

Article

The CPD Needs of Irish-Medium Primary and Post-Primary Teachers in Special Education

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Abstract: There are few professional development courses available to teachers with a focus on meeting the special educational needs (SEN) of students in immersion education contexts worldwide. The continuous professional development (CPD) needs of immersion education teachers in SEN are under researched internationally. This study investigated the CPD needs of primary and post-primary Irish immersion education teachers (N = 133) in SEN using an anonymous online survey. In this article, we provide an overview of the types of CPD that teachers have engaged with in the past and their preferences for future CPD in this area. The challenges they face in relation to CPD are evaluated and provide a context for the future development of CPD courses for this cohort. It was found that teachers want to learn more about inclusive pedagogies and assessments through a variety of interactive pedagogies. The findings of this study will be of interest to immersion educators in other contexts.

Keywords: continuous professional development; special education; immersion education; assessment; inclusive pedagogies



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1. Introduction

Over the last decade research has shown that primary and post-primary teachers in *Gaelscoileanna* and *Gaeltacht* (Irish immersion, IM) schools require CPD in the area of special educational needs (SEN) provision for students learning through Irish [1–6]. Primary school teachers work with students during their first 8 school years, typically with students aged between 4 and 12 years old. Post-primary teachers work with students after this period, generally, aged between 12 and 18 years old. Most of the CPD courses available to these teachers are based on meeting the SEN of children in English-medium schools, with few courses available specifically for teachers of students with SEN learning through Irish [2]. The findings of studies identified that teachers in IM schools find the following elements challenging in relation to SEN provision; assessment through Irish, having realistic expectations for their students, differentiation, implementing appropriate inclusive teaching pedagogies, and accessing appropriate resources [2,5]. Teachers from IM schools also reported how they often attended CPD in this area and that little reference was made to meeting the needs of students with SEN learning through Irish [2,7]. In some instances, the course facilitators questioned the teachers about the suitability of this form of education for students with SEN [2]. This suggests that those delivering these CPD courses may not have the appropriate knowledge and understanding as to how to meet the SEN of students learning through Irish. International research suggests that effective teachers promote higher levels of academic attainment for students with SEN [8] It also suggests that the absence of appropriate teacher education, support, and guidance can mean that teachers teaching through a language which is not the majority language of the community can have misconceptions about patterns of first (L1) and second language (L2)

development for their students [9]. Hence, more students are often referred for additional teaching support than is appropriate [10]. Therefore, it is important for teachers in IM schools to have access to further education in this area, especially since they have requested additional CPD in this area for over a decade [1]. Furthermore, recent research suggests that there has been an increase in the percentage of students with SEN attending IM schools over the last decade [11]. It is anticipated that this research and the development of a CPD course may improve the quality of teaching and learning for students with SEN in the classrooms of the teachers who undertake the course. This research and the subsequent course which was developed was undertaken to ensure a high quality and appropriate learning experience is provided to teachers.

This study identified primary and post-primary teachers' self-reported future CPD needs in relation to helping them meet the SEN of their students learning through Irish. The study investigated what motivated teachers to undertake CPD in SEN, the challenges they faced when doing so, and their preferred method of course delivery. The course that was developed was piloted as a Department of Education and Skills approved summer course (further outlined below). An anonymous online questionnaire was completed by 133 IM primary and post-primary teachers. As mentioned previously, the findings of the study were used to inform the development of an online CPD course on meeting the SEN of students learning through Irish. The findings informed the course development through; (a) informing the development of module content based on the different areas that the teachers wanted more CPD in (e.g., assessment, inclusive pedagogies), (b) their learning preferences were taken into consideration in terms of how the content of the course was to be taught/delivered (e.g., accessing up to date research, discussion forums), and (c) every effort was made to overcome the challenges that they identified when designing the course in order to make it more accessible for them (e.g., cost and location). The research was undertaken in November 2020 at a time when teachers were under additional pressure, implementing in-person teaching COVID-19 guidelines. The requirements of social distancing, little/no group learning, sanitising of resources, and online learning for students at home isolating, etc. are likely to have reduced the number of participants in the study, as teachers had less time to complete the survey. Additionally, at the time, there was little appetite for forward thinking in terms of completing CPD in the summer of 2021/2022 due to teachers suffering from burnout [12].

1.1. Irish Immersion Education

This study took place across two socio-linguistic contexts, IM 'Gaelscoileanna' and 'Gaeltacht' schools. Gaelscoileanna refer to Irish immersion schools located outside Irish heartland areas known as the Gaeltacht. We use the term Irish medium (IM) to encompass both types of school. At the time of publication of this study, there were 45,471 primary school students and 14,581 post-primary school students being educated through the medium of Irish (see Table 1).

Table 1. The number of Irish-immersion and Gaeltacht schools in the Republic of Ireland (RoI) and the number of students attending these schools [13].

	Outside the Gaeltacht	Gaeltacht Areas	Total
Primary School Students	37,243	7059	44,302
No. of Primary Schools	151	101	252
Post-Primary Students	10,498	3602	14,100
No. of Post-Primary Schools	47	21	68

The Gaeltacht schools that participated in this study were located in the 26 Gaeltacht Language Planning areas [14]. These schools have registered to participate in the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme [14]. They operate fully through the medium of Irish, except when teaching English and other languages. Students in infant classes (age 4–7) in Gaeltacht primary schools experience total immersion in the Irish language, a condition of the

Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme [14]. Traditionally, those living in Gaeltacht areas used Irish as their day-to-day language of communication. Hence, these schools were viewed as heritage language schools [15]. However, over the last number of decades, the language profile of students in Gaeltacht schools has changed with more students coming from homes where Irish is not their first language (L1) [16,17]. A Gaelscoil (Irish immersion school) is located mainly in cities and small towns outside the Gaeltacht and students come mostly from households where Irish is not their L1 [18]. The L1 in these areas is English. Early total immersion programmes of up to two years are provided to students before they commence English language [19]. At the time of the present study (academic school year 2020/2021), there were 180 Irish immersion primary schools throughout the island of Ireland outside the Gaeltacht [13]. Most of these schools ($n = 151$) and students were situated in the Republic of Ireland (RoI). The remaining schools were located in Northern Ireland.

