ar na difríochtaí ar fad agus bhraithfeá go raibh failli á déanamh againn ar leanaí áirithe a bhíodh a fhios agat, níos ciúine b'fhéidir nó nach raibh chomh dian céanna ó thaobh a gcuid riachtanas agus díriodh go mór ar chúpla páiste a bhainistiú.

We were torn like hugely before that, trying to kind of respond to all the difference and you would feel that we were neglecting certain children who would be quieter may be or who weren't as demanding in terms of their needs and there was a huge focus on just kind of managing a couple of children.

Agallamh AJ1

In some settings it was reported that the SEN of some children were impacting the structure of activities in the setting. For example, in one setting, the children can only do singing when a child with SEN is not there as it causes him to be upset and distressed.

Bhí páiste eile againn ar fuath leis an amhránaíocht. Mar sin bhí orainn a chinntiú go bhféadfadh sé imeacht go luath ar na laethanta a raibh muid ag canadh

We had another child who hates singing. So, we had to make sure that he could leave early on the days we were singing and that we would sing when he left.

agus go mbeadh muid ag canadh nuair a d'fhág sé.

Agallamh K3

Another example given was the challenge of doing day-to-day activities in the setting and how some children cannot cope with this.

Abair agus tú ag dul ó A go B. Agus má tá tú ag dul áit éigin nó rud ar bith, féadfaidh sé glacadh níos faide, nó is féidir go mbeidh tubaiste nó rud éigin agat, agus socróidh sé sin gach rud agus tógann sé sin níos mó ama. Agus ansin más rud é nach bhfuil an leanbh sin sásta agus tá a fhios agat, agus thosaíonn rud éigin agus nach bhfuil siad sásta. Tógann sé sin níos mó ama, níos mó foinne, níos mó ama.

Say when you're getting from A to B. And if you're going somewhere or anything, it can take longer, or you can have a meltdown or something, and that will hold everything up and that takes more time. And then if the child like that is not happy and you know, and something kicks off and they're not happy. That takes more time, more staff, more time.

Agallamh K1

One participant spoke about how they have come to realise how difficult and time consuming the needs of some children can be and how it can negatively impact other children in the class.

Sílim i mbliana mar nach bhfuil an dúshlán sin againn tá tú ag feiceáil cé mhéad aird a bhí de dhíth air.

I think this year because we don't have that challenge, you're seeing how much attention he needed.

Agallamh B

Challenges in Diagnosing Very Young Children

Eleven of the participants, one from every setting spoke about how the children were very young when they start in the IM preschool and that this is a challenge for them in relation to meeting their needs and also identifying whether they have SEN. One participant gave an example of how the children are still so young when they start and that their parents are only getting to know them too as children at that stage.

Sílim go bhfuil na leanaí seo chomh óg, is dóigh liom go raibh fiú a dtuismitheoirí, na tuismitheoirí cineál ag dul i dtaithí ar a bpáistí féin. *I think these children are so young, I think that even their parents, the parents were also kind getting to their own children.*

Agallamh AJ2

Tá ceann nó dhó ann a bhféadfadh ceisteanna a bheith agat futhu, ach tá siad chomh óg agus tá sé deacair a aithint ag an aois óg seo, tá sé cineál deacair a shainiú. *There is one or two that you could have questions over; but they're so young and it's hard to kind of at this early age, it's kind of hard to define.*

Agallamh B

Another participant spoke about how they are still very dependent on adults when they start in the IM preschool and that this can mean that it is hard to differentiate between those who need more help and guidance to become independent and those who have SEN.

Measaim go bhfuil na páistí dhá bhliain ocht míosa, tá siad an-óg fós ag teacht isteach agus tá an chuid cabhair uathu. Ní hé just go bhfuil riachtanais speisialta, tá cabhair ag teastáil uathu ó thaobh an leithris, ó thaobh rudaí simplí cosúil le glanadh suas, cabhair ó thaobh an lón, rudaí, gnáth rudaí ó thaobh neamhspleáchas de níl sé acu. *I think the children are two years and eight months old, they are still very young coming in and they need lots of help. It's not just that they have special needs, they need help with the toilet, with simple things like cleaning up, help with lunch, things, normal things in terms of independence they don't have.*

Agallamh 10

One participant spoke about the importance of keeping an open mind when observing a child and their young age, this they felt was important so as not to label a child incorrectly.

Caithfidh tú a bheith cúramach. Ní siad ach óg. Seans nach bhfuil sé acu. *You have to be careful. They are only young. They might not have it.*

Agallamh A

Another participant spoke about the challenge that reducing the age at which children can start in an ECCE setting poses for them in relation to meeting their individual needs as outlined in the example above.

Sílim go bhfuil fadhb fosta ó thosaigh siad an aois dhá bhliain agus ocht mhí.

I think there's also a problem since they started at the age of two years and eight months.

Agallamh 7

SEN and the Irish Language as a Challenge

Nine participants (N=15) referred to how they perceive that the Irish language can be a challenge for young children with SEN. Some of the participants spoke about their belief that it can be harder for some children to learn through a second language, Irish in this case. Some of the participants spoke about the need to look at the individual needs of the child when assessing the suitability of learning through Irish for all children.

An bac teanga agus an chumarsáid leo is dócha a bheadh mar cheist nuair a thagann sé go dtí an naíonra, nílím 100% cinnte an mbeadh an naíonra go maith do pháistí le riachtanais speisialta.

It's just more the language barrier and the communication with them that would be probably the issue when it comes to the naíonra, I'm not 100% sure whether the naíonra would be good for children with special needs.

Agallamh D

Some participants spoke about how they chose to speak in English to some children with SEN to ensure that the points that they were trying to communicate were understood.

Braitheann sé uaireanta bíonn gá orainn labhairt i mBéarla leo ó thaobh cumarsáide agus tuiscint cumarsáid so bíonn orainn athrú isteach i mBéarla. Ionas nach gcailleann siad aon rud sa cumarsáid.

It depends, sometimes we must talk to them in English, in terms of communication and understanding communication. So that they don't miss any of this communication.

Agallamh AJ1

Most of the participants spoke about how the language challenges that children with speech and language difficulties have been evident in all the languages of the child and not just their Irish language ability.

Feicim go dtuigeann sé, tuigeann sé na bun rudaí go mbíonnse ag caint faoi ach a níl an teanga Béarla soiléir go leor so, níl a fhios agamsa an bhfuil Béarla nó Gaeilge aige, ach níl an Béarla soiléir agus ní chloisim Béarla nó Gaeilge soiléir.

I see that he understands, he understands the basic things that you are talking about, but the English language is not clear enough, I don't know if he speaks English or Irish, but the English is not clear, and I don't hear clear English or Irish.

Agallamh 7

Cuid do na daoine leis na deacrachtaí teangacha ceapaim uaireanta bíonn sé deacair duit na focail a chloisint go maith freisin.

Some of the people with the language difficulties I think sometimes it's hard for you to hear the words well too.

Agallamh C

One participant spoke about how it was challenging teaching through a new language for the children, and this perhaps relates to the need for more CPD in the area of immersion education as outlined in the literature reviewed in chapter one and two.

Sea, sílim, má tá tú má tá fadhb agat, agus má tá tú ag iarraidh múineadh i dhá theanga, is dóigh liom go bhfuil sé sin deacair le dhéanamh.

Yeah, I think if you have a problem and you're trying to teach in two languages, I think it is a hard thing to do.

Agallamh A

COVID19 Pandemic

Interestingly, the COVID19 pandemic was identified as a theme within the data gathered in this study. The primary sub-theme identified was how the needs of the children attending the IM preschool of all the participants are greater since the pandemic. It is reported that since the pandemic the children need greater support in relation to behaviour management, social skills development and speech, language and communication. One participant spoke about how this is unprecedented and that they have never seen anything like this before.

