A Survey of Assessment and Additional Teaching Support in Irish Immersion Education

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Abstract: This study investigates the assessment methods used in Irish immersion schools to identify students for additional teaching support. An overview is provided of the percentage of students receiving additional teaching support in this context and whether there is a higher rate of students accessing additional teaching support in Irish immersion schools than English-medium schools. The challenges of assessment through Irish as a second language are evaluated. In addition, this study investigates the language used by educational professionals when assessing and/or providing interventions for these students. A quantitative research approach was adopted for this investigation, with a random stratified sample of 20% (N = 29) of Irish immersion schools in the Republic of Ireland completing an online questionnaire. SPSS was used to analyse the data. The findings of the present research contribute to the limited body of knowledge available on the types of assessment used in immersion education to identify students for additional teaching support. These findings are significant as there has been limited research undertaken on this aspect in immersion education and the findings of this study may have implications for immersion education contexts in other countries.

1. Introduction

This study investigated the assessment methods used in Irish immersion schools to identify students in need of additional teaching support. It also evaluated the challenges faced by schools when assessing children learning through Irish as a second language (L2). An overview is provided of the language of assessment/intervention used by educational service providers, such as, educational psychologists and speech and language therapists when working with these students. The data were gathered through survey research, which included a randomised stratified sample of 20% (N = 29) of Irish immersion schools in the Republic of Ireland (RoI). In these schools, all curriculum subjects are taught through the medium of Irish (except for English as a curriculum subject). This means, for example, that a lesson on 'the Romans' in history is taught through Irish, the focus of the lesson is on the subject content, rather than the teaching of Irish itself (Cummins 2009). Early total immersion programmes are provided by these schools to those living mainly in cities and small towns outside of the heartland Irish-speaking areas known as the Gaeltacht. In Irish immersion schools in the RoI, students predominantly come from English speaking homes and receive up to two school years' total immersion in the Irish language, before they commence English as a curriculum subject (NCCA 2019). This period of immersion allows students to develop greater proficiency in the Irish language (NCCA 2019).

At the time of the present study, there were 145 Irish immersion schools located in the RoI outside of the Gaeltacht. This figure amounts to 4.6% of all primary schools in the RoI (N = 3111) at this time. For the academic school year 2017/2018 there were

640 primary schools involved in the DEIS[1] programme for schools located in areas of low socio-economic status, only 15 of these schools were Irish immersion primary schools (DES 2017b). There were 1305 special classes for students with special educational needs (SEN) in the RoI at the time; however, only 4 of these were in Irish immersion primary schools (NCSE 2018). Within this article, four research questions are addressed:

1. How many students in Irish immersion education are in receipt of additional teaching support due to their special educational needs?
2. What methods are used to select students for this additional teaching support?
3. What are the challenges of appropriate assessment in Irish immersion education?
4. What external support services[2] are provided through the medium of Irish to students in these schools?

In order to investigate these issues, a questionnaire was designed and sent to a randomised stratified sample of 20% of Irish immersion primary schools. This questionnaire gathered data on the number of students in receipt of additional teaching support in these schools, and the gender breakdown of this cohort (Research Question One). It also assessed which forms of informal and formal assessment were used by schools to identify students for additional teaching support (Research Question Two). In the questionnaire, schools were presented with a list of factors that they had to rate in terms of how challenging they were in the Irish immersion primary education context (Research Question Three). Schools were also asked to identify what external services attended their school and in which language they undertook their work with students (Research Question Four).

Through investigating the research questions, a comparison can be made as to whether there are more or fewer students in Irish immersion schools, learning through Irish as an L2 and in receipt of additional teaching support than students being educated through English, the majority community language. This is important as much of the research suggests that students learning through an L2 can be disproportionately represented with SEN (Artiles et al. 2010). As used in this article, this term relates to "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" (Government of Ireland 2004, Sct. 2). It is important to assess how Irish immersion schools select students for additional teaching support, as there has been much discussion internationally regarding how to appropriately assess children who are learning through an L2 (Caesar and Kohler 2007; Leung and Scott 2009). The research suggests that the use of bilingual assessment is best practice for students who are bilingual or are learning through an L2 (O'Toole and Hickey 2013). It is recommended that students are assessed in both of their languages so that their total abilities (in their first and second language) can be identified. However, implementing this form of assessment can be challenging due to factors, such as, time constraints and the availability of bilingual assessments. This topic is discussed in further detail below.

1.1. Literacy Assessment in Immersion Education

Early identification and intervention of literacy difficulties in students is considered best practice to help meet their needs and improve their reading ability (Simmons et al. 2008; Vellutino et al. 2008). These literacy difficulties may include issues with short-term memory, word recognition, phonological awareness, spelling, and decoding. This is particularly true for students in immersion education who are learning through an L2 (Bournot-Trites 2008; Geva 2006; MacCoubrey et al. 2004; Wise and Chen 2010, 2015). In immersion education it has been found that students with literacy difficulties are often not identified until later in

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[1] DEIS: Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools, schools located in areas where children are at greatest risk of Educational disadvantage (Government of Ireland 2020).

[2] These are services such as, educational psychologists, speech and language therapists, and occupational therapists which are provided outside of school.

their school years and this in turn means that they may miss out on this very important period for early intervention (Andrews 2020; Barnes 2017; MacCoubrey et al. 2004; Wise and Chen 2010, 2015).