1.2. Special Education in Irish Immersion Schools

Little research has been conducted on the prevalence and types of SEN of primary and post-primary students in Gaeltacht schools [4,6]. Unfortunately, the most recent study does not provide an overall prevalence rate for students with SEN attending Gaeltacht primary schools [4,20]. However, it does provide an overview of the categories of SEN that are most frequently reported in these schools ($N = 15$). The five most frequently reported categories [4] are: (1) Specific Learning Difficulty (SLD), (2) Mild General Learning Disability (MGLD) (3) Specific Language Impairment (SLI) (4) Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and (5) Developmental Coordination Delay (DCD). In 2004, it was estimated that 6% ($n = 511$) of students attending primary Gaeltacht schools had a diagnosis of SEN [6]. In that study, 4% ($n = 358$) of students were reported to be receiving additional teaching support from the resource teacher in school. In relation to post-primary Gaeltacht schools in 2004, it was estimated that 7% of students ($n = 324$) had a diagnosis of SEN [6]. The most frequently reported categories of SEN in these post-primary schools were; (1) SLD (2) Borderline Mild General Learning Disability (3) Mild General Learning Disability, (4) Severe General learning Disability and (5) Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (EBD) [6].

It has been estimated that 9.4% of students in primary IM schools outside of Gaeltacht areas in the RoI present with a diagnosis of SEN [11]. Dyslexia is reported to be the most prevalent category of SEN in these schools [4,11,20]. The other most frequently reported categories of SEN are Dyspraxia (DCD), ASD, EBD, and Specific Speech and Language Disorder (SSLD) [11,20]. It was estimated that for the school year 2017–2018, 16.57% of students enrolled in these primary schools received additional teaching support from the special education teacher [21]. This figure is higher than that of 13% ($n = 1719$) estimated previously by Nic Gabhann [22] for IM schools in the RoI. However, this percentage of students (16.6%), is similar to that of 17% generated for students who were receiving additional teaching support under the general allocation model in all primary schools in the RoI [23]. Hence, this comparison suggests that there is little difference in the number of students receiving additional teaching support in IM and English-medium schools. Unfortunately for post-primary Irish immersion schools outside of Gaeltacht areas, there is no data available on the prevalence and types of SEN experienced by students in these schools.

1.3. Bilingualism/Immersion Education and Students with SEN

Bilingualism is the ability to speak and understand two languages [24]. As this research involves children with SEN, the definition of bilingualism by Grosjean [25] (p. 51) which refers to “the regular use of two (or more) languages” by those who “need and use two or more languages in their everyday lives” has been adopted. This definition has been selected as it places an emphasis on the use of the languages, rather than the language proficiency of the children with SEN. This is important, as children with SEN may never acquire full language proficiency in any language [26]. Research suggests that bilingual learners display increased attention control, problem solving, and abstract/symbolic rep-

resentational skills [27,28]. Better developed communication and social skills have also been identified in bilinguals [29]. Some of the other benefits experienced by bilinguals include, but are not limited to, an increased sense of identity, culture, and community, and the benefit of forming friendships with others from a range of diverse backgrounds [30]. Nevertheless, the research has proposed that there may be disadvantages of learning two languages for some individuals. These are thought to be caused by a lack of exposure to a language, the age of L2 acquisition, and the lexical conflict that occurs due to the ownership of two languages. Conflict is thought to arise as bilinguals experience more influences during lexical decision making [31]. On verbal fluency tasks, it has been found that bilinguals can be at a disadvantage compared to monolinguals [32,33]. It is suggested that bilinguals have a smaller vocabulary in each of their languages [33,34]. This is thought to be attributed to the fact that bilinguals often receive less exposure in each language [35,36]. Those who receive higher levels of language exposure attain a larger vocabulary [37,38]. Reduced language input/output in both languages can negatively impact word learning compared to those using only one language [39]. It has been suggested that the total vocabulary of bilinguals (L1 vocab + L2 vocab) equals or is greater than the total vocabulary of monolinguals [38].

In terms of bilingual children with SEN the research into this topic is only starting to emerge. Much of the research focuses on bilingual children with ASD, Specific Language Impairment, Dyslexia, and Down syndrome [40,41]. This research has found “no significant differences between bilingual preschool-aged learners with Developmental Language Disorder (DLD), ASD, and Down Syndrome and monolingual children with the same disorders” when tested in their dominant language [42] (p. 171).

However, there are challenges of bilingual education for students with SEN, in terms of (i) parental involvement, (ii) accessing bilingual services [43], (iii) professional development for teachers [7,44] (iv) monolingual assessment [45,46], (v) professional advice from external professionals regarding the suitability of bilingualism/immersion education for students with SEN [26,40], and (vi) students with SEN transferring from immersion education [47]. Much international research has been conducted on the benefits of parental involvement within a child’s education. Research on parental involvement in immersion education programmes, identified that low parental proficiency in the school’s language of instruction was a barrier to their participation [5,48,49]. This was referenced by parents of children with SEN, who felt that they were unable to help their child academically and this caused them anxiety and concern [5,48].

As mentioned previously, there are many benefits of bilingualism and immersion education. However, as with all forms of education, a percentage of students with SEN transfer from immersion education to a monolingual school due to several factors. For students with SEN, international studies have shown that these students often transfer from immersion education due to the academic challenges learning through a L2 poses for them [2,21,50]. Concerns have also been raised regarding the ability of this form of education to meet the diverse educational needs of these students [21,47,51].

1.4. CPD in Immersion Education Contexts

To date, little research has been undertaken on the CPD needs of immersion teachers in the area of SEN. There has been some limited research undertaken in the area of teacher preparation for bilingual education in general [44,52–54]. In designing a CPD course for bilingual special education teachers, it is recommended that bilingual special education teacher CPD should provide opportunities for participants to acquire theoretical and practical knowledge of bilingual education and bilingualism [53,54]. It should demonstrate how to identify and utilize 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 L2 acquisition theory, assessment, pedagogies for teaching through a L2, and research in this context [7,55,56]. Studies have found that many immersion education contexts find it difficult to recruit teachers who are fluent in the language of instruction of the school and that are appropriately trained and accredited [57]. 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 policy-makers, 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” [58] (p. 168).

