



TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN GAELTACHT SCHOOLS: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Professional learning (PL) is key if teachers are to feel prepared and supported to implement inclusive education (IE) for students with special educational needs (SEN). There is a dearth of research related to professional learning for inclusion in Gaeltacht education. The intersection of immersion education and SEN presents additional challenges for Irish-medium education (IME) schools in meeting the needs of their students with SEN, and teachers in these settings require context specific PL in the area of SEN. However, to date, PL has not always addressed the complex socio-linguistic context in which Gaeltacht schools are located. This paper reviews key literature pertaining to Gaeltacht education, as well as PL and SEN across a range of contexts.

Keywords: Gaeltacht, immersion education, teacher professional learning, inclusive education, special educational needs

TERESA NÍ GHALLCHÓIR, is a post-primary school teacher and current postgraduate research student at Dublin City University. **DR JOE TRAVERS** is an Associate Professor in the School of Inclusive and Special Education, Dublin City University. **DR AISLING NÍ DHIORBHÁIN** is an Associate Professor in the School of Language, Literacy and Early Childhood Education, Dublin City University.

Corresponding author: teresa.nighallchoir3@mail.dcu.ie

INTRODUCTION

Despite global policy commitment to inclusive education (IE), inadequate professional learning (PL) to support the translation of policy into practice remains a key challenge (Chow et al., 2023; O’Gorman and Drudy, 2010; Roberts and Simpson, 2016; Travers et al., 2010; Young et al., 2017). International research on the PL needs of immersion teachers in the area of SEN is limited (Carr, 2007; Casey et al., 2013; Lapkin et al., 2006; Mady, 2018; Mollica et al., 2005; Rodriguez and Carrasquillo, 2005). Increasingly, research in the Irish-medium education (IME) context highlights that teachers require PL in the areas of SEN (Andrews, 2020; Barrett, 2016; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2007; Ní Chinnéide, 2009; Nic Aindriú et al., 2022). However, there is a dearth of research focusing specifically on Gaeltacht education (Ní Thuairisg, 2018; Ó Grádaigh, 2015), particularly in the area of SEN (Mac Donncha et al., 2005; Mac Intyre Coyle and Nic Aindriú, 2023). Furthermore, PL has not always addressed the complex socio-linguistic context in which the professional practice of Gaeltacht teachers is located (Ní Thuairisg, 2018). It is important to address PL for IE in the under-examined Gaeltacht context, since the understanding and enactment of inclusion varies significantly across contexts and cultures (Artiles and Kozleski 2007; Norwich, 2008; Warnes et al., 2022). This article aims to review key literature pertaining to PL and SEN in immersion contexts in order to answer the following question, how might PL further support IE in Gaeltacht schools? In doing so, it aims to address research gaps related to PL for IE in immersion settings.

METHODOLOGY

A thematic approach (Clarke and Braun, 2017) was deemed the most fitting to undertake this review, due to the multi-strand nature of this research. Literature was yielded from comprehensive searches of Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC), PsycINFO, Scopus and Google Scholar. Additionally, grey literature and national websites (e.g., www.cogg.ie; www.gaeloideachas.ie; www.ncse.ie) were analysed in order to identify relevant data/publications. This review draws upon literature from the Republic of Ireland (RoI) and Northern Ireland (NI), in both English and Irish, that is pertinent to both primary and post-primary schools, as well as international research. Systematic reviews/meta-analyses were sought out but studies with smaller sample sizes were also included, due to the relatively small number of relevant studies in the Irish context. Key search terms utilised included: Gaeltacht, immersion education, teacher professional learning, inclusive education, special educational needs. Although the focus of this paper is PL to support IE in Gaeltacht schools, it includes research on IME schools outside of the Gaeltacht (Gaelscoileanna), who face similar challenges in the provision of IE through a minority language.

GAELTACHT CONTEXT

Gaeltacht area and Gaeltacht education

'Gaeltacht' refers to regions in Ireland in which the Irish language is, or was until recently, the primary spoken language of the majority of the community (Údarás na Gaeltachta, 2017). The linguistic district of the contemporary Gaeltacht is "multi-faceted and complex" (Ó Duibhir et al., 2015, p. 9). The position of the Irish language as a minority language in the Gaeltacht is precarious (Mac Donnacha et al., 2005; Ó Giollagáin et al., 2007; Ó Giollagáin and Charlton, 2015; Péterváry et al., 2014), with a general downward trend in the number of people in the Gaeltacht speaking Irish on a daily basis (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2017, 2023). This is also evident at school level, (Harris et al., 2006; Mac Donnacha et al., 2005; Ó Giollagáin et al., 2007; Péterváry et al., 2014). As a consequence, a model of Gaeltacht education has arisen which must simultaneously tend to the socio-linguistic needs of both "native speakers" and learners of Irish alike (Ó Ceallaigh and Ní Dhonnabháin, 2015, p. 188).