In French immersion education contexts in Canada, the lack of early identification and intervention services for struggling readers has often led to students transferring out to English-medium education where they can benefit from the early identification and intervention opportunities available there (Wise and Chen 2015). Research suggests that this may also be the case for students learning through Irish as an L2 (Andrews 2020; Ní Chinnéide 2009; Nic Aindriú et al. 2020). The early identification of students learning through a minority language or L2 is challenging due to the fact that these students undertake a period of total immersion in the minority language/L2 before they start reading in the majority community language (Wise and Chen 2010, 2015). That said, studies in the Canadian context have shown that early English phonological awareness assessments can predict reading achievement in the French of immersion students (Erdos et al. 2011, 2014; Jared et al. 2011; Wise and Chen 2010). Thus, it is possible that in the Irish context, assessments in the majority language, English, can also shed light on the development of Irish.

In all primary schools in the RoI, students must undertake standardised assessment in literacy and numeracy in 2nd (age 7–8 years), 4th (age 9–10 years), and 6th (age 11–12 years) classes. However, it is important to note that standardised assessments are available to schools in English literacy, Irish literacy, and mathematics for class groupings from the end of senior infants (age 5–6) to 6th class (Educational Research Centre 2020a). In English-medium schools, this mandatory assessment is undertaken in English reading and mathematics (through English), whilst in Irish immersion schools standardised testing is undertaken in Irish reading, English reading and mathematics for these class groups. Standardised mathematics assessments are available through both the medium of English and Irish, however, it is not specified by the Department of Education and Skills (DES 2017a) in which language the mathematics assessment should be administered in Irish immersion schools. Recent research suggests that the most frequently used methods of assessment by Irish immersion schools in the RoI for the identification and assessment of students for additional teaching support, are teacher observation, the Middle Infant Screening Test[3] (GL Assessment 2020), and the Drumcondra primary Irish literacy test[4] (Educational Research Centre 2020b; Barrett 2016). As seen from the research above on French immersion education, assessments of early English literacy can be useful for the early identification of struggling students coming from homes where English is their first language. It is therefore important to note the value of assessment through the majority language, English in the Irish immersion context. Other assessment methods used by Irish immersion schools, include standardised assessments that are delivered through the medium of English, for example, the Non Reading Intelligence Test (Carty and Young 2012)[5], Wechsler Individual Achievement Test[6] (Wechsler 2017), and the Wide Range Achievement test[7] (Robertson and Wilkinson 2006).

For over 10 years now, there have been calls for more standardised assessment to be made available through the medium of Irish (COGG 2010; NCCA 2007). The need for bilingual literacy assessments in Irish and English has also been referenced in studies on Irish immersion education (Andrews 2020; Barnes 2017). This might allow for the assessment of students in both of their languages and provide a complete overview of their literacy abilities. The development of these assessments might be beneficial, as research has shown that students learning through Irish follow a different trajectory of literacy development compared to students learning through English (Barnes 2017; Parsons and

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3   Middle Infant Screening Test (MIST) is an early phonological assessment in English.
4   Drumcondra primary Irish literacy test is a standardised assessment that evaluates Irish listening and literacy skills.
5   English medium assessment of aspects language and thinking.
6   English medium assessment of reading, language and numerical attainment in one test.
7   English medium measure of the basic academic skills of reading, spelling and mathematics computation.

Lyddy 2009). This can mean that these students are delayed in terms of their non-word and word reading skills in English due to the period of Irish language immersion in these schools. Therefore, the results that they may obtain on English-medium tests may not present an accurate picture of their ability. Research suggests that standardised non-word and word reading tests, along with cognitive ability assessments, should be created through Irish for Irish immersion education students. It is very important that these assessments are normed using students in Irish-immersion schools (Barnes 2017). Unfortunately, there are currently no standardized assessments of early Irish literacy development available.

1.2. Alternative Measures of Assessment for Bilingual Students

Monolingual standardised assessments have been deemed as inappropriate tests for bilingual children due to content bias, linguistic bias, and the disproportionately small representation of bilingual children in the normative sample (Caesar and Kohler 2007; Leung and Scott 2009). Furthermore, researchers have also cautioned against the practice of using only monolingually normed tests for the identification of bilingual children with language impairments (De Lamo White and Jin 2011; Gathercole 2014; Paradis 2010; Williams and McLeod 2012). Many researchers believe that for bilingual children to be accurately assessed, their language skills need to be evaluated in both languages (Hambly and Fombonne 2012; Paradis et al. 2011; Stow and Dodd 2005). Research findings suggest that the assessment of these children in only one of their languages may lead to a misdiagnosis of a language impairment or an inaccurate determination of the nature of their language difficulties (Crutchley et al. 1997). Non-verbal assessments, particularly those which focus on the cognitive processing speed of the learner are recommended for use with students learning through an L2 (Lakin 2012). Cognitive assessments are valuable as they have the ability to measure a student's verbal, quantitative, and nonverbal reasoning skills. Hence, these assessments can provide valuable information in relation to the student's abilities in areas other than language.

Parental report measures are a strong indicator of language impairment in children when early language milestones are assessed (Hoff et al. 2012). Detailed interviews with parents, and teachers on the development of a child's minority language have been shown to be beneficial for assessing the development of the child's first language skills (Boerma and Blom 2017; De Lamo White and Jin 2011; Grimm and Schulz 2014). Language sampling and narratives are also valuable methods of assessment, as they demonstrate the language production abilities of a bilingual child (Pesco and Bird 2016). Narratives allow for the assessment of verbal fluency, lexical development, and code-switching between languages (Bedore et al. 2010; Gutiérrez-Clellen et al. 2008). Furthermore, research findings show that when the results of a bilingual child on a standardised test are compared to their language narrative, these methods assess different areas of language development (Bedore et al. 2010; Cleave et al. 2010; Ebert and Pham 2017; Ebert and Scott 2014).