Because it's unprecedented, níor tharla sé sin riamh, so it's a cohort iomlán nua do pháistí a bhí muid ag fáil le trí bliain, b'fhéidir ceithre bhliain, an iompar yeah, sin iompar agus scileanna sóisialta ach go háirithe.

Agallamh AJ1

Because it's unprecedented, that's never happened before, so it's a whole new cohort of children that we've been getting for three years, maybe four years, the behaviour yeah, that's behaviour and social skills in particular.

Participants spoke about how the children were very far behind in some cases and that this was a challenge for them.

Agus anois tá siad thart ar dhá bhliain taobh thiar ina bhforbairt agus sin an fhirinne faoi agus tá mé i bhfad i gcéin sa phost.

Agallamh 10

And now, they are about two years behind in their development and that's the truth of it and I am a hell of a long time in the job.

Several participants questioned whether this was because of the stress that parents felt at the time, for example, trying to work from home and mind children at the same time. They wondered whether this impacted the development of the children in some way.

Babai Covid a bhí ann agus b'fhéidir go bhfuair sé a lán aird nó a bhealach féin agus anois is seo an chéad, an chéad ait go bhfuil, go gcaithfidh sé tabhairt faoi na 'transitions', go gcaithfidh sé lón a ithe ag an mbord, go gcaithfidh sé glanadh suas na bréagáin, go gcaithfidh sé b'fhéidir dul isteach sa líne ag am dul abhaile.

Agallamh 7

A Covid baby again and maybe he got a lot of attention or his own way and now this is the first, the first place that there is, that he has to do the 'transitions', that he has to eat lunch at the table, that he has to clean up the toys, that he maybe has to join the line at time to go home.

One participant gave a practical example of how they think that the pandemic and lockdowns affected the childrens' social development.

Cuid de na grúpaí is deacra a bhí agam riamh ó thaobh an Covid.... Ní raibh siad riamh as an teach i measc páistí eile, bíonn deacrachtaí acu, ag roinnt, ag tógáil seans le

Some of the hardest groups I've ever had in terms of Covid... They've never been out of the house with other kids, they have trouble sharing and taking chances with each other,

Chéile, even just ag argóint, you know, bíonn siad an t aon duine sa domhan. You know ní thuigeann siad go gcaithfidh tú fanacht go dtí go bhfuil an duine eile réidh leis. Tá sé deacair dóibh i mbliana, caithfidh mé a rá ceapaim go bhfuil na tuismitheoirí, very, protective of the páistí sin ó thaobh an Covid so na rudaí sin, they are definitely a dúshlán.

even just arguing, you know, they're the only ones in the world. You know they don't understand that you must wait until the other person is ready. It's been hard for them this year, I have to say I think the parents are, very, protective of those kids in terms of Covid so those things, they're definitely a challenge

Agallamh C

This participant was not the only one to mention how the COVID19 pandemic has impacted on the way that parents interact with their children or the educators in the setting, this was also mentioned by three others. The three other participants gave an example of how disengaged the parents can be in their child's education and that this can be a challenge for the IM preschools, particularly when parents are busy working and there is no opportunity to meet and talk with parents.

I don't know like tá rud éigin, tharla rud éigin cinnte le linn Covid agus tá tionchar ollmhór tar éis a bheith aige ar na páistí, ach freisin ceapaim tá tionchar mór ar meon nó dearcadh na tuismitheoirí agus bhéis tú ceapadh go raibh siad níos mó, I suppose, more grateful if, fuaimíonn sé sin mícheart, but you know like anois ní thugann aon duine saghas they don't put any weight in aon rud go bhfuil rá againn

I don't know like there's something, something definitely happened during Covid and it's had a huge impact on the kids, but also I think there's a big impact on the mindset or the attitude of the parents and you would have thought they would be more, I suppose, more grateful if, that sounds wrong, but you know like now nobody kind of gives a damn they don't put any weight in anything that we have to say.

Agallamh S

AIM Programme

In the focus groups and interviews the participants discussed their experiences of AIM and how it is implemented through the medium of Irish in IM preschools. In this section the primary focus of the data gathered was on the lack of availability of educators with Irish language proficiency. While an evaluation of the AIM programme was not the focus of the study, it was

deemed valuable to invite participants to share their experience of how the programme is implemented in their setting.

Some participants (n=4) spoke about how they found the extra allocation of educators to be a positive factor in their setting, one that was of great help to them in their day-to-day work with children who have SEN. All these participants spoke about having the additional support of another adult in the setting as invaluable and that they benefit greatly from this.

Is iontach an rud you know agus tá sé an, like ní fhéadfadh muid feidhmiú gan AIM le cúpla bliain anuas. You know nuair a bhreathnaím siar cén chaoi a rinneamar é gan AIM roimh é seo.

It's amazing, you know, and it's like, we couldn't have functioned without AIM for the last few years. You know, when I look back at how we did it without AIM before this.

Agallamh S1

Is dóigh liom gurb é sin an buntáiste mór a bhaintear as AIM ná go bhfuil an cóimheas seo again.

I think that is what we benefit hugely from through AIM is that we have this ratio.

Agallamh AJ1

Whilst the higher educator ratio was of benefit, the main challenge experienced by all of the participants was the challenge of hiring suitably qualified educators with Irish language proficiency. Firstly, it was discussed that they found it difficult to find people even with English with the required qualifications to work in their settings, that these people simply were not out there or available. One participant questioned whether English-medium settings experienced the same difficulties as they did.

Nil a fhios agam, agus tá sé níos éasca do na daoine atá ag obair i gcóras trí Bhéarla, ach dúinn go bhfuil sé deacair duine a fháil go bhfuil an cháilíocht agus an teanga acu.

I don't know, and it's easier for the people working in a system through English, but for us it's difficult to find someone who has the qualifications and the language.

Agallamh AJ2

Even though it would be contrary to the ethos of IM preschool education, one participant spoke about how they would be willing to employ someone with English to work in their setting, but these suitably qualified individuals were not available.

Sea, cinnte d'fhéadfainn iad a thógáil fiú gan Gaeilge ach ní féidir linn teacht ar duine ar bith. *Yeah, sure I could even take them without the Gaeilge, but I can't find anyone.*

Agallamh C

Five of the settings spoke about how they were left with no choice but to hire an AIM early years educator without Irish so that they could run their setting inclusively. This was an aspect that they were unhappy with, but they felt that they were left with no other choice as they could not meet the needs of the children without this extra person. Whilst all participants commended the work of their colleagues without Irish, they all discussed how having an educator without Irish led to there being more English spoken in the setting and thus the level of immersion in the Irish language for the children was diluted. This was a point of dissatisfaction as they felt that the children were experiencing less exposure to the Irish language and this in turn could be impacting their Irish language development.

An cailín atá againn faoi láthair tá Gaeilge aici but níl mórán chor ar bith agus bhí sé iontach í a fháil. Tá sí an mhaith just tá sé deacair. So, you know cloiseann na páistí Béarla sa rang bíonn sí ag obair lena páistí ciúin but tá sé an deacair like duine a fháil le Gaeilge. *The girl we have at the moment speaks Irish but not much at all and it was great to find her. She's good but it's hard. So, you know the kids hear English in class she works with her kids quietly but it's hard to find someone with Irish.*

Agallamh H

Tá tú anois, ag rá rudaí leo i mBéarla agus tá siad i gcónaí ag obair leis na páistí i mBéarla. Bíonn Béarla ag na páistí le riachtanais speisialta mar tá Béarla acu *You now, saying to them things in English and they're always working with the children in English. The special needs kids in English because they have English, and they don't*

agus níl Gaeilge acu. Mar sin, tá sé tógtha ó Ghaeilge iarbhír na naíonra. *have Irish. So, it's taken from the actual Irish of the naíonra.*

Agallamh K1

One of the participants in the group spoke about how they taught the educators without any Irish how to speak Irish. This, they reported, added burden on them and was beyond their remit, but they felt little choice if they wanted to maintain the level of Irish language that is required.

