The Experiences of Pupils with Special Educational Needs in Irish-Medium Schools

This study investigated the experiences of nine pupils with special educational needs (SEN) enrolled in Irish-medium (IM) schools in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland through pupil-led interviews. Four pupils had a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder, three had a diagnosis of dyslexia, and two had a diagnosis of specific speech and language disorder. These categories of SEN were chosen as children with these diagnoses often experience language and communication difficulties. Therefore, it was interesting to investigate the experiences of these pupils when learning through Irish as a second language. The data gathered was analysed using thematic analysis. In IM schools, pupils are immersed in Irish as a second language as most come from homes where English is their first language. Internationally, limited research has been conducted on pupil voice in terms of children with SEN. However, even less research has been undertaken on pupil voice in terms of pupils with SEN in immersion education contexts. Therefore, the findings of this study will add to the limited research available in this area and provide an overview of the experiences of pupils with SEN in IM education. Pupil voice is important in educational research for pupils with SEN, as their experiences and perspectives can inform practices and policies.

Keywords: pupil voice, Irish-medium education, special educational needs, immersion education

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INTRODUCTION

Recognising the voice of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) for the purpose of educational policy, planning, and intervention development has been increasingly promoted (Porter, 2014; United Nations, 2006). Nevertheless, limited research has been conducted on pupil voice in terms of pupils with SEN. This

is particularly the case in relation to pupils with SEN in immersion education contexts. This study investigated the experiences of nine pupils with SEN enrolled in Irish-medium (IM) schools in the Republic of Ireland (RoI) and Northern Ireland (NI) through pupil led interviews. The pupils had a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), specific speech and language disorder (SSLD), or dyslexia. These categories of SEN were chosen due to the language and communication difficulties these pupils face. The research question being addressed was, what are the experiences of pupils with SEN learning through Irish, as a second language, in an IM school? At the time of this study there were 145 IM schools in the RoI. In NI, there were 35 IM schools, 28 of these were stand-alone schools and seven were Irish language units attached to English-medium host schools (Gaeloideachas Teo, 2017). In these units the curriculum is delivered through Irish even though they are under the governance of an English-medium host school. In IM schools, all curriculum subjects are taught through the medium of Irish, except for English (Cummins, 2009). Pupils receive up to two years total immersion in the Irish language in IM schools in the RoI and up to three years in IM schools in NI, before they commence English as a curriculum subject (McKendry, 2006; Ó Duibhir, Nig Uidhir, Ó Cathalláin, Ní Thuairisg, and Cosgrove, 2015; NCCA, 2019). This allows pupils to develop greater proficiency in Irish (NCCA, 2019). 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 (NCCA, 2019; Údarás na Gaeltachta, 2017).

PUPIL VOICE IN SPECIAL EDUCATION RESEARCH

Several studies have been undertaken incorporating pupil voice to assess the school experiences of children with SEN (Gaona, Palikara, and Castro, 2019; Howard, Katsos, and Gibson, 2019; Norwich and Kelly, 2004; Prunty, Dupont, and Mc Daid, 2012; Sellman, 2009; Squires, Kalambouka, and Bragg, 2016; Travers et al., 2010). Pupils have been given an opportunity to have their say on different aspects of their schooling through interviews or questionnaires. Within these studies, common themes have been identified. Friendship is a theme, which has emerged as a positive aspect of school for pupils with SEN, as it provides an informal support system for them (Gaona, et al., 2019; Norwich and Kelly, 2004; Prunty et al., 2012; Ring, O'Sullivan, Ryan, and Burke, 2018; Sellman, 2009). Travers et al. (2010) found that pupils received support from their friends through playing together, talking, and listening to each other. There were references made by the pupils in that study to playing games together, and to how this helped them

to feel included. The quality of school experiences and friendships was also cited as being central to student happiness in school in a more recent study of 38 primary and post-primary children with SEN in the RoI (Prunty et al., 2012).