1.5. CPD for Teachers in Schools in the Republic of Ireland (RoI)

For the purposes of this study, “CPD refers to lifelong teacher learning and comprises the full range of educational experiences designed to enrich teachers’ professional knowledge, understanding, and capabilities throughout their careers” [59] (p. 19). This definition was taken from the Teaching Council’s Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education. In the RoI, the Teaching Council of Ireland [60] has developed ‘Cosán’ (pathway or track in Irish), the national framework for teachers’ learning. This framework forms part of an overall framework of standards for all stages of teacher learning. It recognises that there are many ways in which teachers can learn and undertake CPD, for example, formally, informally, personally, and professionally. A range of processes are listed in the framework [59,60] including engagement in professional conversations, reading literature/research, team teaching with a colleague, engaging in collaborative reflection, attendance at a professional learning event (e.g., conference), or school-based learning [61]. The Teaching Council [60] states that CPD is very important for teachers as it equips them to meet the challenges that they face in their profession. CPD for teachers in Irish primary and post-primary schools may be delivered through organisations such as, the Department of Education, the Professional Development Service for Teachers, third level institutions, Education Centres, and other organisations [7,60]. The format in which CPD can be delivered includes face to face, online, and through a blended learning approach. Organisations that offer CPD to IM schools include An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta, Gaeloideachas, Údarás na Gaeltachta, Education and Training Board Ireland, and local voluntary groups/community cooperatives [7].

It is suggested that teacher led CPD, which allows teachers considerable autonomy in regard to choice is better than provider driven CPD [59]. This frame of thought is in line with that of the Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers [60], which states that; teachers should take personal responsibility for sustaining and improving the quality of their professional practice, they should actively acquire professional knowledge and understanding that is current and relevant, and they should reflect on and critically evaluate their professional practice. Research suggests that short-term non-qualification courses are the format of CPD most frequently accessed by teachers internationally [61]. However, the efficacy of this form of CPD has been questioned due to its short duration. It has been suggested that the short duration of the course does not allow for comprehensive and meaningful professional development [7,61]. In the context of Gaeltacht post-primary schools in the RoI, Ní Thuairisg [7] investigated the personal and professional challenges faced by teachers when accessing CPD. Through interviews with 20 post-primary teachers, she found that teachers were dissatisfied with the provision in this area because it did not address the sociolinguistic context of the Gaeltacht. Teachers reported that they were frustrated by the lack of CPD available to them through the medium of Irish and the low levels of awareness that CPD facilitators had of the teachers’ specific context. Some of the teachers in the study were motivated to undertake CPD because they had personally identified their need in a specific area. Barriers to undertaking CPD that were mentioned by participants were, time, family commitments, and the location in which the CPD took place.

2. Materials and Methods

For the present study, a link to an anonymous online survey was distributed to all primary and post-primary IM schools in the RoI (see Table 1 above). The survey investigated the following research questions:

- What types of CPD do teachers in primary and post-primary IM schools undertake in special education?
- What are the CPD needs of teachers in these schools in special education?
- What are the motivating factors for teachers in IM schools when undertaking CPD in special education?
- What are the challenges that IM teachers experience when accessing CPD in special education?

School principals were then asked to forward the link to the anonymous questionnaire to the teachers in their school. The anonymous survey link and a brief message was also shared online through Twitter. The plain language statement and informed consent form were included in the survey link. Participants gave informed consent to participate in the study before they could access the questionnaire. Those who participated in the questionnaire were offered the opportunity to undertake the CPD course which was developed using the findings of this research.

The questionnaire contained 18 questions. The first two questions gathered data about the age and gender of the participants. Two questions then asked what teaching position they currently held in their school, as well as the total number of years that they had been teaching. Four questions were then asked about their level of education and about the CPD that they had undertaken in the last year. Following on from this, there were six questions that asked participants about the aspects of SEN in which they would like more CPD, what CPD was available to them in this area, and how they would prefer this content to be delivered (e.g., online, face-to-face, blended learning). There was one question that asked them about their motivation for undertaking CPD in this area. The next question listed a range of categories of SEN and participants were asked how well prepared they felt when teaching students with the following categories of SEN through Irish. Participants were then asked what the barriers they encountered in accessing CPD. Finally, they were invited to include any other comments they had in an open-ended question. Information on the sources of literature that influenced the development of the questionnaire is available in Table 2.

Table 2. The sources of literature that influenced the development of the questionnaire.

Questionnaire Theme	Sources of Literature
Age range and years teaching experience.	OECD 2008, 2013, 2014
Type of position they held in their school.	OECD 2008, 2013, 2014
Their level of teacher training/education.	OECD, 2008, 2013, 2014
Previous CPD.	OECD, 2008, 2013, 2014
The areas of special education in which they would like more CPD.	Andrews (2020), Barrett, Williams, Kinsella, 2020; Nic Aindriú et al., 2020
The aspects of CPD course development that are most relevant for them.	OECD, 2008, 2013, 2014
The way they would like to access CPD in this area (e.g., online, face-to-face, blended learning).	OECD, 2008, 2013, 2014
Their motivations for undertaking CPD in this area.	Ní Thuairisg, 2018; McMillan, McConnell & O'Sullivan, 2016
The barriers they face when accessing CPD in this area.	Ní Thuairisg, 2018; McMillan, McConnell & O'Sullivan, 2016

2.1. Data Analysis

Data responses were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 27, IBM, accessed through Dublin City University). This enabled the examination of quantitative data in terms of descriptive statistics and frequencies. Findings were analysed in terms of percentages, averages, mean, mode, maximum value, minimum value, and range. Statistical analyses (e.g., ANOVA, Crosstab) were undertaken in terms of; the type of school in which participants worked, their role within the school, gender, characteristics, education, and experience. There were no statistically significant differences identified between these categories. Qualitative responses to open ended questions were analysed using thematic analysis [62]. This process enabled the researcher to identify patterns and themes within the qualitative data while addressing the research questions [62]. The data gathered were analysed on a semantic level, where what the participant said was analysed for ‘surface meaning’ and on a latent level, where ideas, assumptions, and ideologies were identified and examined [62], p. 84). Responses to survey questions and additional comments provided in the questionnaire were given in Irish. These were translated from Irish to English for the presentation of data/findings in this chapter.