Tá cailín agamsa (oibreoir) thart ar 3 bhliain is ón (Ainm Áite) dí agus ní raibh éinne eile ann so thógas an cailín álainn seo isteach agus chun an fhirinne a rá tá a dhóthain Gaeilge aici chun an lá iomlán a chaitheamh sa naíonra as Gaeilge ag an bpointe seo. *I have a girl who is with us (working) 3 years old, and she is from (Place Name) and there was no one else there so I took this beautiful girl in and to tell the truth she has enough Irish to spend the whole day in the naíonra at this point.*

Agallamh 10

Another participant spoke about how there were no AIM early years educators available with Irish and that they refused to hire someone with English due to the immersion education policy in their setting. When they reflected on this in the interviews, they said that this reluctance to hire someone with English put extra pressure on everyone in their setting.

Is dócha go bhfuil a mhalairt de chás agam leatsa, áit ar chuir mé féin agus mo bhaill foirne eile go leor strus orainn, is dócha, mar ní fhostaighfinn duine nach raibh Gaeilge aige. Mar sin bhíomar faoi bhrú mór i mí Mheán Fómhair agus is dócha nach raibh sé an timpeallacht is fearr do na páistí ar fad mar diúltaíonn mé duine gan Gaeilge a thabhairt isteach. *I am probably the opposite to you, where I probably put us, me and my other staff members through a lot of stress because I wouldn't hire someone who didn't have Irish. So, we were under really a lot of stress for the month of September and probably it wasn't in the best environment for all the children because I refuse to bring someone in who didn't have Gaeilge.*

Agallamh K3

Two of the settings in which participants were employed did not apply for AIM as they found the process too cumbersome due to the fact that there are no educators available with Irish or English. This was reported as disappointing by the educators as the settings could do with the extra adult working in their settings to ensure the inclusion of all children.

I mbliana, tá drogall orm teagmháil a dhéanamh leo i ndáiríre mar cad atá siad chun a dhéanamh domsa? ...ba bhreá liom duine breise a bheith sa seomra, ach níl siad chun é sin a sholáthar dom.

Just yeah kind of this year I am kind of reluctant to contact them really because what are they going to do for me? ...I would love to have an extra person in the room, but there are not going to supply that for me.

Agallamh B

The importance of awarding an AIM early years educator to the needs of the setting rather than the individual child was further highlighted by the participants who spoke about the reluctance of parents to apply for the AIM programme for their child. Having to wait until the child is attending the setting to apply for AIM support was referred to as a challenge by participants. They spoke about how they would know that a child with SEN were enrolled to start in September well before the summer break but that having to wait until September to apply and maybe until after mid-term break in November to get an AIM early years educator approved was particularly challenging.

B'fhéidir go mbeadh a fhios againn cén leanbh atá ag teacht isteach i mí Mheán Fómhair má tá tuismitheoir tar éis a rá linn roimh ré, b'fhéidir go mbeadh a fhios againn go bhfuil leanbh ag teacht isteach le riachtanais. D'fhéadfaimis iarratas a chur isteach, ach ní féidir leis an speisialtóir luathbhlianta teacht amach go dtí go dtosóidh an leanbh.

We might know what child is coming in in September if a parent has told us in advance, we might know a child is coming in with needs. We could put in an application, but the early years specialist can't come out until the child starts.

Agallamh K2

This meant that there was a period where either the setting was without an extra adult that was required, or the setting was paying the wages of that adult until the position was sanctioned. Both of these situations placed an added burden on the settings in relation to increased stress and pressure on educators and in some cases, there were negative financial implications. Furthermore, this period of uncertainty and waiting means that there is no stability for AIM

early years educator already employed in the setting, with many educators not knowing if they have a job the following year.

Tá sé an deacair gach bliain a rá go háirithe mar stiúirthóir, ní fhéadaim abair le duine éigin cinnte go mbeidh post agat i mí mheán fómhair agus caithfidh fanacht thart go dtí mí Iúil. Uaireanta mí Lúnasa chun abair go mbeadh post acu and then, leath den am, faigheann siad post éigin áit éigin eile agus ansin caithfidh tú dul agus duine éigin a fhostú agus leis an Ghaeilge freisin.

It's hard to say every year especially as a director, you can't tell someone for sure you'll have a job in September, and we have to wait around until July. Sometimes August to say they'll have a job and then, half the time, they'll find a job somewhere else and then you must go and hire someone and with Irish too.

Agallamh S

Having a good understanding of the IM sector among AIM early years specialist was deemed very important by participants. Additionally, Irish-speaking specialists were reported as a critical support tool, all of the participants spoke about how important it was for the AIM early years specialist to have an understanding of how IM preschool education works. They also spoke about how it is important for these specialists to be able to speak and understand Irish so that they can understand the workings and nuances of the immersion education settings when they visit. There were some instances where participants felt that the lack of understanding of and consideration for the IM preschool sector impacted on the resources available to them. For example, a simple consideration should be that all the documentation, paperwork and information leaflets should be available through Irish.

Five participants spoke about how time consuming it can be for them completing administration and paperwork for children with SEN. This paperwork related to individualised planning for children with SEN, completing forms for referrals and AIM.

Táimid ansin chun cabhrú leo na foirmeacha a líonadh ansin caithfidh muid iad a chur suas ar HIVE agus rudaí mar sin so tá an píosa sin ach ní ceapaim, ceapaim sin just a time management rud in ionad go bhfuil an páipéarachas dúshlánach nó aon rud mar

We're there to help them fill out the forms then we have to put them up on HIVE and things like that so there's that part, but I don't think, I think that's just a time management thing rather than the paperwork being challenging or anything like that. It's just

*sin. Tá sé just deacair cinnte go bhfuil tú ag hard to make sure you're giving everyone
tabhairt a ndóthain am do gach duine. enough time.*

Agallamh S

Suggestions Regarding AIM

There were some suggestions made by participants in the focus groups and interviews in relation to how the AIM programme could be improved for IM preschool settings. A suggestion made by two participants was that there should be a panel of AIM early years educators who are available to work through the medium of Irish, and ideally, be available to attend the need of the naíonraí at short notice. It is noted by the researcher that this suggestion was also identified in the official evaluation of AIM and that the recommendations made in the evaluation are being implemented on a phased basis.

*Ba bhreá liom go mbeadh painéal acu, I would love for them to have a panel, maybe
b'fhéidir Gaeloideachas, go mbeadh cineál Gaeloideachas, to have a kind of panel where
painéal gur féidir linn daoine a fháil fiú má we can get people even if someone is sick or
tá duine tinn nó má tá siad as láthair you if they are absent, you know, there would be
know go mbeadh painéal ann. Sin fadhb a panel. That's a huge problem and it's in
ollmhór agus tá sé i ngach naíonra. every naíonra.*

Agallamh AJ2

Another suggestion made relates to the qualifications required to work as an AIM early years educator. It was stated in the interviews that there were highly qualified people proficient in Irish (e.g., qualified primary school teachers) who could potentially work in an IM preschool but that the qualifications required were a barrier. It was suggested that there should be a flexible training option available to upskill these people so that they can work in the settings and reduce the challenges in relation to hiring suitable people with Irish.