Accessing additional teaching support outside of the mainstream classroom has been listed as a positive aspect of school by pupils with SEN (Norwich and Kelly, 2004; Prunty et al., 2012). In a large study of post-primary pupils (N=272), Squires et al. (2016) reported that withdrawal to the resource room enabled pupils with SEN to focus better, it provided them with an emotional sanctuary, and helped them to develop a positive relationship with the teacher. This was due to several factors, such as, less noise, less distraction, more attention, and more appropriate work. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that there were negative aspects of withdrawal cited by these pupils, such as, being without their friends and the work being too hard. Interestingly, research has shown that specific subjects, such as, art, computers, and physical education are preferred by pupils with SEN due to being more inclusive in their pedagogy (Howard et al., 2019; Riley, 2004, Travers et al., 2010). These subjects may be perceived to be more inviting and engaging due to offering a range of pupil-centred teaching techniques, such as, group work, practical work, guided learning, and individual work (Howard et al., 2019).

METHODOLOGY

Pupils were asked to bring the researcher on a tour of their school. An adult from the school whom the pupil trusted accompanied them on this tour. Before the tour, the pupils' parents were provided with a plain language statement regarding the nature of the research and they had signed an informed consent form for their child to participate in the study. The pupils were given a child-friendly plain language statement, a visual timetable, and an assent form. These were read by the child or to the child by the adult accompanying them on the tour. The pupils were asked whether they had any questions and were assured that if they decided not to participate in the study at any stage they could withdraw. All pupil interviews were conducted through the medium of Irish and all the pupils, except one, spoke Irish during the interview. The interviews were recorded and transcribed with permission. Direct quotes in the Irish language provided in the findings are also accompanied by an English language translation. During the tour, pupils were asked to take photographs of different areas of the school using an instant camera. The content of these photographs was described and discussed

as part of the interview; pupils were not asked direct questions from an adult's perspective. However, as mentioned previously the interviews were pupil-led guided by the following topics and questions.

- Areas of the school where different activities take place
- Their favourite place in the school
- What they like most about the school?
- What they think is the most important area in their school?
- What is their least favourite place in the school?
- Where in the school they feel proud/good?
- Where in the school they feel included?
- Where in the school they feel least included?

This research method was chosen as the use of photography gave the pupils, who had varying levels of language and communication skills, the opportunity to express themselves both verbally and non-verbally (Einersdóttir, 2007). Short narrative notes were taken by the researcher during the tour, which included references to non-verbal communication. For example, it was noted that one pupil chose to change the setting of the camera from colour to black and white when they were taking a photograph of an area in the school that they did not like. The data gathered was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Participant Profiles
Table 1 provides further details in relation to the pupils' (i) school, (ii) SEN diagnosis. (iii) class level, (iv) home language, and (v) the stage at which their SEN was identified. Pupils were enrolled in four mainstream IM primary schools, three in the RoI and one in NI. Participating pupils were selected by the schools based on their availability and willingness to partake in the study.

Table 1. *The profiles of pupils with special educational needs in IM schools who participated in the research.*

	School/ Location	SEN Diagnosis	Class Level	Home Language	SEN Identified
Pupil 1	School B RoI	ASD	4th Class (9-10 years old)	English	IM primary school
Pupil 2	School C RoI	ASD	3rd Class (8-9 years old)	English	IM preschool
Pupil 3	School C RoI	ASD	6th Class (11-12 years old)	English	IM preschool
Pupil 4	School D NI	ASD	3rd Class (8-9 years old)	English	IM preschool
Pupil 5	School A RoI	Dyslexia	5th Class (10-11 years old)	English	IM primary school
Pupil 6	School B RoI	Dyslexia	4th Class (9-10 years old)	English	IM primary school
Pupil 7	School C RoI	Dyslexia	4th Class (9-10 years old)	English	IM primary school
Pupil 8	School A RoI	SSLD	2nd Class (7-8 years old)	English	Before preschool
Pupil 9	School D NI	SSLD	Senior Infants (5-6 years old)	Irish/ English	Before preschool

FINDINGS

The findings discussed below relate to different locations and activities that took place in the schools, which pupils either liked or disliked. The themes included in the findings are outlined in Table 2, along with a breakdown of the references made.