2.2. Participant Profiles

This study was undertaken using survey research. In total 133 primary and post-primary school teachers from IM schools undertook an anonymous online survey to assess their CPD needs in SEN provision. Unfortunately, the estimated total number of teachers in IM schools in the RoI is not available and therefore cannot be used for comparison purposes when reviewing these findings. Within this cohort surveyed, 87% of teachers were female ($n = 116$) and the remaining 13% ($n = 17$) were male. The teachers were employed in four types of schools, primary Gaelscoileanna schools, post-primary Gaelscoileanna schools, primary Gaeltacht schools, and post-primary Gaeltacht schools (see Figure 1). Most of the teachers who participated in the study worked in an IM school outside of a Gaeltacht area (64.66%, $n = 86$). Less than 20% of participants worked in a post-primary school outside of the Gaeltacht (17.29%, $n = 23$) and primary Gaeltacht schools (15.04%, $n = 20$). Only three percent ($n = 4$) of participants taught in post-primary Gaeltacht schools.

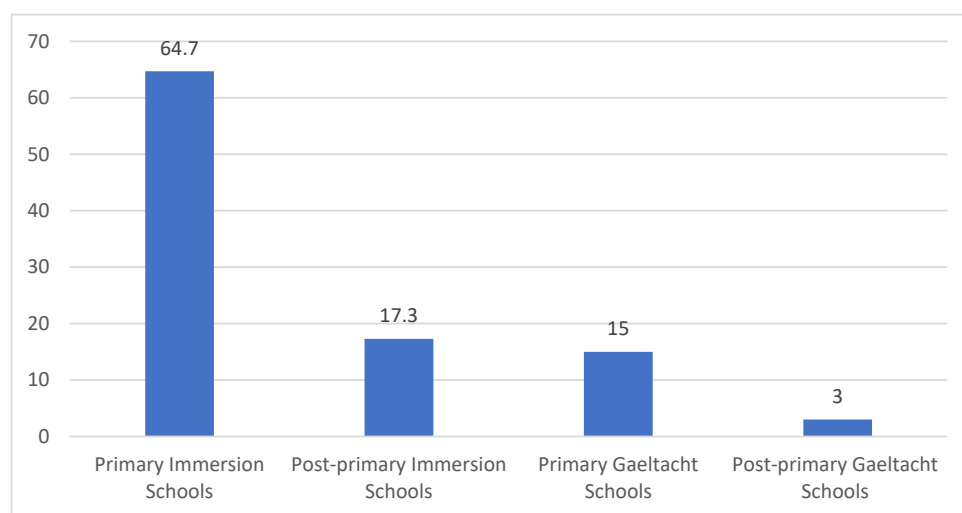


Figure 1. The percentage of teachers that worked in each type of IM school.

Most of the teachers surveyed were over 31 years of age (see Figure 2), with only 21% ($n = 28$) reporting that they were 30 years old or younger. There were 26.3% of participants aged between 31 and 40 years of age. There were 30.1% of teachers ($n = 40$) aged between 41 and 50 years of age. Within the 51–60 age group there were 21.8% teachers ($n = 29$) and only one teacher (0.75%) who completed the survey was aged 61 or over.

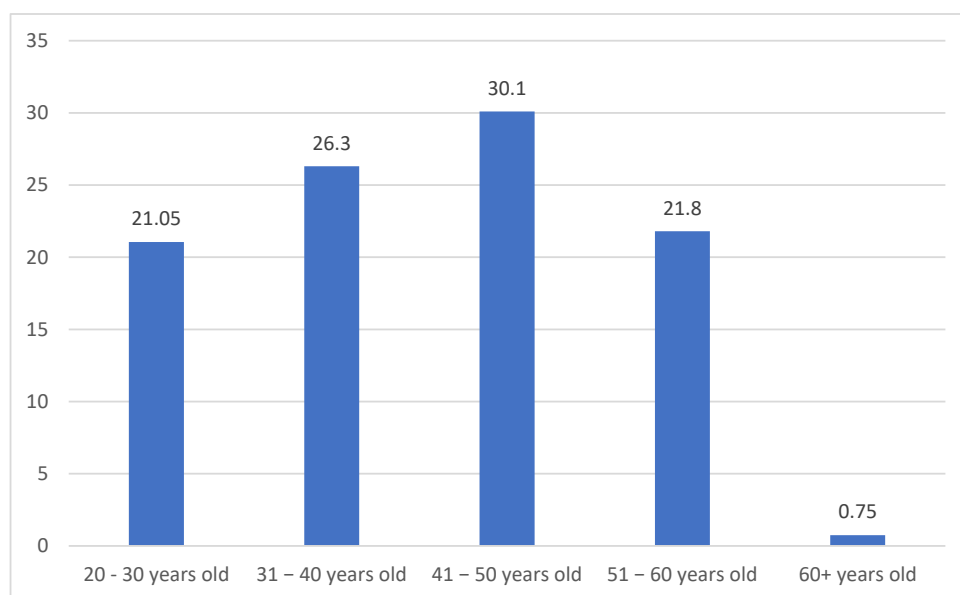


Figure 2. The age range of the teachers (%) that participated in this study.

The teachers surveyed held various roles within their schools (see Figure 3). The cohort with the highest number of participants was the special education teacher group (33.8%, $n = 50$), whilst the special class teacher cohort had the smallest number of participants (2.0%, $n = 3$). There were also 12.8% of participants that worked as a subject teacher in post-primary schools ($n = 19$).

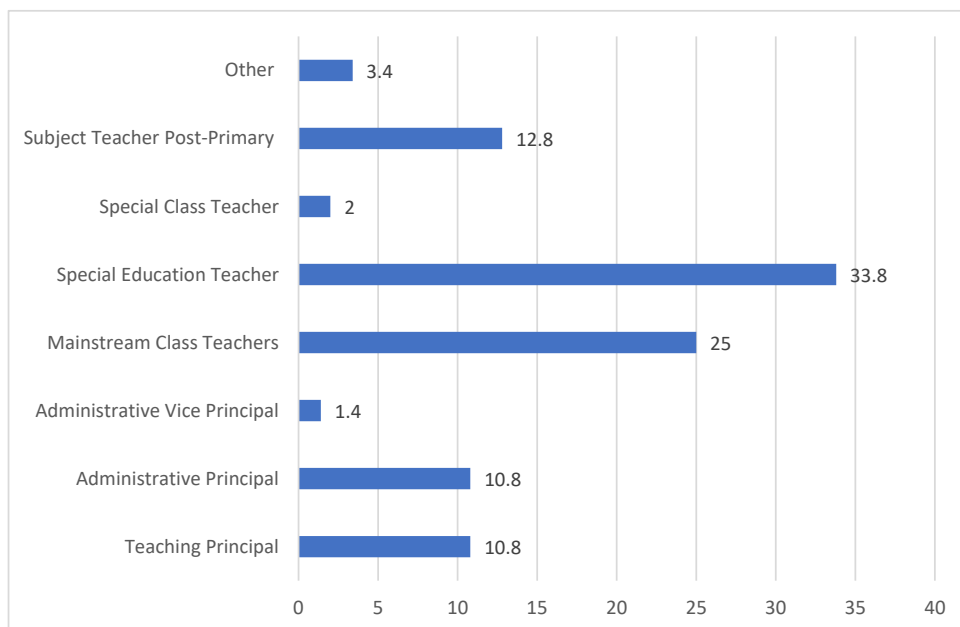


Figure 3. The teaching roles of participants (%) in this study.