*Sílim ba chóir go mbeadh sí ábalta cúrsa I think she should be able to do a quick
tapáil a dhéanamh ar line agus an rud a fháil course online and get something online
ar line gan a bheith ag dul isteach in oifig nó without having to go into an office or a place
in áit mar. Sílim go bhfuil go leor oibreoirí, like that. I think there are a lot of workers, a
go leor daoine amuigh ansin go dtiocfadh leo lot of people out there that could help us but*

cuidiú linn ach mar gheall go bhfuil siad mar tuismitheoirí, ní féidir leo rudaí a dhéanamh sa tráthnóna. Ní féidir leat cúrsaí a dhéanamh sa tráthnóna nuair atá clann agat, bíonn tú ag dul ag snámh bíonn tú ag dul go dtí cluichí. Bíonn tú ag déanamh obair bhaile. Bíonn tú gnóthach go leor agus sílim go mba chóir go mbeadh an rialtas just píosa níos cruthaitheach ag cuidiú le daoine atá ar fáil chun teacht agus cuidiú linne.

because they are parents, they can't do things in the evening. You can't do courses in the evening when you have kids, you're going swimming you're going to games. You're doing homework. You're pretty busy and I think the government should just be a little bit more creative in helping people who are available to come and help us.

Agallamh 7

A suggestion that arose a few times was that the AIM early years educator should be awarded to the setting based on the needs of the setting, and not just the needs of the individual children. This suggestion was important for them as they felt that often the needs of the other children (particularly those without SEN) were not being considered when services were being allocated.

Is féidir le duine éigin teacht amach agus breathnú ar an ngrúpa agus féachaint conas atá an grúpa ag dul chun cinn, ach d'fhéadfaimis, thiocfadh linn, gheobhaimid luach saothair bunaithe ar na seirbhísí atá ag teastáil seachas aon leanbh ina aonar.

Someone can come out and look at the group and see how the group is progressing, but we could, we would get rewarded based on the services needed rather than any child individually.

Agallamh S

Resources Required

Access to Professional Services

The main sub-theme identified was that the participants (n=10) spoke about how they would like more access to professionals such as speech and language therapists and educational psychologists in their settings, particularly those with an understanding of learning through Irish or a second language. These participants felt that it would be invaluable to them if these

professionals could come into their setting and observe and provide them with practical advice around referrals and strategies to help them meet the needs of all students.

Nó tagann duine éigin isteach agus deir siad, éist, tá níos mó tacaíochta ag teastáil ón leanbh sin ná é sin. Tá níos mó tacaíochta ag teastáil ón bpáiste sin. Mar sin dá mbeadh duine agam a tháinig isteach a bhí ina theiripeoir urlabhra agus teangadá dtiocfadh siad isteach uair sa mhí nó uair nó dhó sa bhliain go bhféadfaidís tacú linn leis na leanaí.

Or somebody comes in and they say, listen, that child needs more support than that. That child needs more support. So, if I had somebody that came in that was a speech and language therapistif they came in once a month or once or twice a year that they could support us with the children.

Agallamh D

This was important for the participants as they understand that the needs of all children are different, and they would like some personalised advice to help meet their needs.

Ach ní mór dúinn duine éigin a fháil chun teacht ar an láthair agus i ndáiríre feiceáil cad a bhfuil muid ag déileáil leis. Ní féidir linn múineadh do gach riachtanas a bhfuilimid go léir ag déileáil leis.

But we need someone to come on site and actually see what we're dealing with. We cannot teach for every need that we're all dealing with.

Agallamh K3

Resources Required

Participants also discussed how they would like access to PECS through Irish (n=2), an AAC device through Irish (n=1), grants for the purchase of sensory materials (n=2), speech and language therapy and resources through Irish (n=7), social stories through Irish (n=2), more songs through Irish for teaching the language (n=2), and more visuals such as posters and visual timetables (n=3).

Public Campaign

Two of the participants spoke about the need for a public campaign to demonstrate that the IM preschool and learning through Irish is suitable for children with SEN.

Mar sin b'fhéidir feachtas poiblí ar na tairbhí atá ann do leanaí agus is éard atá i gceist agam ná go bhfuil sé cruthaithe anois ag taighde go dtéann sé chun tairbhe leanaí a bhfuil, bíodh a fhios agat, an dara nó an tríú teanga á fhoghlaim acu. Agus mar sin b'fhéidir feachtas poiblí a bheidh dírithe ar thuismitheoirí chomh maith le rá gur rogha é seo do'd leanbh.

So maybe a public campaign on the benefits that are there for children and I mean research has proved now that it does benefit children with, you know, learn a second or third language. And so maybe a public campaign aimed at parents as well to say that this is an option for your child.

Agallamh K3

This factor coincides with the fact that eight of the participants spoke about the negative opinions that are in the public domain about the suitability of learning through Irish for children with SEN.

Is dóigh an bac a bheadh ann ná uaireanta, tá sé suimiúil na daoine a chur níos mó brú ó thaobh an Ghaeilge orainn ná na teiripeoirí. Like tagann b'fhéidir an síceolaí nó tagann an OT agus deireann siad linn 'Wouldn't they be better off speaking English?'

I think the barrier would be that sometimes, it's interesting that people put more pressure on us in terms of Irish is the therapists. Like maybe the psychologist comes or the OT comes, and they say to us 'Wouldn't they be better off speaking English?'

Agallamh 10

Measaim féin an dara teanga tá siad.... tá an dearcadh amuigh ansin go bhfuil sé ró-dúshlánach do páistí le aon riachtanaisí breise ach ní aontaím leis sin. Agus cuireann an tuairim sin saghas as dom, go háirithe like ní amadán iad na páistí seo.

I personally think that the second language is.... there's a perception out there that it's too challenging for kids with any additional needs but I don't agree with that. And that perception kind of pisses me off, especially because like these kids are not stupid.

Agallamh S

In many instances, it was reported that parents were being discouraged by professionals (e.g., educational psychologists, doctors, public health nurses (PHN) and speech and language therapists) from sending their child to an IM preschool. One participant referred to the fact that it was as if children would be 'cured' from their SEN if they attended an English-medium setting.

Caithim go leor ama ag troid leis an PHN, altraí sláinte agus teiripeoirí urlabhra agus teanga, agus ag cur oideachais orthu faoi bhuntáistí na Gaeilge.... caithfidh mé an oiread sin ama a chaitheamh ag troid le daoine gairmiúla eile a bhfuil baint acu le saol na leanaí seo mar go gceapann siad go huathoibríoch go bhfuiltear chun iad a leigheas trí iad a thógáil amach as suíomh lán-Ghaeilge agus sin ceann de na frustrachas is mó atá orm a rá.

Agallamh K3

I spend a lot of time fighting with PHN, public health nurses and speech and language therapists, and educating them in the benefits of GaeilgeLike I have to spend so much time fighting with other professionals that are involved in these children's lives because they automatically just think that they are going to be cured by taking them out of an Irish-medium setting and that's one of my biggest frustrations.

Collaboration with Parents

One of the key areas of inclusive practice is working collaboratively with parents. Within the focus groups and interviews, the participants were asked about their experiences of working with parents. There were 13 references made by participants to the fact that parents often find it difficult to accept that their child may need additional support in the setting. This can be quite difficult and challenging for the educators as they try to meet the needs of all children.

Tá sé deacair go leor mar ar an drochuair bheadh roinnt tuismitheoirí a mhothaíonn, níl, tá mo pháiste ceart go leor.

Agallamh D

It is quite difficult because unfortunately there would be some parents who feels no, my child's OK.

Do roinnt páistí freisin, just ní aontaíonn na tuismitheoirí linn gur gá dó dul a aon rud a fhiosrú.

Agallamh S

For some children too, the parents just don't agree with us that they need to go and investigate anything.

In some instances, there are parents who may know that their child has SEN, but they are reluctant to share any information with the setting to help them meet the needs of their child. This may be due to the parents being reluctant to accept the difficulties their child faces or due to fear that they may not be accepted in the preschool setting.