Dynamic assessments which provide a cross disciplinary evaluation of a child's development have become the focus of recent research for identifying bilingual children with language impairments (Ebert and Kohnert 2016; Martin 2015; Petersen et al. 2017). This assessment method focuses on the ability of a student to respond to an intervention which is interactive in nature (Hasson et al. 2013; Martin 2015). Research conducted in this area has compared the language/literacy development of the child before and after a period of structured intervention. It was found that bilingual children with language impairments could be discriminated from those without language impairments using dynamic assessment (Hasson et al. 2013; Martin 2015). Dynamic assessment has also been shown to be useful for predicting whether bilingual children at risk of language impairments may also be at risk of reading difficulties (Petersen and Gillam 2013).

1.3. Accessing Additional Teaching Support in the Republic of Ireland

Students who experience significant SEN, such as those with mild or transient educational needs including those associated with speech and language difficulties, social or

emotional problems, or co-ordination or attention control difficulties should be considered for additional teaching support, as well as, students who have specific learning disabilities, and those in need of support due to having English as an additional language (DES 2017a, p. 16).

It is recommended that students with a score below the sTen of 4 on the standardised tests of literacy and mathematics discussed above, should be prioritised for additional teaching support in literacy and numeracy (DES 2017a, p. 15). A sTen score is the result a student obtains on a standardised test; this score can then be compared to the standard normal distribution of scores to evaluate how well students are performing in the area of assessment. The Department of Education and Skills (DES 2017a) does not specify in which language the additional teaching support should be provided to students in Irish immersion schools. This is left to the discretion of the schools. Banks and McCoy (2011) estimated that 17% of primary school students were in receipt of additional teaching support. Shiel et al. (2011) compared the number of students in Irish immersion education (N = 3030) and English-medium education (N = 5358) receiving additional teaching support in 2nd and 6th class. As shown in Figure 1, the same percentage of second class students (16%) in both school types, namely students learning through English and those attending an Irish immersion school who predominantly come from homes where English is there first language, attended learning support classes for English literacy. There were fewer students (8%) from second class in Irish immersion schools receiving additional teaching support in mathematics than in English-medium schools (11%), whilst in 6th class in both school types equal numbers of students (10%) were reported to be receiving additional teaching support in mathematics. A marginally higher number of students in 6th class (11%) were obtaining English literacy support in English-medium schools compared to those attending Irish immersion schools (10%). When reviewing these findings, it is important to note that a description of the methods used for selecting students for additional support is not provided for either school type. It was not reported which language(s) (Irish or English) was used for the assessments to identify students for additional teaching support or in which language(s) this additional support was being provided in the Irish immersion schools. Hence, there could be a difference in the selection criteria and the language used to provide additional support in these school types. When the gender breakdown of students receiving additional support was investigated further in the RoI, it was found that similar to international research, more boys than girls were in receipt of additional teaching support in both Irish and English-medium schools (DES 2017a; Ní Chinnéide 2009).
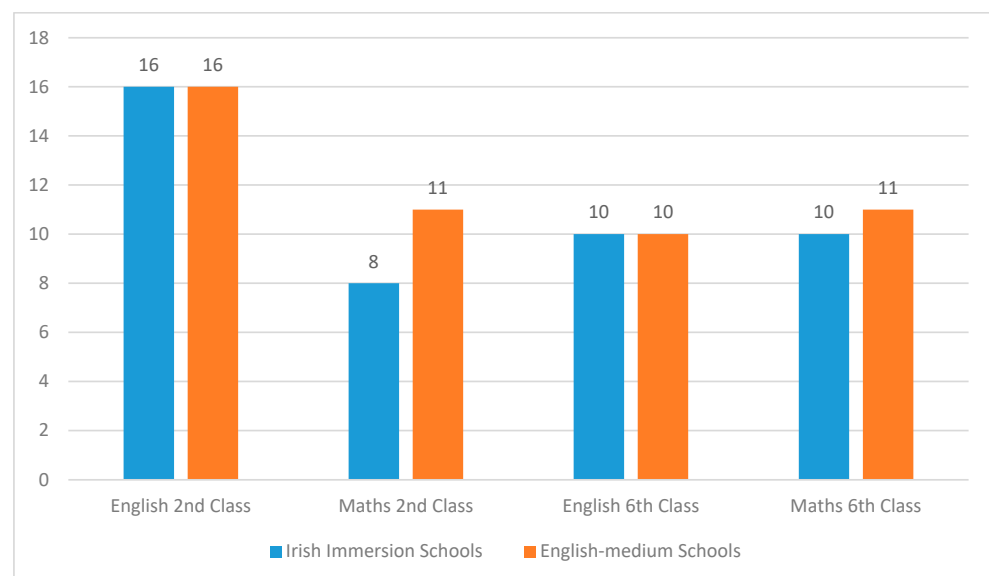

Figure 1. Comparison of the percentage of children attending learning support in Irish immersion and English-medium schools (Adapted from: Shiel et al. 2011, p. 32).

1.4. Educational Professionals Assessing Students Learning through a Second Language

In terms of assessment of bilingual children by educational professionals, such as, speech and language therapists and educational psychologists, it has been found that there are limited bilingual language assessment resources available internationally (Kohnert 2010; McLeod and Verdon 2014). Research suggests that many educational professionals translate monolingual norm referenced tests to another language without the certainty of the reliability or validity of these translated tests. For example, in the context of the RoI, O'Toole and Hickey (2013) found that most speech and language therapists and educational psychologists working with Irish–English bilingual children were left with no option but to translate standardised assessments themselves from English to Irish, whilst still using the norms of the English tests to score children. This was a practice which they were dissatisfied with, but they reported that the demands of the Department of Education for standardised scores, and the lack of appropriate bilingual assessment methods left them with no choice. This practice has been deemed to be unreliable due to the fact that there are differences in the normative populations and also there are variations in terms of the sequence of language acquisition. These factors need to be considered if test translations are to be valid and reliable (Pert and Letts 2003). Even though bilingual assessment is recognised as best practice when working with children with more than one language, it often fails to be undertaken by educational professionals and support service providers. The factors reported as to why bilingual assessment fails (assessment in both of the child's languages) to be undertaken were a lack of assessment instruments, a lack of time in appointments, and scheduling difficulties (de Valenzuela et al. 2016; O'Toole and Hickey 2013).