2.3. Teaching Experience and Qualifications of Participants

To investigate the current CPD needs of the participants in this study, it was important to establish their teaching experience and qualifications (see Figure 4). When the level of education of the participants of this study was investigated, it was found that most of the teachers held a primary degree and a postgraduate qualification (34.9%, $n = 53$). Over a quarter of respondents (27.0%, $n = 41$) had a master's degree and only 1.3% ($n = 2$) held a doctorate.

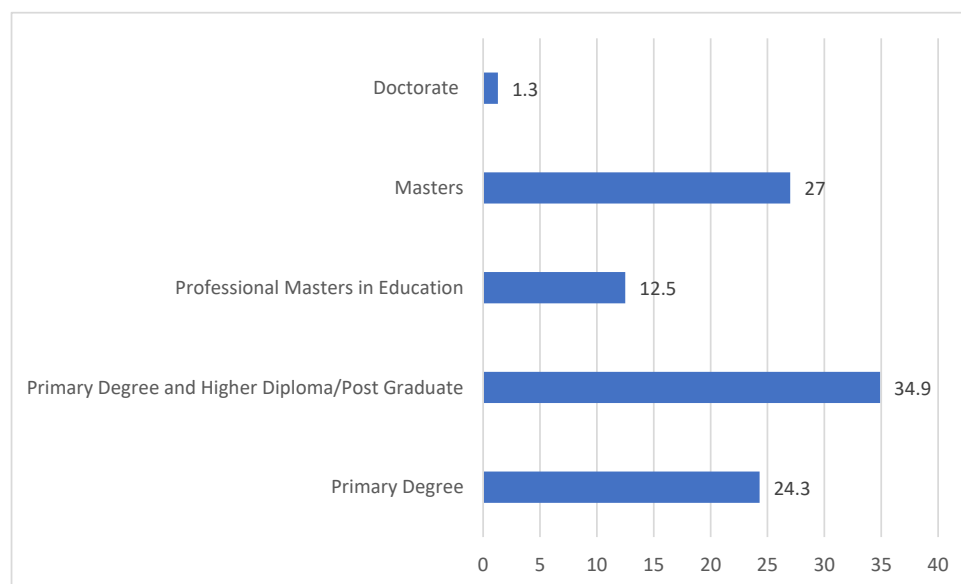


Figure 4. The level of education of the participants (%) of the present study.

The teachers who responded to the survey had a range of teaching experience. Almost half, (47.7%, $n = 63$) had five or less years of teaching experience. Fifteen percent of participants (15.6%, $n = 20$) had been teaching between 11 and 15 years. Only 16.0% ($n = 21$) teachers had been teaching for more than 16 years.

3. Results

3.1. Previous CPD in Special Education

As part of the questionnaire, the teachers were asked what type of CPD in SEN they had undertaken in the previous 3 years from 2017–2020 (see Figure 5). This question was important to assess the level of CPD that respondents had in this area. Similar to the findings of international studies, teachers who participated in this study stated that they most frequently engaged in short CPD courses [61]. The most frequently reported form of CPD that the teachers engaged with was in-school in-service training (85%, $n = 114$). Engagement in workshops was reported next with 72.9% ($n = 97$) of respondents accessing this form of CPD. The other most frequently reported forms of CPD accessed were conferences or educational seminars (62.4%, $n = 83$) and summer courses accredited by the Department of Education (62%, $n = 78$). There were only 27.8% of participants ($n = 37$) who had undertaken a university accredited course over the previous three years. However, this figure is quite high as international research states that generally university accredited courses are the lowest type of CPD undertaken by teachers [61].

Participants listed a wide range of topics and subjects that they covered during these forms of CPD which focused specifically on SEN for students learning through Irish. In the area of SEN, the following topics were covered by the study participants over the previous three years; language and communication difficulties/bilingualism, setting up an ASD special class in an IM school, differentiation, assessment, planning, supporting students with SEN learning through Irish, in-class support/team teaching, dealing with trauma, Nurture groups, Dyslexia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), and ASD. The contents of the other courses that were undertaken included Irish literacy, assessment in Irish literacy ($n = 4$), mathematics ($n = 1$), ICT ($n = 1$), music ($n = 1$), and IM education ($n = 4$).

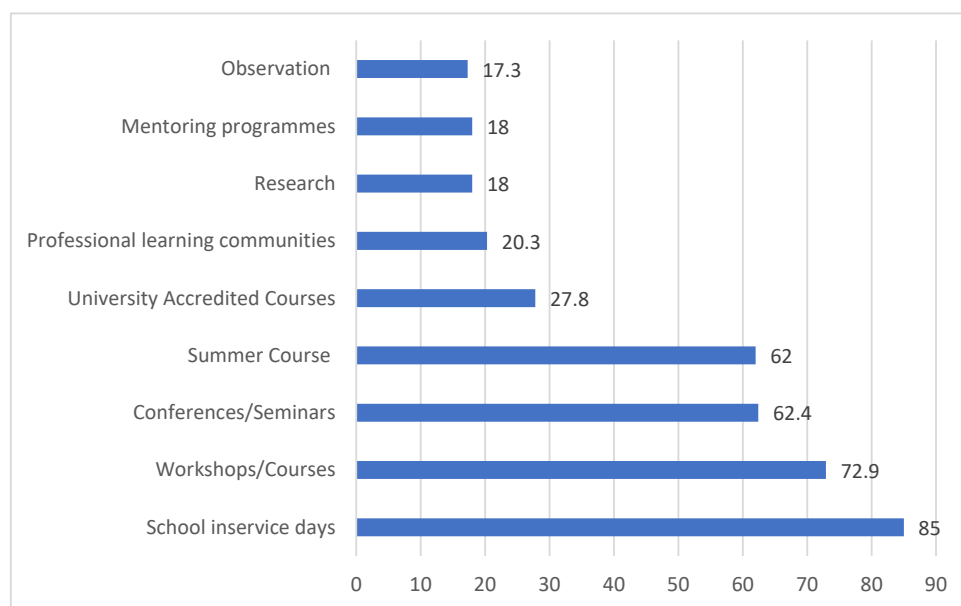


Figure 5. The types of CPD that participants (%) had engaged in over a three-year period from 2017 to 2020.