Table 2. *A summary of the findings of the study.*

Area/Activity	Liked	Disliked	No Reference
The Mainstream Classroom	4	1	4
The Special Education Teacher's Classroom	2	0	7
The School Hall	7	0	2
The School Yard	7	2	0
The School Kitchen	4	0	5
Extra-Curricular Activities (Music/Sport)	5	0	4
Other Areas in the School (Library, Garden, Quiet Room, Computer Room)	7	0	2

The Classroom

Five of the pupils brought the researcher to their mainstream classroom on the tour. Four of these pupils reported positive feelings towards their classroom. The four pupils who liked their classroom spoke about how this was a place where they had friends and did schoolwork, a place where they felt included. Two pupils from different schools (pupil 3 & 5) described how they enjoyed using a laptop in their mainstream classroom for their schoolwork. However, one pupil (pupil 7) said that this was an area that they disliked but they did not elaborate further on the reason for this. Two of the pupils who attended the same school in the RoI (pupil 5 & 8) also reported that they liked to go to the special education teacher's classroom for additional learning support in English and mathematics, both individually and in small groups.

Seo seomra Múinteoir X. Ba mhaith liom dul isteach agus bheith ag obair. (Pupil 5)	This is Miss X's room. I like to go in and do work.

The School Hall

Seven pupils who took part in the interviews spoke about how they liked going to the school hall and how they felt included in activities that took place there. The activities that they enjoyed in this space were playing games, physical education, and assembly.

Taighdeoir: Cén fáth ar roghnaigh tú an halla?	*Researcher*: Why did you choose the hall?
Dalta 1: Mar is maith liom spórt	*Pupil 1*: Because I like sport.
Taighdeoir: Cén saghas spórt?	*Researcher*: What type of sport?
Dalta 1: Aon saghas sport!	*Pupil 1*: Any sport!

The two pupils in schools in the RoI, who did not refer to the school hall, had no hall in their school (pupil 5 & 8).

The School Yard

Almost all of the pupils (n=7) discussed how they enjoyed going out to the school yard to play. All of these pupils said that they enjoyed playing with their friends. Two of the pupils (pupil 1 & 6) spoke about some of the games that they played in the yard, for example, marshmallow, cops and robbers, and tag.

Bulldog, thall anseo le rang a dó agus uaireanta gafa. (Pupil 6)	Bulldog, over there with second class and sometimes tag (chasing).

However, two pupils with ASD (pupil 3 & 4) spoke about areas in the school yard that they did not like. One of these pupils did not like the area where pupils line up.

Ní maith liom an líne agus uaireanta tá an talamh fliuch agus tá sé fuar. Níl mé ag iarraidh é seo (an grianghraf) chun féachaint go maith. (Pupil 3)	I don't like the line and sometimes the ground is wet and cold. I don't want this (picture) to look good.

Due to this, accommodations were made by the school for this pupil to go straight into the school building and there was no need for them to line up. The other pupil did not like the yard because it was busy and had too many people in it. Due to this, their school had also made accommodations. For example, the pupil sometimes stayed in at break time and did some work on a laptop or did jobs for the teacher.

Ní mhaith liom sin, see an píosa sin, cos tá daoine síos ansin. Suím sa seomra agus úsáideann mé an computer le obair a dhéanamh. (Pupil 4)	I don't like that, see that piece there, 'cos there are people there. I sit in the class-room and I use the computer to do work.

The School Kitchen

In two of the schools (school C&D), the pupils spoke about how they liked going to the school kitchen or canteen. In the school in NI, the pupils got a hot lunch in the school canteen. Both pupils interviewed in that school (pupil 4 & 9) spoke

about how they liked going there for lunch. However, the pupil with ASD said that they were often felt uncomfortable in this area due to its small size and the high volume of noise.

| Tá sé píosa beag ró-ghlórmhar agus ró-bheag. (Pupil 4) | It is a little bit too noisy and too small. |

In a school in the RoI, two pupils with ASD (pupil 2 & 3) talked about how they used the school kitchen for practical activities like making hot chocolate, cooking, and baking. For example, one of these pupils had been learning about Spain and had used the kitchen to cook Spanish dishes. This was an activity that they enjoyed greatly. "This is the kitchen. We like bake stuff and everything!" (Pupil 2).