2. The Study

This study investigated the number of students with SEN receiving additional teaching support in Irish immersion schools. This allowed for a comparison to be undertaken between the number of students learning through Irish and the number of students learning through English accessing additional teaching support. The methods used by Irish immersion schools to identify students for additional teaching support was also investigated in order to allow for a comparison to the practices recommended internationally. The challenges that schools encounter when assessing students was investigated to identify the areas where schools and teachers need additional support. In terms of the external support services provided to schools by professionals, such as, educational psychologist, an assessment was undertaken to identify the languages used by these professionals when working with students. This allowed for a comparison of the language of the services being provided and of recommended practices in this area. The research questions that were addressed in this study were:

1. How many students in Irish immersion education are in receipt of additional teaching support due to their special educational needs?
2. What methods are used to select students for this additional teaching support?
3. What are the challenges of appropriate assessment in Irish immersion education?
4. What external support services are provided through the medium of Irish to students in these schools?

2.1. Materials and Methods

A random stratified sample of 20% (N = 29) of Irish immersion primary schools in the RoI were selected for the survey research. This research method provided numerical, and descriptive data about the practices in place in these schools to assess and select students in need of additional teaching support. Participant anonymity was protected through the use of a school identification code and no personal details of participants were collected. School staff completing the questionnaire could do so from any location, and over a period of time. The questionnaire design incorporated some adaptations from previous research in this area (Barrett 2016; Ní Chinnéide 2009; Barrett 2016). This allowed for the comparison

of research findings. Questionnaire responses were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences, version 25, (IBM 2017). This enabled the examination of quantitative data in terms of descriptive statistics and frequencies.

The questionnaire contained 25 questions which included both multiple choice and open-ended questions (see Appendix A). The first seven questions in the questionnaire gathered data on the current teaching position of the person completing the questionnaire and their previous teaching experience. These questions also gathered data on the type of school that they were teaching in, e.g., school size and number of students enrolled. In the questionnaire, there were three open-ended questions (Questions 14–16) for the respondents to complete in relation to; (1) the number of students receiving additional teaching support in the school, (2) the number of boys receiving this support, and (3) the number of girls receiving this support. This question was designed to answer Research Question One. In order to address Research Question Two, three questions were presented in the questionnaire to evaluate the assessment methods used by Irish immersion primary schools to identify students for additional teaching support. Respondents were asked to identify the assessment types used in their school to select students for additional teaching support through a multiple choice question (Question 10). Following on from this two open ended questions were provided. In the first of these questions, respondents were asked to input the sTen score they used to select students for additional teaching support on standardized tests. The second of these questions related to how many students scored below a sTen score of four on the standardized tests. This score was chosen as it is recommended by the Department of Education for the selection of students for additional teaching support. Research Question Three was addressed through the use of a multiple-choice question (Question 18). The respondents were asked to select the educational professionals that attended their school and the language that they used when working with the students. In Question 19, the respondents could then list the educational services that are required through Irish in an open-ended question. Some of the respondents reported challenges that they encountered in their answers. Research Question Four was addressed through a multiple-choice question (Question 20). Here respondents had to state whether certain factors were challenging for them when meeting the SEN of their students, assessment was included on this list.

2.2. School Profiles

The schools who participated (N = 29) in this study had an enrolment of 7494 students (see Table 1). The gender breakdown showed that 3683 boys and 3756 girls were enrolled in these schools. The smallest school that participated in this study had 31 students enrolled and the largest school had 540 students (mean; 258.41). There were no single sex schools included in the study, all schools were mixed gender. In total 29 school principals, 294 mainstream class teachers, 83 full-time special education teachers[8], 23 part-time special education teachers, 2 special class[9] teachers, and 68 special needs assistants[10] were employed in the sample studied.

From the cohort studied, 55.17% (n = 16) of the online questionnaires were completed by the school principal, 41.37% (n = 12) by a special education teacher, and in one school by both the principal and special education teacher. Participants in these positions were asked to complete the questionnaire due to their high level of knowledge in relation to SEN provision in their schools. The principal has the overall responsibility for the education of children with SEN in primary schools in the RoI and the special education teacher assesses, plans interventions, and provides additional teaching support to students with SEN in these schools (DES 2017a; DES 2020a). Therefore, it was thought that principals and special

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[8] A special education teacher is a teacher who provides additional teaching support to students with learning difficulties (DES 2017a).

[9] Some Irish immersion schools have a special class for students with SEN (DES 2020b for more info).

[10] Special needs assistants assist the teacher in supporting students with SEN who have significant care needs (NCSE 2015).

education teachers were best placed in terms of their knowledge and experience of working with students with SEN in Irish immersion education to answer the questionnaire.

Table 1. The representative sample of Irish immersion schools included in this study.