Tá tú cineál ag bualadh an bhalla agus bhí an cás sin againn nuair a bhí an leanbh a bhí sa chathaoir rothaí, bhí na tuismitheoirí i séanadh iomlán. Agus ní bheadh siad ag teacht chugann le haon fhaisnéis agus tá eagla ort go bhfuil tú chun níos mó damáiste a dhéanamh.

You're kind of hitting the wall and we have had that situation where there was the child that it was in the wheelchair, the parents were in complete denial. And they just wouldn't come forward with any information and you're terrified you're going to do more damage.

Agallamh B

Tar chugainn le do thoil agus cuir in iúl dúinn agus ansin uaireanta ní insíonn siad duit agus mar go bhfuil eagla orthu go gcaillfidh siad an áit nó rud éigin.

Please come to us and let us know and then sometimes they don't tell you and because they're afraid they might lose the place or something.

Agallamh K2

A common theme that was identified was the lack of awareness of parents around the developmental milestones, particularly first-time parents and the lack of understanding around the varying needs of children. One participant suggested there should be more information made available to parents in this area.

Ní thuigeann sí so tarlaíonn sin go leor tuismitheoirí nua. Tá sé an deacair orthu so measaim nach bhfuil go leor eolas nuair a bhíonn na máthar ag iompar leanaí, b'fhéidir go mba chóir go mbeadh níos mó eolas acu roimh don pháiste teacht isteach sa naíonra.

Many new parents don't understand that. It's hard for them, I think that there's not enough information when the mothers are carrying children, maybe they should have more information before the child comes to the naíonra.

Agallamh 7

Another example given by a participant is how children can react differently in different settings and situations and parents may not see the difficulties that their child faces in the preschool setting.

Ach má tá leanaí agat, ansin nach bhfuil na tuismitheoirí ar an eolas, deir siad tá siad ceart go leor sa bhaile. Nuair atá siad i dtimpeallacht scoile nó ranga, seasann siad amach beagán.

But if you have children, then that the parents aren't aware, they say they're fine at home. When they are in a school or class environment, they stand out a little bit.

Agallamh K2

This was reported to be particularly important since the COVID19 pandemic and in the cases where there are no other family members around the same age as the child.

Tá leanbh againn faoi láthair agus is páiste aonarach iad, níl col ceathracha acu, is leanbh covid é. Níl a fhios agam go bhfeiceann a thuismitheoirí nach bhfuil sé mar an gcéanna le leanaí eile.

Like we have a child at the moment, and they are an only child, they have no cousins, he's a covid baby. I don't know that his parents see that he's not the same as other kids.

Agallamh C

Difficult Conversations with Parents

All the participants spoke about how they find talking to parents about the difficulties that the children may face difficult and often challenging. As mentioned above, this can be because some parents are reluctant to accept that their child has difficulties. Many of the participants felt that they would benefit from more education and training in this area to help them deal with these difficult conversations.

Níl muid ag iarraidh aon droch rud a rá agus ní maith liom go bhfuil orainn na cruinniú seo a bheith againn le thuismitheoirí mar tá siad deacair agus tuigim é sin dóibh.

We don't want to say anything bad, and I don't like that we have to have these meetings with parents because they're difficult and I understand that for them.

Agallamh S

Participants felt that these conversations were often made more difficult by the fact that they are not qualified to identify and diagnose children with SEN. This has made them consider how to approach the situation carefully.

Sea, mar mar a dúirt mé níl muid cáilitheach is féidir leat a rá an tugann tú faoi deara riamh ... na heochairfhocail sin a fháil sea, bheadh sé sin iontach.

Yeah, because as I said we are not qualified... but you can say you the wonder did you ever notice ...to get those key words yes, that would be great.

Agallamh B

Treating Parents with Empathy and Collaboration

All of the settings spoke about how they treat parents with empathy when discussing the needs of their children with them. This is due to some of the factors outlined above around some parents not noticing that their child is having difficulties or being reluctant to accept this. However, the work and life experience of the participants has been of great help to them when dealing with parents compassionately and working collaboratively with them.

Caithfidh tú cur chuige go socair agus tuisceannach a bheith agat agus a bheith ag smaoineamh ar an duine sin. It's just you have to approach calmly and compassionately and think of that person.

Agallamh D

The participants spoke about thinking about how the parents are feeling and how you might feel if you were in their situation.

Sílim go bhfuil sé an tábhachtach cén bealach go ndéireann tú pé rud atá le rá agat le tuismitheoir agus arís caithfidh tú seasamh siar agus smaoineigh conas go bhfuil siadsan ag mothú agus conas go mbeidh tusa ag mothú dá mbeadh tusa ag fáil an scéal seo agus sílim sin an áit go dtagann an toideachas isteach agus an traenáil isteach just go mbeidh tú ag go deas séimhg agus go mbeidh tú proifisiúnta agus go mbeidh tú ag rá an rud insan bealach is fearr nach mbeidh an tuismitheoir faoi barraíocht brú. I think it's important how you say whatever you have to say to a parent and again you have to step back and think about how they are feeling and how you would feel if you were getting this story and I think that's where the education comes in and the training comes in, just so that you are nice and calm and that you are professional and that you are saying the thing in the best way that the parent is not under too much pressure.

Agallamh 7

Working collaboratively with the parents is also key to the inclusion of all children in IM preschools and this is a practice that was implemented by all of the settings. Some of the participants spoke about the individual planning in place for children and how their needs were discussed with parents along with the plan that has been put in place.

Déanfaimid plean amach agus an rud tábhachtach leis an plean téann muid i dteagmháil leis na tuismitheoirí agus tá sé sin fiorthábhachtach go bhfeiceann an páiste go bhfuil muid i dteagmháil leis na tuismitheoirí agus go bhfuil gach duine ag obair le chéile. *We will come up with a plan and the important thing with the plan is we contact the parents and that is really important that the child sees that we are in contact with the parents and that everyone is working together.*

Agallamh AJI

The importance of listening to parents was also discussed as part of the collaborative process and making sure that their suggestions, ideas and experience is taken into consideration.

Agus sílim go bhfuil sé tábhachtach dúinn éisteacht leis na tuismitheoirí chomh maith, is cuma cad atá le rá acu agus b'fhéidir go mbeadh ceisteanna acu agus gur mhaith leat a bheith in ann iad a fhreagairt más féidir. *And I think its important to parents to listen to the parents as well, whatever they have to say and they might have questions and you would like to be able to answer them if possible.*

Agallamh C

Continous Professional Development (CPD)

Conversations with Parents

The CPD needs of participants in the area of special education was further investigated in the focus groups and interviews. The need for more education and training when discussing the SEN of children with parents was identified as one of their primary needs with 11 of the participants discussing the need for more education and training in this area. The difficulties that participants experienced in this area are outlined in the section above on collaboration with parents. In relation to the more education and training in this area, participants wanted more

guidance on how to approach sensitive topics and the correct terminology to use when doing so. Participants spoke about how more education and training would help them feel more comfortable and confident in this area.

Cosúil le conas dul ag caint le tuismitheoirí agus ag mothú muiníneach sa mhéid is go bhfuil muid, táimid oilte go leor mar braitheann tú uaireanta má bhíonn tú ag bualadh le tuismitheoirí go mothaíonn siad go maith, cé hé tusa ag rá é sin liomsa? *How to go about talking to parents and feeling confident in that we are, we are educated enough because you do sometimes feel if you're meeting with parents that they feel well, who are you to tell me?*

Agallamh B

Categories of SEN

Ten of the participants spoke about the need for more CPD in the area of categories of SEN and how they can be identified. This was important due to the different needs of children within categories of SEN, as no two children are the same.

