

A Snapshot of Inclusion in Irish-Medium and Gaeltacht Post-Primary Schools in 2024

Research suggests there has been an increase in the prevalence of additional educational needs (AEN) in Irish-medium (IM) and Gaeltacht post-primary schools over the last 20 years (Mac Donnacha et al., 2005; Nic Aindriú, in press). These schools are catering for an increasingly diverse student population with a range of AEN. This article draws on research on inclusive practices and policies in IM and Gaeltacht schools throughout the Republic of Ireland (RoI) and Northern Ireland (NI).

Surveys (n = 29; 38% of RoI schools), focus group discussions, and individual interviews (representatives from 20% of RoI and NI schools) were carried out with principals and teachers in early 2024. These provided a snapshot of the positive practices in place in schools, the benefits of IM education for students with AEN, and the challenges that schools face in meeting the needs of all students.

Positive practices and benefits

Internationally, a growing body of research suggests that students with a range of AEN (e.g., autism, and speech and language difficulties) can become bilingual and that there are many benefits – including cognitive, social, and cultural – in their doing so (Bialystok, 2009; Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2016). Participants in this study reported that IM and Gaeltacht schools offer students with AEN the opportunity to learn Irish and become bilingual, which may not be available to them in an English-medium school, due to the exemptions offered to students with AEN from studying Irish (DES, 2018).

It was clear from the findings of the study that these schools have many positive practices in place to meet the needs of all students, as recommended by the Department of Education (DES, 2010). They reported



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This article provides a snapshot of the inclusive education landscape in Irish-medium and Gaeltacht post-primary schools in 2024. It discusses the positive practices in place in these schools, the benefits of this form of education for students with additional educational needs, and the challenges that schools face in meeting the needs of all students.

having clear, whole-school policies for planning, assessment, teaching, and learning which are implemented consistently throughout the school, thus creating positive outcomes for students with AEN. This in turn has a positive impact on students' wellbeing, sense of belonging, and self-esteem (Allen et al., 2021). Participants spoke about how students feel they belong in the school, have positive and trusting relationships with staff, and are motivated to learn.

Challenges

As with inclusion in all forms of immersion education, IM and Gaeltacht schools reported several challenges in meeting the needs of all students. Most of these challenges were systemic and outside of their control (Nic Aindriú & Ó Duibhir, 2023).

A significant difficulty for staff in these schools is a lack of appropriate Irish-language assessments, interventions, and resources. Few assessments are available through Irish to post-primary schools, meaning that Irish-English bilingual students are not being assessed in the school's language of teaching and learning. This has negative implications for assessment results, because if bilingual students are being assessed in only one of their languages, results are unlikely to provide a true overview of their abilities (Hambly & Fombonne, 2014). This may lead to a disproportionate number of students being referred with AEN.

These schools also have trouble accessing external professionals, such as educational psychologists or speech and language therapists with Irish and an understanding of bilingualism or IM education (De Valenzuela et al., 2016). Furthermore, many schools experienced difficulties sourcing appropriate and up-to-date textbooks in Irish and were often faced with little choice compared with English-medium schools. Teachers frequently find themselves needing to translate or create resources themselves, causing additional stress and a huge drain on valuable teacher time.

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Conclusion

This study highlights both the positive strides and the significant challenges facing Irish-medium and Gaeltacht post-primary schools in fostering inclusive education. The increased prevalence of additional educational needs in these schools reflects a more diverse student population, which has been largely embraced through dedicated whole-school inclusive practices implemented by schools.

However, systemic issues such as insufficient resources, inadequate assessments in Irish, and lack of access to Irish-speaking educational professionals hinder

schools' ability to fully support their students. Addressing these barriers through better government investment, up-to-date resources, and tailored teacher training is essential to ensure that all students can thrive in IM and Gaeltacht educational settings.

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