School Type	Number of Irish Immersion Schools	Representative Sample (20%)
DEIS Schools	15	3
Schools with Special Classes	4	1
Urban (City) Schoolswith Teaching Principal[11] (<203 students)	7	1
Urban (City) Schools with 1/2 classes per year group[12] (203–410 students)	21	4
Urban (City) Schools with 2/3 classes per year group (>410 students)	13	3
Small Town SchoolsWith Teaching Principal(<203 students)	30	6
Small Town Schools with 1/2 classes per year group (203–410 students)	44	9
Small Town Schools with 2/3 classes per year group (>411 students)	11	2
Total	145	29

3. Results

3.1. Students Receiving Additional Teaching Support

In total, it was reported that 1242 students from the schools surveyed were receiving additional teaching support from the special education teacher. These students represent 16.57% of the total number of students enrolled in the schools (N = 7494). More boys— 55.55% (n = 690) than girls—44.45% (n = 572) were reported as receiving additional teaching support. No school reported that the special education teacher's caseload was made up of less than 40% boys, compared to 27.58% (n = 8) of schools having less than 40% of girls on their caseload. In addition, no school reported having more than 60% of girls on their caseload, while in 31.03% (n = 9) of schools' caseloads consisted of over 60% of boys. These findings suggest that there is a similar percentage of students in Irish immersion education receiving additional teaching support when compared to the statistics available for all primary school types in the RoI (Banks and McCoy 2011, (17%); Shiel et al. 2011, (16% English literacy; 10% mathematics)). Data from this investigation indicate that children learning through Irish as an L2 are not disproportionately represented with learning difficulties and that like other educational contexts, more boys than girls are in receipt of additional teaching support due to learning difficulties.

3.2. Assessment Methods for the Selection of Students for Additional Teaching Support

All of the schools who participated in this study (N = 29) stated that they used teacher observation to select students for this teaching support. In over half of these schools (58.62%, n = 17) school-based assessments were created and implemented to select students for additional teaching support, however, the language in which these tests were created was not provided (see Figure 2).

In terms of assessments undertaken through the medium of Irish for the identification of students for additional teaching support, 89.66% of schools (n = 26) reported that they used standardised assessments in Irish literacy. One of the three schools that did not use standardised Irish literacy assessment to select students, stated in an open-ended question

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[11] A teaching Principal is a primary school teacher with both teaching duties and administrative duties in terms of managing the school on a day to day basis.

[12] There are eight year groups in Irish primary schools (junior infants—6th class). Some schools have only one class per year group whilst others can have more than one, e.g. two junior infant classes etc.

that they do not provide additional support for Irish literacy. Most schools in this study (82.76%, n = 24) used the scores of standardised tests in mathematics through Irish to identify students. Almost a third of schools (31.03%) undertook mathematics assessment through English. Some of the schools reported undertaking mathematics assessment through both English and Irish (24.13%, n = 7).
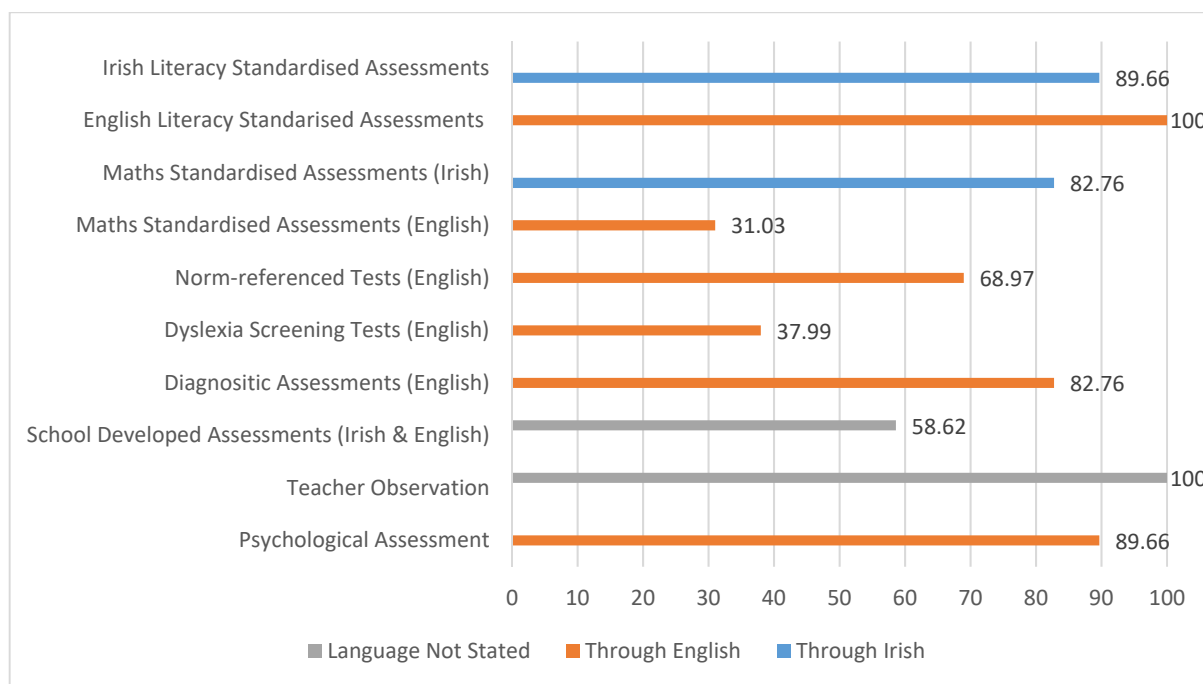

			Value
Irish Literacy Standardised Assessments	Through Irish		89.66
English Literacy Standarised Assessments	Through English		100
Maths Standardised Assessments (Irish)	Through Irish		82.76
Maths Standardised Assessments (English)	Through English		31.03
Norm-referenced Tests (English)	Through English		68.97
Dyslexia Screening Tests (English)	Through English		37.99
Diagnositic Assessments (English)	Through English		82.76
School Developed Assessments (Irish & English)	Language Not Stated		58.62
Teacher Observation	Language Not Stated		100
Psychological Assessment	Through English		89.66

Legend: ■ Language Not Stated ■ Through English ■ Through Irish

Figure 2. The assessment methods used by schools in the present study, for the selection of students for additional support.