3.2. The CPD Needs of Teachers in Special Education

Participants were asked to choose five areas which they would like to learn more about to help them when teaching students with SEN learning through Irish (see Figure 6). Irish literacy was the area identified most by the teachers with 70.6% of teachers ($n = 94$) choosing this option. The assessment of students learning through Irish was identified as the second most important area (69.9%, $n = 93$). This was closely followed by the identification of students with SEN learning through Irish (67.6%, $n = 90$). Other areas identified as important were, differentiation (53.3%, $n = 71$), L2 acquisition (44.3%, $n = 59$), and inclusive pedagogies (38.3%, $n = 51$). It is interesting that many of the areas identified for CPD have previously been identified as challenges in terms of SEN provision in IM schools [1,2,5]. Additionally, many of the areas identified by teachers are suggested internationally as essential components for CPD in this area for bilingual education teachers [44,52–54].

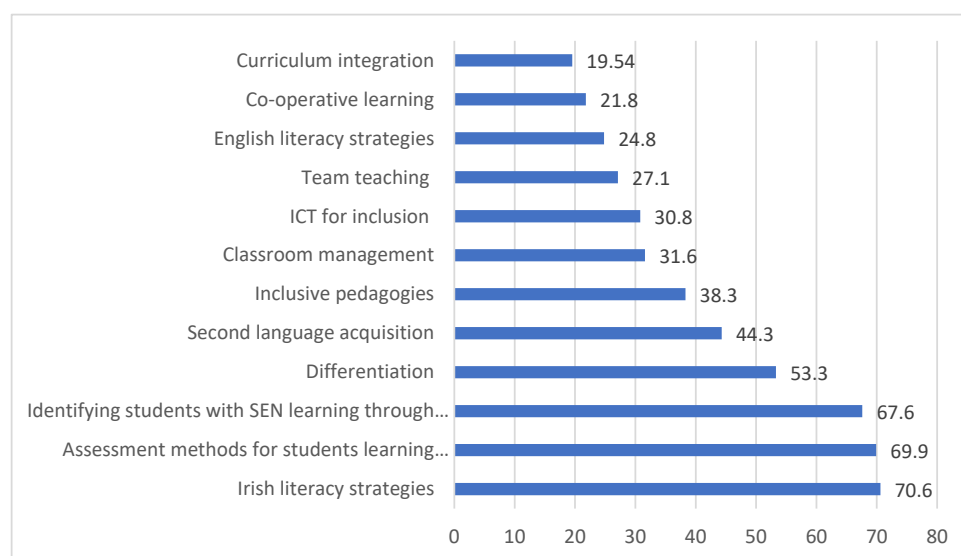


Figure 6. The areas in which teachers (%) would like to learn more when teaching students with SEN through the medium of Irish.

To gain a greater understanding of the needs of students and teachers in IM education, participants were asked which categories of SEN they wanted to learn more about (see Figure 7). The most frequently reported category was Dyslexia (85.71%, $n = 114$). This finding corresponds with previous research that identified Dyslexia as the most prevalent category of SEN in IM primary schools [11,20]. ASD (73.6%, $n = 98$), SSLD (67.6%, $n = 90$) and EBD (57.89%, $n = 77$) which are in the top five most frequently reported categories of SEN in IM primary schools, were also identified as the areas in which teachers wanted the most CPD [11].

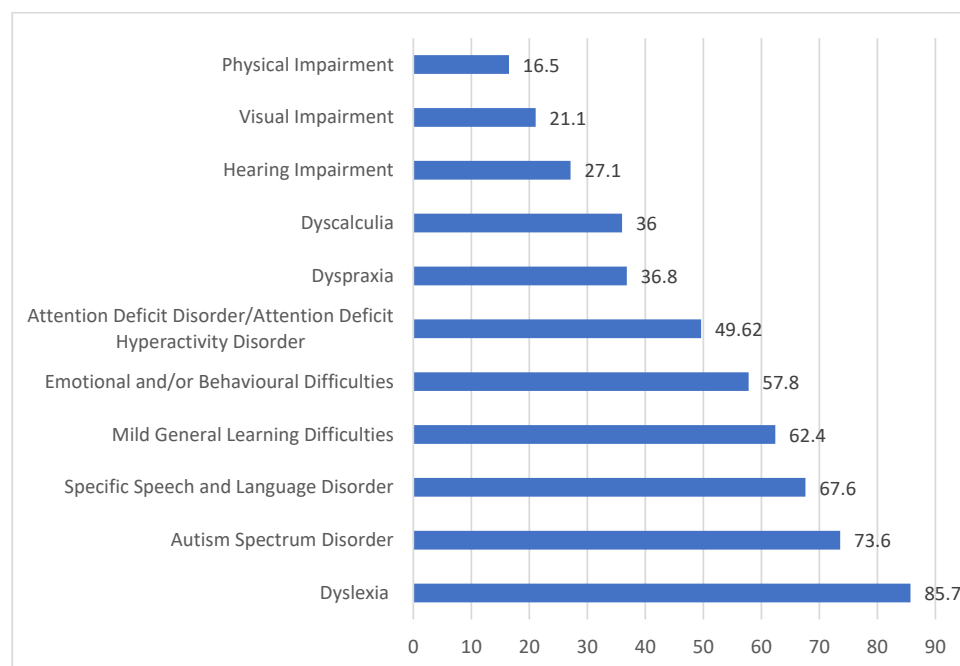


Figure 7. The categories of SEN that teachers identified in which they want more CPD.

3.3. CPD Course Design

Teachers were asked to rate (1 being the most important and 6 being the least important) the factors listed in Figure 8 below in relation to the most important elements of CPD course design. The element of course design that was most important for teachers was that they would be given resources and strategies that would help them in their teaching. The opportunity to learn from other teachers was cited third as the most important element of a CPD course [60]. The opportunity to learn from other teachers through multimedia, e.g., video analysis was cited fourth by participants. Time to think and consolidate learning was listed fifth and the opportunity to engage with appropriate up-to-date research was listed sixth.