Gach leibhéal éagsúla, is dócha de rudaí, mar nach bhfuil na páistí go léir mar an gcéanna. *All different, probably levels of stuff, because one kid isn't the same.*

Agallamh A

This the participants said would help them identify the need of children in their settings and guide them when discussing the needs of the children with parents.

Is dóigh liom go bhfuil an oiread sin riachtanais éagsúla ann, níl a fhios agam. *I think there's so many different needs it's, I don't know.*

Agallamh B

Beidh sé sin ar fheabhas agus an rud eile atá tusa ag caint faoi RSO, kind of what to expect of the páistí a bhfuil RSO acu. Conas a déileáil leo. *That will be great and the other thing you're talking about is SEN, kind of what you would expect from the kids who have SEN. How to deal with them.*

Agallamh C

*Na comharthaí ach go háirithe you know
cén chaoi iad a aithint agus tá a fhios agam
nach bhfuil muid like.... Níl mé cáilithe
chun diagnóis a thabhairt chuig aon duine,
ach má tá muid in ann iad a aithint agus má
tá tuiscint againn ar cad iad na comharthaí
cad a d'fhéadfaí muid like déanamh chun
cabhrú leo.*

*The signs especially you know how to
recognize them, and I know we're not like....
I'm not qualified to diagnose anyone, but if
we can recognize them and if we have an
understanding of what the signs are what
we could like do to help them.*

Agallamh S

Strategies

The need for more CPD on the categories of SEN feeds into the needs of the participants around how they would like more education and training around strategies to help them meet the needs of children. Ten of the participants spoke about their need for more information on how to meet the needs of children in their setting. Participants were keen to learn about best practice in meeting the needs of the children.

*Is dóigh liom straitéisí chun déileáil rudaí
cosúil le hiompraíocht dhúshlánach. Cineál
cleachtais is fearr, cineál straitéisí is dóigh
liom, rudaí mar sin.*

*I think like strategies to deal with like
challenging behaviour. Kind of best practice,
kind of strategies I suppose things like that.*

Agallamh AJI

The main themes discussed by the participants were strategies to help deal with behaviour, emotional regulation and the sensory needs of the children.

*Ar na rudaí go léir ach mar riachtanais
céadfach agus rudaí mar sin.*

*On all the things but like sensory needs and
stuff like that.*

Agallamh KI

Community of Practice

An area that many participants spoke about is the need for the development of a community of practice among educators in IM preschools. They felt that a forum such as this, online or in

person would be good for them as they could meet and discuss the strategies that work in their settings as well as gathering ideas from others in the community.

<i>Grúpaí atá ag obair i naíonraí ag bualadh le chéile ar Zoom nó ar WhatsApp just chun labhairt faoi na dúshláin agus na rudaí atá ag obair dóibh nó nach bhfuil.</i>	<i>Groups working in naíonra meeting on Zoom or WhatsApp just to talk about the challenges and what is or isn't working for them.</i>
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Agallamh AJ2

Some participants spoke about how this was a practice that was in place several years back and it was a very valuable learning experience for them.

<i>Fadó fadó nuair a bhíomar mar FNT beidh deiseanna dúinne grúpaí áirithe teacht le chéile, b'fhéidir le saineolaí nó gan saineolaithe nó fiú amháin bileog eolais nó a leithéad agus é a phlé le chéile.</i>	<i>A long time ago, when we were a FNT, there were opportunities for certain groups of us to come together; perhaps with an expert or without experts or even just an information leaflet or something like that and discuss it together.</i>
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Agallamh 10

It was also stated that the participants would like to have the opportunity to have information sessions or question and answer sessions with professionals such as speech and language therapists or educational psychologists for information, support and guidance. This they felt would be a very valuable experience and would help them in their work with parents and children.

<i>Bheadh sé an chabhrach go mbeadh cineál painéal le Gaeilge acu gur féidir teacht chun obair linn agus gur féidir linn ceisteanna a chur orthu.</i>	<i>It would be helpful if they had some kind of panel with Irish that we could come and work with and that we could ask them questions.</i>
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Agallamh AJ2

Chapter 5: Conclusion & Recommendations

Introduction

In this chapter, conclusions and recommendations are made as to how the findings of the study could be used to enhance policy and practice for special education provision in IM preschool settings outside of the Gaeltacht.

Research Context

This study was undertaken to explore how such IM preschools support inclusion, identify training needs, and manage the intersection of Irish language learning and special education. It draws on data collected from IM preschool educators working across the country and seeks to highlight both the opportunities and the challenges they face. Importantly, this study was not conducted as an assessment or evaluation of Government services or public agencies. Its focus is on the practices and perspectives of educators within IM preschool settings. By centring their voices and experiences, the report aims to contribute meaningfully to the ongoing development of inclusive, culturally and linguistically responsive early years education in Ireland.

Conclusions

The research was conducted independently to capture the perspectives and experiences of educators, with the goal of informing best practice, identifying areas of need, and contributing to the broader conversation around inclusion in minority language education. The approach adopted offers an educational and linguistic lens from which to understand the reported needs of the sector, which is hoped will help frame and support policy direction and interventions.

1. Inclusion and Policy Frameworks

It is clear from the findings of the study that IM preschools were implementing inclusive frameworks and practices as outlined in Government frameworks such as the AIM programme

and the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter for Early Childhood Care and Education (DCEDIY, 2025).

2. Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

The international literature reviewed on the CPD needs of teachers in immersion contexts emphasises the lack of structured training pathways for s in IM educators' settings, especially regarding SEN and bilingual education (most of the research is conducted on primary school and post-primary schools). Within this study, educators confirmed this gap, rating CPD access as one of the biggest challenges that they face. They specifically identified the need for training in areas like bilingualism and second language acquisition, well-being and autism. Moreover, educators expressed low confidence in discussing SEN with parents, directly tying into the literature's concerns about professional preparedness. There is strong alignment between the literature and findings, both identifying a critical need for targeted CPD in SEN within IM contexts with a focus on immersion education. Whilst there is much CPD available in the broader context of SEN and preschool education, there is a need for more CPD specifically focused on supporting children learning through the medium of Irish.

3. Resources in the Irish Language

The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 notes a scarcity of Irish language resources, assessments and interventions. It also discusses the importance of culturally and linguistically appropriate tools for supporting inclusion. This is one of the most frequently cited challenges. Educators consistently mentioned a lack of assessment tools, teaching materials, and external services (e.g., SLTs, psychologists) in Irish, making it harder to accurately assess and support children with SEN. Findings strongly reinforce the literature's concern about linguistic inequity in services, showing it is a major barrier to inclusion in practice.

4. Bilingualism and SEN

The international literature reviewed in Chapter 2 challenges the outdated notions that bilingualism negatively affects children with SEN. It presents evidence supporting bilingual education as beneficial, even for children with SEN, such as autism or speech/language delays. Despite the literature's positive framing, findings indicate that many parents and professionals still doubt the appropriateness of IM education for children with SEN. For example, 51% of participants reported parents were advised against sending their children with SEN to IM primary schools. It is therefore evident that there is a mismatch between research and practice. While the literature supports bilingualism for children with SEN, negative perceptions persist, often influencing transitions to English-medium education.

5. Identification and Diagnosis of SEN

Access to early diagnosis is discussed as being hampered by long waiting lists and a lack of Irish language proficient professionals as identified in the literature in Chapter 2. The data supports this concern with many children being undiagnosed with SEN due to delays in the AON process, therefore, educators struggled with early identification due to limited services available to them, particularly through the medium of Irish. The findings validate the concerns expressed in the literature. The diagnostic bottleneck remains a significant issue, especially in IM contexts where services are unavailable through Irish.