The English assessments used by the schools to identify students for additional teaching support include educational psychological (89.66%) and diagnostic assessments (82.76%). English language norm referenced assessments were also used by over half (68.97%, n = 20) of the schools surveyed, a finding that is lower than that of 93.3% (n = 70 Irish immersion schools) surveyed in 2016 (Barrett 2016). This difference may be due to the fact that more Irish immersion schools were implementing two-years full immersion at the time of this study than at the time of the earlier study. Hence, fewer schools may be using early English literacy assessments that are norm referenced. Less than half of the schools surveyed (37.93%, n = 11) reported using English literacy dyslexia screening tests. These findings show that Irish immersion schools are still using English medium assessments to identify students with literacy and learning difficulties due to the fact that Irish literacy assessments, for example, dyslexia screening tests, are not available to them through Irish (Barrett 2016).

3.3. Standardised Tests Cut-Off Points for the Selection of Students for Additional Support

Schools were asked about the cut-off point they used on standardised assessments to select students for additional teaching support from the special education teacher. Most schools (64%, n = 16) used a sTen score of four, as per the guidance of Circular 013/2017 (DES 2017a) to select students when using English literacy assessments. Other schools (32%, n = 8) used a score of three, and one school used a sTen score up to five to select students.

For Irish literacy assessments, most schools (n = 10) also used a sTen of four to select students. Some schools used a score of five or lower (15.78%, n = 3), and one school stated that it selected students with a score below a STen of six.

In the subject area of mathematics, over half the schools (59.25%, n = 16) that administered the tests through Irish used a score of four and below for the selection process. A score of three and lower was used by 33.33% (n = 9) of the schools, one school used a score of five and another school six (3.7%). Interestingly, schools who administered these tests through English did not use the higher scores of five and six to select students. Most of these schools (85.71%, n = 6) used a score of four and under, and the remaining school used a score of below three.

3.4. The Challenges of Assessing Students through the Medium of Irish

All schools (N = 29) found accessing assessment materials through the medium of Irish as challenging on some level. Almost half (42.8%) of the schools found this very challenging, whilst 27.59% found it challenging and 24.14% found it somewhat challenging. This was due to either the lack of availability of Irish language tests, such as, early literacy/numeracy assessments, or the Irish language of the tests available being too difficult and not reflecting the day to day language used by the students in the schools (NCCA 2007). It is important to highlight that there are three different dialects in the Irish language (Connaught, Munster, and Ulster) and that the standardised tests available through the medium of Irish are written using the state norm for spelling and grammar that is used in official publications.

3.5. Access to External Services through the Medium of Irish

All participants answered a multiple-choice question in relation to the availability of external services through the medium of Irish. These services relate to those provided outside of the school by professionals, such as, educational psychologists, speech and language therapists, and occupational therapist for example. The services available through Irish to some schools were that of the educational psychologist (10.34%, n = 3) and play therapist (4.76%, n = 1). Some schools reported that Irish and English were used by medical practitioners (20%, n = 5), educational welfare officers (5%, n = 1), and educational psychologists (17.24%, n = 5). The remaining respondents reported that there were no support services through the medium of Irish available for the Behavioural Support Service, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, and speech and language therapists. Two schools (6.89%) also reported that the visiting teacher[13] service provided by the Department of Education is only available to them through English. Hence, like other students learning through a minority language or L2, bilingual students in Irish immersion education, did not have access to minority language or bilingual assessments and interventions when working with external educational professionals (Kohnert 2010; McLeod and Verdon 2014; O'Toole and Hickey 2013).

In an open-ended question, schools were asked what external services they require to meet the needs of students with SEN that are currently unavailable to them. Of the 23 schools that responded to this question (N = 29), almost half (47.82%, n = 11) said that they need more access to external services, such as, the educational psychologist, occupational therapist, and the speech and language therapist. Most of this cohort did not state in which language they wanted to access these services in. However, the availability of the external services through the medium of Irish, for example, those of the speech and language therapist, and the educational psychologist was referenced as a need by 21.73% (n = 5) of respondents. These respondents want these services to provide assessments and interventions through the medium of Irish. Another issue which was identified by two of the schools was the need for these external services to understand the ethos of Irish immersion education and the process of learning through an L2.

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[13] Visiting teachers are qualified teachers with particular skills and knowledge of the development and education of children with varying degrees of hearing loss and/or visual impairment. They offer longitudinal support to children, their families and schools from the time of referral through to the end of post-primary education. (NCSE 2021).

4. Discussion and Conclusions

It is clear that Irish immersion education experiences many challenges in terms of assessment through the medium of Irish and access to Irish language external services. In terms of identifying students for additional teaching support it is clear that these schools use standardised assessments in English literacy, Irish literacy, and mathematics. Most schools (n = 24) reported that they assessed students in the area of mathematics through Irish. Some schools reported using standardised mathematics tests through English to identify students. It might be beneficial to assess students' mathematical abilities in both languages due to the bilingual abilities of Irish immersion students. If students are being assessed solely through English, this means that they are not being assessed in mathematics in the language of instruction of the classroom. Therefore, this may cause issues in assessing the total abilities of these students in mathematics. For example, if they do not have the mathematical vocabulary in English, they may not be able to answer the question. A bilingual assessment of mathematics might be beneficial for students in this educational context. It is clear from the findings of this study that Irish immersion primary schools are making good use of the Irish language assessments available to them for the senior classes (second–sixth class). Nevertheless, there is a lack of assessments available through the medium of Irish in terms of early literacy and numeracy. These assessments might be beneficial for schools in terms of the early identification of students with SEN. Irish immersion schools are still very reliant on the use of assessments through the medium of English for the identification of students for additional teaching support. This is due to the fact that assessments, such as, dyslexia screeners and diagnostic assessments are not available through the medium of Irish. Having these forms of assessment available through the medium of Irish might allow for the earlier identification of students with SEN and thus earlier intervention. Schools also reported that their students are being assessed by educational psychologists through the medium of English (Barrett 2016). The need for more standardised and diagnostic assessments to be made available through the language of instruction of these schools, Irish, has been highlighted for over a decade now (COGG 2010; NCCA 2007; Ní Chinnéide 2009). The development of these assessments might allow for a more accurate identification of students. In addition, from the findings of this study, it is clear that Irish immersion schools are currently using the Irish language assessments available to them and this might suggest that they would proactively use any further assessments developed through Irish.