3.4. The Reasons Teachers Want to Undertake CPD in This Area

It is important to understand the motivating factors for teachers wishing to undertake CPD in this area. In the questionnaires, the teachers were provided with a selection of choices surrounding why they wanted to undertake CPD in this area. From this list (see Figure 9) teachers could choose more than one option. The most frequently reported factor was that teachers wanted to learn more and improve their teaching (74.4%, $n = 99$). This coincides with Feng & Sass [8] who state that teachers become more effective when they are supported and undertake CPD. A further 66.1% of teachers ($n = 88$) reported that they were motivated due to their interest in this area [7]. Career progression was cited as a motivation for 60% of teachers ($n = 80$). The other factors listed include wanting to access more research/literature in this area (53.38%, $n = 71$), the fact that they were a special

education teacher (34.5%, $n = 46$), or that this area relates to their post of responsibility in the school (20.3%, $n = 27$).

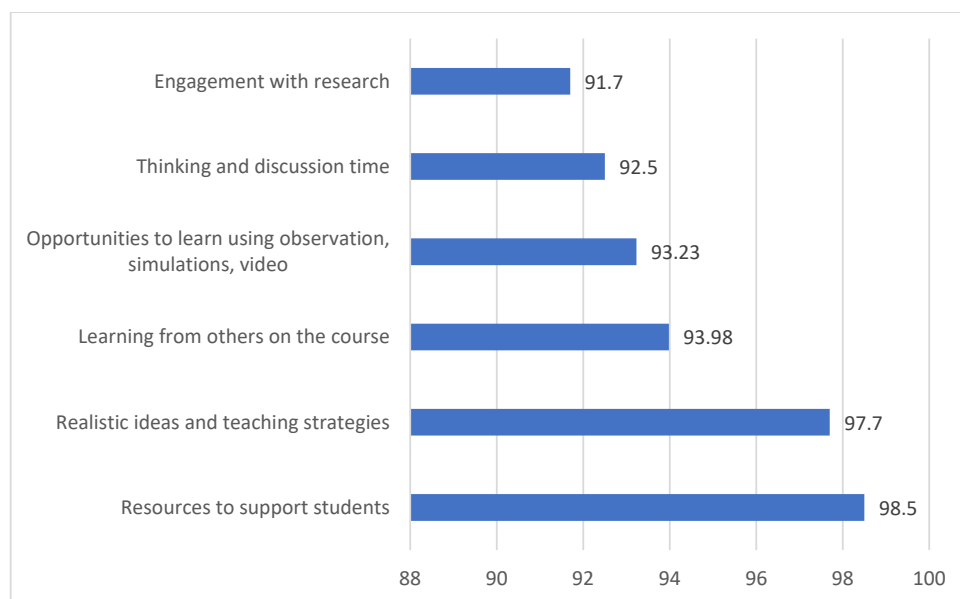


Figure 8. The most important elements in CPD course design as identified by participants (%).

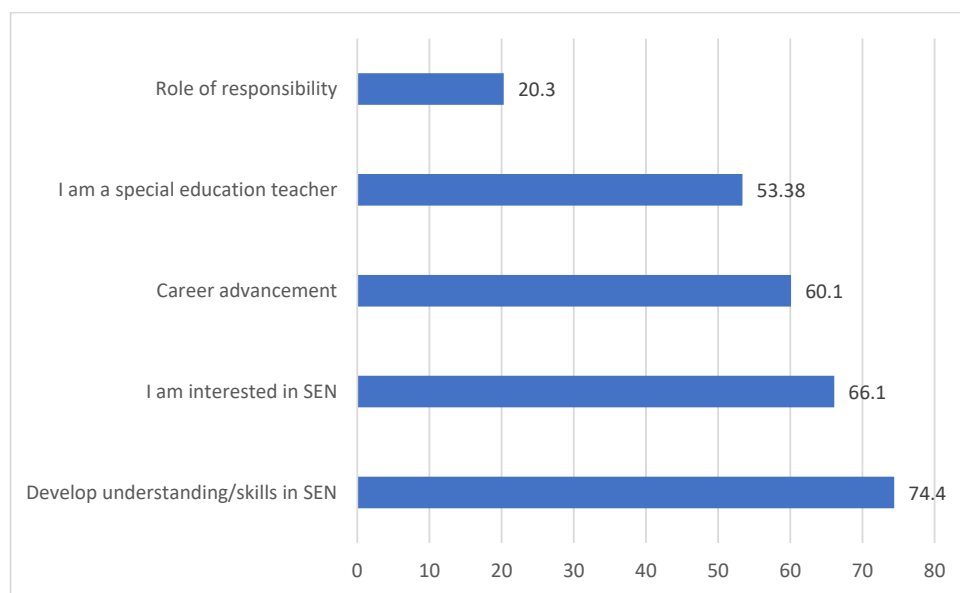


Figure 9. The motivating factors around why participants (%) wanted to undertake CPD in the area of special education.

3.5. The Challenges of Accessing CPD

It is important to understand the challenges that teachers face when accessing CPD in this area through the medium of Irish (see Figure 10). Similar to both national and international research findings, the biggest challenge faced by teachers in IM schools when accessing CPD in the area of special education was a lack of time, with almost three quarters of teachers identifying this as a challenge (75.1%, $n = 100$) [7,63]. The lack of availability of courses in special education that focus on teaching students learning through Irish was cited as a challenge by 70% of teachers ($n = 89$) [1]. The lack of CPD targeted at teachers who are teaching through the medium of Irish has been cited in previous research, with teachers in Gaeltacht post-primary schools stating that some facilitators have a lack of

understanding of the IM education context and a lack of teaching experience in the area [7]. In the present study, 27.8% of teachers ($n = 37$) wanted the opportunity to undertake more CPD in this area in school, however, this was not an option for them. Other challenges that were cited included the cost of these courses (24%, $n = 32$), technology and resources (18%, $n = 24$), lack of support from the school/colleagues (5.2%, $n = 7$), and a lack of incentives (4.5%, $n = 6$) [61].

