

NCSE Periodic Critical Review

17 Nollaig 2025

Children educated through the medium of Irish, and the professionals who support them, have a right to equitable, timely, and contextually appropriate access to special education supports. Irish-medium education operates within a distinct linguistic and pedagogical context, which must be explicitly recognised within NCSE policy, planning, and service delivery.

Currently, many children in Irish-medium settings experience delays or barriers in accessing assessments, interventions, and support services through Irish. A shortage of Irish-speaking psychologists, therapists, Special Needs Assistants and other professionals undermines the effectiveness of supports and places unnecessary pressure on schools, families, and staff. Where supports are delivered solely through English, this can negatively impact children's linguistic development, educational outcomes, and emotional wellbeing, as well as being a barrier to inclusion.

Staff working in the Irish-medium sector report ongoing challenges in sourcing appropriate teaching resources, professional development, and external supports through Irish. These challenges contribute to inequity between English-medium and Irish-medium settings and are inconsistent with inclusive education principles.

This review presents further opportunity for the NCSE to:

- Explicitly recognise Irish-medium education within special education policy and models of support.
- Plan proactively for the recruitment, training, and retention of Irish-speaking special education professionals, drawing on and extending the excellent work currently being carried out by the newly appointed Irish-language project co-ordinator.
- Ensure assessments, interventions, guidance, and parent supports are available through Irish as a matter of standard provision.
- Engage meaningfully with Irish-medium stakeholders in the design and evaluation of supports.

While Gaeloideachas recognises the progress made in recent years in addressing the needs of Irish-medium schools, children and young people – such as the appointment of an Irish-language projects co-ordinator, increased TPL opportunities, more translated resources, the forthcoming new website, NCSE participation in Gaeloideachas conferences and events, and shared-information sessions - specific issues remain. These are outlined below to ensure parity of access for children in Irish-medium education.

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Statement of strategy

The strategy makes no reference to the Irish language or to Irish-medium education. This omission fails to recognise the unique context of Irish-medium schools, and the statutory rights of pupils and families.

SENOs

- Many SENOs do not have sufficient Irish to engage meaningfully with Irish-medium schools and families, despite a requirement to provide services through Irish where needed.
- Some parents report that the SENO system feels inaccessible, passive, and misaligned with the needs of their children and families.
- SENOs should work in the best interests of the child and family in mind, rather than functioning as gatekeepers or defenders of school capacity.
- Some parents report a consistent lack of contact from the SENO, especially at key times in their child's journey.
 - Some families have never met the SENO.
 - Some have no idea what the role of the SENO actually is.
 - Recommendation: SENOs should proactively contact families at key points in their child's journey (after assessments, during school placement decisions, at key transitions, etc.).
- Perception of passivity/avoidance by some
 - In some cases, families report doing all preparatory and advocacy work themselves, with the SENO's involvement limited to approving paperwork/stamping a form.

Training

- There is a real need for additional professional learning opportunities for Irish-medium education teachers in the area of SEN (Andrews, 2020; Barrett et al., 2020; COGG, 2010; Mac Donncha et al., 2005; Ní Chinnéide, 2009; Ní Fhoighil and Travers, 2013).
- Any training provided for Irish-medium schools (SNAs and educators) must take into consideration the unique linguistic and educational context of immersion education/An Gaeltacht. Some of the available supports are overly focused on the English-medium context that the bilingual and / or Irish-language context in which children live/receive their education is being completely ignored. Simply translating English-medium training or resources into Irish is not sufficient.
- Training should be adapted to address specific areas such as:
 - differentiation, assessment, planning, supporting students with SEN learning through Irish

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- supporting literacy, communication and language development in immersion settings
- language and communication difficulties
- bilingual and second language acquisition
- assessing bilingual and multilingual learners/identification of students with SEN learning through Irish
- Dyslexia in bilingual learners.
- Supporting parents to support their child at home, especially if the language of the home is different to the language of school.

Fur more-detailed information, see the recommendations contained in:

Nic Aindriú, Sinéad, Pádraig Ó Duibhir, Lorraine Connaughton-Crean, and Joe Travers. 2022. "The CPD Needs of Irish-Medium Primary and Post-Primary Teachers in Special Education" *Education Sciences* 12, no. 12: 909. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12120909>

- Mandatory training for SENOs would be beneficial in areas including:
 - The needs of bilingual and multilingual children
 - Immersion education
 - Autism
 - PDA
 - Disability rights
- All NCSE staff working with Irish-medium schools and pupils should receive training in immersion education, bilingualism, and multilingualism. There is a need for better professional development for those supporting Irish-medium schools in relation to the cognitive and other benefits of bilingualism for all children, including children with special and additional educational needs.
- All NCSE training should adopt a neuro-affirmative approach. Training and behavioural-intervention programmes such as TEACCH and Attention Autism should not be promoted as they are closely aligned with ABA-type approaches and prioritise conformity to neurotypical behaviours rather than supporting children to be themselves.

SNA system

- There is a shortage of SNAs with sufficient proficiency in Irish to effectively support children and young people in Irish-medium education. This is a fundamental requirement for inclusion. Targeted training programmes need to be developed for SNAs who work in, or wish to work in, Irish-medium and Gaeltacht schools.
- The SNA system is overly complex and places excessive demands on SNAs, who are frequently forced into crisis-management rather than planned, supportive work.
- Principals are not provided with adequate time, staffing, or resources to manage the additional workload associated with SNA allocation, coordination, and planning.

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Resources

- Tailored guidance, supports, and resources for Irish-medium schools has improved but remains insufficient and require significant expansion. Schools report that the lack of assessment and teaching resources available through Irish is challenging for them when meeting the SEN of students.
- There are no specific, formal guidelines for autism classes operating within Irish-medium schools, particularly regarding language of instruction and student engagement. Without full immersion education in these classes, meaningful inclusion cannot be achieved.
- There is serious concern regarding the future rollout of educational therapy services in Irish-medium mainstream schools:
 - As it stands, there is a huge shortage of SLTs, OLTS, and other professionals who understand immersion education, bilingualism, and multilingualism.
 - An even greater shortage exists of professionals who can carry deliver these services as Gaeilge.
- Parents of children in Irish-medium education are receiving recommendations for assistive technology that do not include Irish-language options, creating a barrier to inclusion and limiting children's and young people's ability to reach their full potential. This issue requires urgent attention. Culturally and linguistically appropriate AAC and assistive technology is not just desirable but a necessity for these students. We strongly recommend that the NCSE publishes a comprehensive list of Irish-language assistive technology options for schools, parents and the wider public, developed in collaboration with the ABAIR team in Trinity College Dublin.