When it comes to the selection of students for additional teaching support, most of these schools used the suggested cut-off points on standardised assessments (DES 2017a). However, the data show that some schools are using higher scores to select students for additional support. This might suggest that there may only be a small number of students in certain schools scoring under the recommended score in English literacy, Irish literacy, and mathematics. Hence, the special education teacher may have extra capacity in their workload to take on students with a higher score. Alternatively, perhaps these schools feel that students with higher scores need more support in these areas and that the recommended cut-off point is too low. It was found that some of the schools using an Irish language standardised assessment of mathematics used a higher sTen score to select students.

The findings of this study suggest that there has been an increase in the percentage of students in these schools accessing additional support since 2011 (Shiel et al. 2011). Nevertheless, in spite of this increase (11–16.57%), the percentage of students receiving additional teaching support in these schools is similar to that reported for all primary schools (17%) in the RoI (Banks and McCoy 2011). This increase may be due to the increase in the number of Irish immersion schools in the RoI since 2011 or a greater diversity of students attending these schools, with parents more open to the idea of sending their child with SEN to learn through Irish (Nic Aindriú et al. 2020b). However, encouragingly, the findings of the present study suggest that students in these schools are not disproportionality represented with SEN when compared to students in all Irish

primary schools (Banks and McCoy 2011; Shiel et al. 2011). This is positive news for Irish immersion education; however, these schools might still benefit from the development of further assessments through Irish to ensure that students are accessing additional teaching support as early as possible. The comparison of these findings is limited by the fact that there is no breakdown available of how many students in each class are accessing additional teaching support. This finding differs to that of other immersion education contexts internationally, where research has found that students have been over-or underrepresented with SEN. In addition, like other national and international educational contexts, there are more boys than girls accessing additional teaching support due to the SEN in Irish immersion education (DES 2017a; Ní Chinnéide 2009).

Access to bilingual or Irish-medium educational professional services (e.g., educational psychologists and speech and language therapists) is a challenge for this sector, as it is for bilingual students internationally. In order for students in Irish immersion schools to be appropriately assessed there is a need for these professionals to have an understanding of Irish-medium education, a level of proficiency in the Irish language, and an understanding of the structure of the Irish language (Barnes 2017; Department of Education 2011). The practice of translating a test from English into Irish whilst using the English test norms is not acceptable (O'Toole and Hickey 2013). Thus, there is a need for these professionals to have access to appropriate and standardised language and literacy assessments for English—Irish bilingual children to ensure accurate and reliable assessment of a student's language and literacy proficiency in both languages. For example, there is a need for the development of cognitive assessments, early literacy screeners, dyslexia screeners, and diagnostic literacy and maths assessments through the medium of Irish. These assessments might be beneficial as it is clear from previous research in this area that informal translation of assessments to Irish is occurring in these areas and professionals/teachers are still using the norms associated with the English versions of the tests (O'Toole and Hickey 2013). This practice is unreliable and impacts on the validity of the scores and thus may have a negative impact on the accurate identification of students with SEN learning through Irish.

As with all research there are limitations to the findings presented in this study. It is important to recognise that the data gathered through this research only provides a 'snapshot' of one moment in time in Irish immersion primary education. There are a few methodological considerations which should be considered if this research was to be replicated again at a later stage. A limitation of this study is that a random stratified sample of schools was selected rather than a total sample of all Irish immersion primary schools. Along with this, Irish immersion schools in Northern Ireland were not included in this study due to a low questionnaire response rate.

However, the findings of the present study contribute to the limited international research available regarding the assessment practices and the number of students receiving additional teaching support in immersion education. They may be significant for other forms of bilingual and immersion education outside of Ireland, in relation to assessment and identification of SEN. For example, there are likely to be parallels between Irish immersion schools and immersion programmes in Scotland, Wales, Spain, Canada, and New Zealand to mention a few. The present study contributes to existing knowledge through offering an up-to-date analysis of the Irish immersion sector. Further research in this area in terms of the language(s) in which additional teaching support is provided in Irish-immersion schools is required. It might also be beneficial to investigate the perspectives, practices, and experiences of external professionals working with students learning through Irish.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, P.Ó.D. and J.T.; Data curation, S.Nic.Aindriú; Formal analysis, S.N.A.; Methodology, S.N.A., P.Ó.D. and J.T.; Supervision, P.Ó.D. and J.T.; Writing—original draft, S.N.A.; Writing—review & editing, S.N.A., P.Ó.D. and J.T. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Appendix A

School Survey (Translated from Irish to English)

'The additional supports required by pupils with special educational needs in Irish-medium schools.'