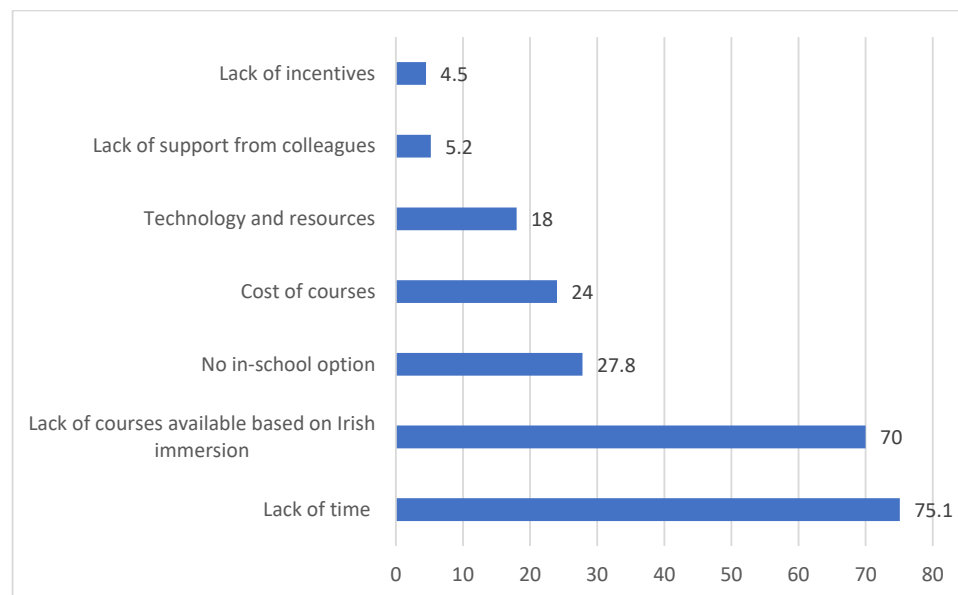


Figure 10. The challenges that teachers (%) faced when accessing CPD in special education through the medium of Irish.

4. Discussion

Little research is available on the CPD needs of immersion education teachers internationally in the area of special education [44,52–54]. This study investigated the CPD needs of primary and post-primary teachers in IM schools ($N = 133$). This research was undertaken to inform the development of a 20-h online CPD summer course approved by the Department of Education in the RoI [64]. The findings of this study informed the development of the course through identifying the areas that teachers wanted to learn more about and by identifying how they would like to access this information.

The findings of this study suggest that the most sought-after method of CPD delivery in the area of SEN for teachers in Irish immersion schools is through a short course and/or in-school in-service [61]. This factor should be taken into consideration when developing future courses in this area. Interestingly, the challenges that teachers face in terms of SEN provision in school were also identified in this study and the areas in which they wanted further CPD (e.g., Irish literacy, assessment, interventions, and inclusive pedagogies) [2,5]. Therefore, it can be suggested that teachers are in urgent need of CPD in these areas. Furthermore, if more CPD was available to teachers in these areas, the negative opinions regarding the suitability of IM schools for students with SEN may decline [2,4,5]. It may be beneficial for this data to be considered by education policy makers, minority language immersion schools, and ITE providers when preparing and supporting teachers to work in this sector [58] (p. 168). Furthermore, this data corresponds with previous research into CPD course development in this area for bilingual special education teachers and it may be a good idea for course developers to follow the framework outlined previously [44,52–54].

Teachers were motivated to undertake courses in special education because they were motivated by their interest in the area, and/or due to the opportunity that it may present for career progression [7,65]. This suggests that teachers in IM schools value CPD in this area and have an understanding that it will help to improve their practice and their students'

academic attainment [8]. The teachers in this study stated that they wanted CPD that provided them with: (1) resources that will help them meet the needs of all their students, (2) an understanding of inclusive teaching strategies, (3) the opportunity to learn from others teaching in the sector, (4) the opportunity to learn from others working in immersion education internationally (videos, simulations, etc.), and (5) time to think and discuss issues with others [59,60]. This in turn suggests that teachers want a practical course where they can learn realistic and useful strategies to help them meet the needs of their students. Through the analysis of this data, it may be beneficial to use the ABC course design method when developing a course in this area [66]. This would ensure that participants can access many different learning styles; acquisition, inquiry, collaboration, discussion, practice, and production [66]. From the findings, it may also be beneficial for teachers to have the opportunity to access professional learning communities where teachers can support and learn from each other [67]. Nevertheless, it is important to take into consideration the challenges that teachers reported when accessing CPD in this area in order to ensure the accessibility and success of future courses in this area. As per teachers in all education sectors, time was listed as the most challenging factor for teachers. This challenge might be overcome by implementing courses using school in-service CPD days [61]. This would also negate the other challenges teachers faced in terms of the availability of courses and the cost associated with undertaking courses [1,2,7]. The development of professional learning communities as mentioned above may also help relieve the challenge faced in terms of feeling supported by colleagues [67].

However, when reviewing the findings of this study, it is important to be mindful of its limitations. One of the limitations of this research was the small sample size that was available, this can be attributed to the fact that the study was undertaken in November 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic where teachers were navigating through a difficult period of change [12]. Nevertheless, the findings of this study are important and add to the limited international research that has been conducted into the CPD needs of primary and post-primary teachers' immersion education teachers in special education. This study aims to fill the research gap in relation to the types of CPD available to teachers in IM education in this area and their preferences in terms of the content delivered. The findings of the present study may be applicable to other immersion education contexts throughout the world, e.g., Canada, USA, Spain, Scotland, Wales, and New Zealand. When designing and delivering CPD in immersion education sectors internationally, course providers should consider holding school in-service days as this seems to be the most effective and popular form of CPD accessed. The needs of teachers in this study relate to the international research that states that a lack of resources and assessments are a challenge for immersion education teachers. Due to this, it may be beneficial to provide CPD on appropriate assessment in immersion education contexts internationally. This study has identified that teachers want realistic teaching ideas and strategies that can be implemented in the class, which is an important factor for consideration by any immersion teacher educators internationally. Furthermore, research from the IM education sector suggests that there is a need for CPD to be delivered by those with an understanding of the educational context. This is a factor that should be considered by teacher educators in immersion education internationally. There is a need for course providers with an understanding of bilingualism and SEN to provide the CPD in order for it to be relevant to teachers in immersion education schools. It is hoped that the content of this article will provide an insight for immersion education teachers and educational professionals, particularly those designing and developing CPD courses in special education for immersion education and heritage language teachers. The findings of the study may positively influence the development of such courses and better support teachers in immersion schools to implement inclusive practices for all their students.

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