Other Activities
Pupils from all of the schools spoke about how they had the opportunity to participate in team sports at school. This was something that they enjoyed and made them feel included.

| *Taighdeoir:* An bhfuil áit ar bith a bhraiteann tú bródúil? | *Researcher:* Is there anywhere that you feel proud? |
| *Dalta:* Ag imirt iománaíochta. | *Pupil:* Playing hurling. |

The school in NI had a library, unlike the schools visited in the RoI, and both pupils interviewed from this school enjoyed going to the library (pupil 4 & 9). One of these pupils had limited verbal abilities and was not able to elaborate further on the reasons for this, whilst the other pupil spoke about how they liked reading non-fiction books in English in the library. Four of the pupils enjoyed doing art in school (pupils 2, 4, 8, & 9). A pupil in one of the schools in the RoI (pupil 5) said that they had the opportunity to learn musical instruments in their school. They were learning how to play the recorder and the clarinet. A school garden was in place in one of the schools in the RoI and all the pupils from that school spoke about how they liked to go to the school garden and do some planting. They enjoyed this area because it was quiet and calm. They also had a quiet room that they liked to go to.

| Bíonn sé ciúin, níl sé mar an seomra ranga. (Pupil 7) | It is quiet, it isn't like the classroom. |

Two pupils (pupils 4 & 6) explained how they liked to go to the computer room in their schools. The activities that they undertook in this room included maths/literacy games and learning about PowerPoint.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

It is clear from the findings above that the pupils participating in the present study enjoyed attending IM education for a number of reasons. The pupils in this study had made friends in their school and their viewpoints reflect those of pupils with SEN in international and national research, where school engagement and enjoyment was defined by the relationships they had with their teacher and peers (Ring and Travers, 2005; Sellman, 2009; Squires et al., 2016; Travers et al., 2010). This suggests that, regardless of the language of instruction in a school, pupils with SEN have the ability to make friends and enjoy/engage in school due to these friendships (Gaona et al., 2019; Prunty et al., 2012; Travers et al., 2010). Similar to international research, two pupils in this study also enjoyed accessing additional teaching support through withdrawal to the special education teacher's classroom (Norwich and Kelly, 2004; Squires et al., 2016). Pupils in this study also enjoyed using computers and partaking in a full range of activities in school, such as, art, sport, and baking, which made them feel included (Howard et al., 2019; Prunty et al., 2012; Squires et al., 2016; Travers et al., 2010). The findings also show that the IM schools made adaptations to promote the inclusion of all pupils, for example, the students who did not like lining up in the yard.

Overall, the participants in this study had a very positive experience of IM education. Nevertheless, there are limitations to take into consideration when reviewing the findings of this study, for example: (i) the small sample size, (ii) the limited range of SEN categories included, (iii) the small number of geographical locations included, (iv) the subjective nature of pupil-led interviews, and (v) the lack of quantitative data to reinforce the anecdotal references made by pupils. Not alone does this research contribute to the limited data available in this area, it also gives pupils with SEN in IM schools a chance to be heard and this in turn may have implications for future educational practices. Similar to other studies, pupils discussed how they enjoyed more practical subjects, such as, cooking/baking, art, physical education, and ICT. Going forward, it is important for educational practitioners in IM education to ensure that all pupils have the opportunity to participate in these activities and to learn using child-centred approaches. This 'hands on' practice should be extended to other subject areas, for example, languages, maths, and science. It would also be beneficial for teachers in IM schools to extend the use of ICT across all subject areas to further promote curriculum accessibility. Pupils also felt proud and that they belonged when they were included in extra-curricular activities, for example, team sports and music groups. It is therefore recommended that IM schools continue to offer all pupils opportunities to be included in activities such as these. It is also recommended

that IM schools should continue to offer special accommodations to include pupils with SEN, such as those implemented by the schools in this study to further promote inclusion.

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