6. Benefits and Challenges of Immersion Education

The international literature outlines the cognitive, social and cultural benefits of bilingual education and the IM preschool education model. However, in immersion education there is the need for skilled teachers/educators and structured supports to ensure successful outcomes for all children. In this study, educators highlighted these benefits but also pointed out practical limitations, particularly around educator burnout, class size, and the complexity of teaching

SEN students through the medium of Irish. While educators were generally committed and positive, they were also overwhelmed. There's an appreciation of the philosophy of immersion education, but findings stress the lack of infrastructure and human resources to support it effectively.

Recommendations

Recommendations are made under the following topics, educator and support structures, Irish language resources, enhancing support for SEN in IM preschools, workforce support and sustainability, family communication and support, transition to primary schools, curriculum and pedagogical strategies, public campaigns, research and advocacy and an early start programme for IM education.

Recommendations made in this chapter are based on the IM preschool context and what would be beneficial for those educating children learning through Irish as a second or minority language in these contexts. It is acknowledged that some of the recommendations made may relate to resources currently available or recommendations being actioned. This in itself is deemed valuable information as it may speak to a lack of general awareness of existing supports.

Early Years Educator Pathways

- In relation to the undergraduate ECE programmes in Irish universities there is a need to provide more emphasis on education through the medium of Irish and IM preschool education. There is also a need to ensure that there is a greater emphasis placed on special education provision in these degree courses.
- There is a need to establish other pathways to upskill those already qualified to teach in the sector who do not speak Irish but who would be willing to work in an IM preschool if they could acquire Irish language proficiency.

- Launch targeted campaigns to promote careers in IM early years education, especially among fluent Irish speakers.

Irish-Language Resources

- It is recommended that more inclusive teaching and assessment resources are translated and created through the medium of Irish.
- It is necessary to create a central repository of Irish-language resources, especially for SEN support (e.g., social stories, visuals, behaviour supports).
- As per the Official Languages Act (Government of Ireland, 2003) it is imperative that all support and materials are fully available in Irish.

Recruitment

- Recruitment is a main priority to ensure that there are suitably qualified educators available to work through the medium of Irish. It is recommended that a national panel of AIM early years educators who are fluent in Irish is established. The need for panels such as these have been identified previously in the official review of the AIM programme and it is important that the phased implementation of recommendations maintains a focus on educators who are proficient in Irish (DCEDIY, 2024).
- There is a need to create fast-track upskilling programmes for people with Irish fluency but lacking ECCE qualifications to increase the workforce available to IM preschools.
- There is the need to ensure the provision of early, flexible, and adequate support through the medium of Irish for children attending IM preschools.

- As is detailed in many reports, there is a need for the Government to increase pay parity and include educators in pension schemes, similar to school-based SNAs. This will ensure that preschools can offer a more inclusive learning environment for all children.
- It is recommended that incentives should be provided to encourage educators to work in IM preschools such as being given a supplementary increase for teaching through Irish. Ideally, funding for this would be provided by the Government.

Enhancing Support for SEN in IM Preschools

(a) Early Identification & Intervention

- Establish routine developmental screening within settings with professional support to help educators identify SEN earlier, especially given the young starting age and diagnostic delays. These services should be available through the medium of Irish.
- It is important for the Government to ensure that all children have access to a public health nurse (PHN) for developmental assessments. This is particularly important since the COVID19 pandemic, as it is evident from the research that the pandemic may have had a negative impact on the development of children (Barnett & Jung, 2021; Education Endowment Foundation, 2021; Ofsted, 2020; UNICEF UK, 2021).
- Provide further training to educators on observing and documenting behaviours that may indicate developmental or language difficulties, with a focus on identifying SEN for children learning through a second language.

(b) Professional Collaboration

- Increase on-site access to educational professionals (e.g., Speech & Language Therapists, Educational Psychologists) for observations and strategy guidance. Implement a model where specialists visit settings termly to provide tailored

support. Ensure that those who are visiting IM preschool settings have an understanding of immersion education and proficiency in Irish.

Family Communication and Support

- Provide bilingual guides and workshops to help parents understand and support the bilingual development of children with SEN.
- It is recommended that IM preschool educators receive further education and training in working collaboratively with parents/guardians and on how to have sensitive conversations with parents about the SEN of their child.

Transition to Primary School

- It is recommended that the process of creating and sharing structured transition plans from IM preschools to primary schools is further developed and promoted to allow for the smooth transition of children across contexts.
- It would be beneficial to encourage collaboration and shared professional development between early years and primary educators (particularly in the IM education sector) to allow for the effect transition of children across contexts.

Curriculum & Pedagogical Strategies

- It is necessary to provide ongoing professional development to IM preschool educators in inclusive pedagogies, especially for supporting sensory needs, emotional regulation, and behavioural strategies.
- It would be beneficial to develop an undergraduate university recognised degree in ECCE for IM preschool education with a sufficient focus on SEN.
- A focus should also be placed on suitable immersion education strategies for IM preschools. It is important to continue to prioritise and develop immersion

education strategies such as song, play, and role play in the IM preschool context, which were shown to benefit children with and without SEN. It is recommended that this professional development is provided in-line with the recommendations made in the international literature reviewed (Andrews, 2006; May, 2013; May, Hill & Tiakwai, 2004; Rodriguez, 2005; Rodriguez & Carrasquillo, 1997).

Public Campaigns

- It is recommended that a national awareness campaign is launched showing that IM education is beneficial for all children including those with SEN.
- The launch of a public campaign is also recommended to educate external professionals (e.g., PHNs, educational psychologists, and speech and language therapists) on the advantages of bilingualism, countering outdated misconceptions about IM education being unsuitable for children with SEN.
- It would be beneficial for the Government to continue to offer further information, support and guidance to parents of young children in relation to developmental milestones and it is imperative that all children are offered access to developmental checks by the local PHN.

Continuous Professional Development

- Within IM preschools a good starting point for CPD would be self-evaluation and action planning using the resources in the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide. This allows educators to reflect on their current practice and identify areas for development. Each pillar of practice includes specific resources. The Practice Guide is available in Irish: [Aistear Síolta Practice Guide \(Gaeilge\)](#)
- For CPD and career progression, the Nurturing Skills website is also a valuable resource ([Nurturing Skills](#)).

- The development of IM education specific courses in the area of special education delivered through Irish.

Research & Advocacy

(a) Ongoing Monitoring

- It would be worthwhile to undertake a longitudinal study to assess outcomes of children with SEN in IM settings. The data gathered through this study could be used to inform funding decisions, policy development, and inclusive practices.

(b) Advocacy

- It is important to further advocate for dedicated funding for resources through the medium of Irish (e.g., sensory materials, language tools) for all IM education contexts.
- It is also necessary to continue advocating for policy changes that recognise the unique challenges of IM early years settings in national education frameworks.

Early Start Programme

- The findings of the study suggest that there are many benefits for IM preschools that are located on the site of IM primary schools. It is recommended that a programme like that of the Early Start programme (Department of Education, 2022) is created to further support the longevity of IM preschool education. The Early Start Programme is an Irish Department of Education initiative aimed at providing a one-year preschool programme for children in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. It operates within selected primary schools and is designed to enhance the children's overall development and school readiness, particularly focusing on language, cognitive, social and emotional skills. The target group for

the programme is children aged 3 years and 2 months to 4 years and 7 months, prior to entry into Junior Infants.