School Code	

1. What is your current teaching role in your school? Please select the correct option

Principal	
Special Education Teacher	
Class Teacher	
Other ... Please specify	

2. How many years have you spent in your current role?

3. How many years in total have you been teaching?

4. Is your school located in an area of low socio-economic status (DEIS)?

No	
DEIS Band 1	
DEIS Banda2	

5. How many boys are currently enrolled in your school?

6. How many girls are currently enrolled in your school?

7. How many teachers and special education teachers are currently employed in your school?

Class Teachers	
Special Education Teachers (Full-time)	
Special Education Teachers (Part-time)	
Special Class Teachers	
Special Needs Assistants	
Other, Please Specify	

8. How many students in your school are currently under the care of a special needs assistant?

9. How many students in each class present with the following diagnoses of special educational need? Please insert the correct number for each category.

	Junior Infants	Senior Infants	First Class	Second Class	Third Class	Fourth Class	Fifth Class	Sixth Class
Dyslexia								
Dyspraxia								
Physical Disability								
Hearing Impairment								
Visual Impairment								
Emotional Disturbance and/or Behavioural Problems								
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder/Attention Deficit Disorder								
Severe Emotional Disturbance								
Mild General Learning Disability								
Moderate General Learning Disability								
Autism/Autistic Spectrum Disorder								
Specific Speech and Language Disorder								
Assessed syndrome								
Multiple Disabilities								
Other, Please Specify								

10. **From this list, please select the forms of assessment used in your school to identify and assess students with special educational needs. You can choose more than one option.**

Standardised Tests of Irish Literacy	
Standardised Tests of English Literacy	
Standardised Tests of Mathematics through the medium of Irish	
Standardised tests of mathematics through the medium of English	
Criterion referenced tests (m.sh., Middle Infant Screening Test)	
Dyslexia Screening Tests	
Diagnostic Tests (English medium)	
School Developed Assessments	
Teacher Observation	
Psychological Assessment	
Other, Please Specify	

11. **If you use standardises assessments to select students for additional teaching support, what cut off point on these tests do you use??**

(For example, if the special education teacher provides additional teaching support for students with a sTen score of 5 or lower, please select 5)

	sTen Score
Drumcondra test of Irish literacy	
Drumcondra test of English literacy	
Drumcondra Maths test through Irish	
Drumcondra Maths test through English	
Sigma- T (Maths through Irish)	
Sigma- T (Maths through English)	
Other, Please Specify	

12. **How many students got a sTen score of 4 or lower on the most recent standardised assessments that they took? Please input the correct number in each category as appropriate.**

Drumcondra test of Irish literacy	
Drumcondra test of English literacy	
Drumcondra Maths test through Irish	
Drumcondra Maths test through English	
Sigma- T (Maths test through Irish)	
Sigma- T (Maths test through English)	
Micra T (English Literacy)	
Micra T (Irish Literacy)	

13.   What is the school's annual teaching allocation for the special education teacher?

14.   How many students in total are attending the special education teacher for additional teaching support?

15.   How many boys are attending the special education teacher this school year for additional teaching support?

16.   How many girls are attending the special education teacher this school year for additional teaching support?

17.   How often do you use the following strategies to meet the special educational needs of your students?

	Every Lesson	Everyday	Every Week	Every Month	Every Term	Every Year
Co- teaching/Team teaching						
In-class small group (4–6 students) work (co-operative learning)						
Class withdrawal (groups 4–6 students)						
Class withdrawal (pairs)						
One-to-one tuition (withdrawal)						
In-class heterogeneous grouping						
In-class peer tutoring						
Individualised programmes of learning						
Student self-assessment						
Students' reflective journals						
Reflective learning						
Decision-making/Problem-based learning						
Practical activities						
Use Mind Maps©/Concept mapping						
The Internet/ICT						
Digital/still camera						
DVD/Video/TV/Radio						
Project work						

18.   Please specify whether these professionals work with students in your school and if they do the language in which they undertake their work.

	Working through Irish	Working through English	Working through Irish and English	Service requested but unavailable	This service is not required
Educational Psychologist					
Clinical Psychologist					
Speech and Language Therapist					
Occupational Therapist					
Physiotherapist					
Play Therapist					
Educational Welfare Officer					
Behavioural Support Services					
Medical Professional (e.g. nurse/doctor)					
Psychiatrist					
Counsellor					
Other, Please Specify					

19. **What are the services that are required through the medium of Irish to meet the special educational needs of students in your school that are currently unavailable?**

20. **Please state how challenging you find these aspects in your work with students who have special educational needs.**

	Very Challenging	Challenging	Somewhat Challenging	Never Challenging
Class Size				
Inappropriate instruction				
Lack of in-class support				
Lack of support from home				
Use of inappropriate textbooks				
Insufficient differentiation				
Not enough time				
Unrealistic teacher expectations				
Lack of suitable resources				
Assessment tools through the medium of Irish				
Lack of support from external services through the medium of Irish				
School accommodation and facilities				

21. **Please list the resources, assessments or services that would help you meet the special educational needs of students in your school.**

22. **How many students with special educational needs transferred from your school to another school type listed over the last three years (09/2014 – 09/2017)? (Please insert the correct number for each category)**

Another Irish immersion school	
A special class in an Irish immersion school	
An English-medium mainstream school	
An English-medium special school	
A special class in an English-medium school	

23. **What were the reasons for theses transfers? Please select all the options that apply.**

On the advice of the school principal/classroom teacher	
On the advice of an educational psychologist	
On the advice of a speech and language therapist	
On the advice of an occupational therapist	
The school was not able to support the student in their learning	
The student had a difficulty learning through Irish	
Parental concern	
Other, Please Specify	

24. **Are you interested in your school partaking in the second stage of this study where case studies will be undertaken on students with dyslexia, autism spectrum disorder, mild general learning disabilities, and specific speech and language disorder learning through Irish?**

Yes	
No	

25. **Many thanks for completing this questionnaire, have you any other comments?**

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