- There are many potential benefits of this scheme for IM education if it was adapted to meet the needs of the IM education sector:
 - i. Adapting or expanding the Early Start model to support IM preschool settings could significantly benefit language acquisition and inclusion in IM preschool and IM primary schools.
 - ii. An early start programme could serve as a stepping-stone for immersion, giving children early access to Irish in a structured, play-based setting.
 - iii. Suitably qualified educators could provide explicit oral language instruction in Irish, especially helpful for children with speech and language delays and normalise bilingualism early, reducing later resistance or confusion.
 - iv. A structured environment, such as that provided in the early start programme, can help to identify SEN earlier, allowing for more timely AIM or professional referrals before Junior Infants.
 - v. Children with SEN or from disadvantaged backgrounds would receive extra support in Irish, helping bridge the gap before formal schooling.
 - vi. It could reduce the barriers for families concerned about their child's readiness for IM primary education.
 - vii. It would help all children become familiar with the routine, language, and setting of a primary school. Hence, facilitating a smoother transition into Junior Infants in IM schools.

Conclusion

It is clear from the findings presented in this report that there are many perceived benefits of IM education for children with SEN. Nevertheless, the data also suggests that there are still many challenges faced by these contexts when meeting the needs of all children. The recommendations presented provide an overview of how the nuances of IM preschool education can be considered in the areas of policy and practice. The findings of the present study contribute to the limited international research available regarding the prevalence and types of SEN in immersion education preschools. Therefore, the results of the study may be of significance and have implications for other forms of bilingual and immersion education internationally. There may be findings and recommendations within the present study which are transferrable to other bilingual and immersion preschool educational contexts internationally, and a rich set of data is provided to facilitate this. No known study has been conducted previously which provides this breakdown of SEN in IM preschools outside of the Gaeltacht or immersion education preschools internationally.

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Appendix A: Report Feedback from AIM

The report was sent to the Access, Inclusion, Research and Data Unit in the Department of Children, Disability and Equality for review and feedback. The feedback received was:

- The report mentioned some of the recommendations from the AIM Evaluation. The Department has already taken the Evaluation recommendations on board and is working on improving and expanding the programme to address these. There is a press release on the AIM website from January 2024 advising that the findings from the evaluation have already informed the phased extension of AIM announced in Budget 2024, specifically the extension of targeted AIM supports to ECCE-age children beyond time they spend in the ECCE programme – both in term and out of term from September 2024. This press release also mentions that we have developed an action plan to respond to areas for improvement, including increasing awareness of AIM, further building the capacity and confidence of early years educators and providers in supporting children with autism and streamlining the application process for equipment, appliances, and minor alterations.
- In addition, our intent to expand AIM to all children in Early Learning and Childcare settings through creating tailored versions of AIM for the age 0-3 cohort and the SAC cohort has been publicised online over the last 12 months, chiefly through our responses to parliamentary questions.
- The role of a Level 7 additional assistant which the report describes as one-to-one support. AIM does not fund Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) and any early years educator hired under AIM is a shared resource for all children during ECCE hours and additional hours. Please see below a number of relevant published statements:
 - <https://aim.gov.ie/aim-supports/targeted-supports/> *(Providers can use this funding either to reduce the child-to-adult ratio in the pre-school room or to*

fund an extra staff member as a shared resource with other children in the ECCE setting.)

- <https://aim.gov.ie/app/uploads/2021/05/AIM-Level-7-assistance-information-updated-version-21.09.21.pdf> *(Level 7 AIM is not a Special Needs Assistance (SNA) model.)*
- <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2024-10-22/608/> *(In line with emerging best practice to support the integration and independence of children with a disability, the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) does not fund Special Needs Assistants (SNAs). Rather, Level 7 of AIM provides financial support to the preschool provider, which is used either to reduce the adult-to-child ratio in the preschool room or to buy in additional assistance to the preschool room. Accordingly, AIM Level 7 assistance is a shared resource for the preschool setting.)*

Appendix B: Notes on Terminology

Difficulties

The term "*difficulties*" is used in this report as it is often preferred over "*differences*" in educational and psychological literature because it emphasises the presence of specific challenges that interfere with learning or functioning, thereby highlighting the need for targeted support or intervention. While "*differences*" may suggest a neutral or even positive variation in abilities, "*difficulties*" implies a measurable struggle that can affect academic achievement and daily life. For instance, Snowling and Hulme (2012) use the term "reading difficulties" to describe deficits in phonological processing that require structured intervention, distinguishing these from mere stylistic differences in reading. Similarly, diagnostic frameworks such as the DSM-5 define conditions like Specific Learning Disorder in terms of "difficulties learning and using academic skills" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), reinforcing the notion that these are not just alternate learning approaches but areas of impairment. Furthermore, Vygotsky (1993) emphasized that developmental difficulties can be mitigated through appropriate social and educational support, underlining the practical importance of identifying such challenges. Using the term "*difficulties*" also avoids minimising real barriers to success, especially in cases where individuals experience persistent struggles that cannot be attributed solely to diverse learning preferences (Geary, 2004). Thus, the literature supports the use of "*difficulties*" to reflect a more accurate and actionable understanding of the challenges faced by individuals in educational and clinical contexts.

Autism

The use of the term "autism", as opposed to more general or euphemistic alternatives like "autism spectrum disorder" or "neurodiverse profile" is grounded in both clinical accuracy and a growing recognition of identity within the autistic community. From a clinical perspective, "autism" refers to a neurodevelopmental condition formally recognized in diagnostic manuals such as the DSM-5 and ICD-11, where it is classified as autism spectrum disorder (ASD)

(American Psychiatric Association, 2013; World Health Organization, 2022). This term provides a shared and standardized language for professionals, researchers, and early years educators, facilitating consistent diagnosis, access to services, and evidence-based interventions.

At the same time, the term "autism" is increasingly used by many individuals within the autistic community as an identity marker, rather than a deficit-based label. Research shows that many autistic people prefer identity-first language (e.g., "autistic person") over person-first language (e.g., "person with autism") because it reflects autism as an integral part of who they are, not just a condition they carry (Kenny et al., 2016). The direct use of "autism" also avoids ambiguity and reinforces visibility, which is important for advocacy, social recognition, and self-understanding. Moreover, terms like "autism spectrum condition" or "neurodivergent profile," while valuable in inclusive discourse, can obscure the specific needs and experiences associated with autism by placing them under broader categories. In summary, using the term "autism" aligns with both clinical clarity and community preference, supporting accurate communication, identity affirmation, and the delivery of appropriate supports and accommodations.

Older or Original Terminology:

In places in this report, older or original terms may be used as referenced in the literature that is cited. Using older or original terms in research papers, particularly when reporting on historical studies or quoting past literature maintains accuracy, fidelity, and scholarly integrity. There are several key reasons, supported by academic practice and literature, for preferring the use of original terminology rather than substituting newer or more acceptable alternatives:

- When citing or discussing past research, it is important to preserve the original language used by the authors to accurately reflect the context, conceptual framework, and terminology of the time. Altering terms retroactively risks misrepresenting the intent or

findings of earlier work. APA Publication Manual (7th ed., 2019) emphasizes the importance of “accurately conveying the meaning of the original source,” especially in historical or archival reporting.

- Using older terms appropriately allows researchers to trace the evolution of concepts, language, and societal attitudes. This is important in disciplines such as psychology, education, and disability studies, where the understanding of conditions and identities has changed over time. For example, in autism research, early studies may use the term “Asperger’s Syndrome,” which is no longer a separate diagnosis in the DSM-5. Keeping the original term helps contextualize findings and clarify that diagnostic criteria have since changed. Gernsbacher (2007) argues that shifts in language reflect changing societal values, and that documenting these changes is critical for interpreting research trends over time.
- Academic integrity requires that researchers represent sources faithfully. Paraphrasing or updating terminology could lead to inaccurate quotations or misattributions, especially when the original terms carry specific meanings or were part of diagnostic criteria at the time.
- In some cases, newer terms may not be exact equivalents of the older ones. Replacing original terminology can cause conceptual confusion, especially if the newer term has broader or narrower implications than the one originally used.