Gaeltacht educational policy

These unique challenges and the complex socio-linguistic contexts of Gaeltacht schools are acknowledged in the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education* (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2016). The overarching goal of this policy is to ensure access to high quality and relevant IME in Gaeltacht schools and to promote the use of Irish as the primary language within Gaeltacht communities. The *Scéim Aitheantais Scoileanna Gaeltachta* (Gaeltacht Schools Recognition Scheme) aims to strengthen immersion education in Gaeltacht schools. Immersion education is a form of bilingual education in which students are immersed in a second language (L2) other than their first language (L1), in order to develop fluency and literacy in both languages (Cummins, 2009). The policy acknowledges the need for Gaeltacht teachers to have ongoing PL in order to provide high quality teaching and learning to linguistically diverse groups of students, and that PL for Gaeltacht teachers should be aligned to the PL for teachers in the general school population. Specific reference to SEN exists in one of the seven support pillars of this policy. Objectives include improved access to resources and support services through Irish, as well as raising awareness among professionals about the literature highlighting the benefits of bilingualism and the particular bilingual needs of students with SEN in Gaeltacht settings.

There have been key policy developments nationally related to IE for all, such as *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act* (EPSEN) (Government of Ireland (GoI), 2004). However, Barnes (2024) argues that IME schools operate within a "fragmented policy context" (p.4), which sidesteps the needs of Irish speakers in favour of the majority culture. She highlights that EPSEN does not explicitly mention IME in the Act, nor is the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), developed under EPSEN, obligated to adapt resources, support, or training materials for use in IME schools.

SEN in Gaeltacht schools

There is limited and dated data pertaining to SEN in Gaeltacht schools. In 2005, Mac Donnacha et al. estimated that 6 % (N=511) of students in the 125 Gaeltacht primary schools and 7 % (N=324) in 27 Gaeltacht post-primary schools had a diagnosis of SEN. The most up to date overview of the most prevalent types of SEN in Gaeltacht schools have included both IME school types in their study of the SEN provision and prevalence (Barrett, 2016; Barrett et al., 2020). At that time, the most prevalent types of diagnosed SEN in these schools are as follows: (1) Specific Learning Difficulty (SLD), (2) Mild General Learning Difficulty (MGLD), (3) Specific Language Impairment (SLI), (4) Autism Spectrum (AS) and (5) Developmental Coordination Delay (DCD). However, this study does not provide an isolated, overall prevalence rate of students with SEN in Gaeltacht schools. In a more recent study (Nic Aindriú, in press), it is estimated that 16.7 % of students in IME and Gaeltacht post-primary schools have a diagnosis of SEN. SLD is the most prevalent category of SEN in these schools. Other most frequently reported categories are AS, DCD, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and MGLD. The prevalence rate of SEN in Gaeltacht schools at 18.22 % is marginally higher than the rate of 16.35 % in IME schools outside of Gaeltacht areas. A total of 15.13 % of students in both school types access additional teaching support, which includes students with and without formal diagnoses of SEN (Nic Aindriú, in press).

There are numerous challenges related to IE for students with SEN in IME settings. These include the limited availability of assessment and resources for students with SEN in IME settings (Barnes and Ó Duibhir, 2023; Mac Donnacha et al., 2005; MacIntyre Coyle and Nic Aindriú, 2023; Nic Aindriú et al., 2021), a lack of evidence-based interventions in the medium of Irish (Nic Aindriú and Ó Duibhir, 2023), as well as limited educational psychological provision (Murtagh and Seoighe, 2022) and professional support services to support the needs of bilingual children with SEN (Nic Aindriú et al., 2021).

Teacher professional learning

The terms PL and professional development (PD) are often used interchangeably. Timperley *et al.* (2007) distinguish between PD and PL by associating the former with educational activities and processes and PL as the form of expertise

and internal knowledge creation which is the outcome of such activities. Increasingly, PL is the recommended term used to account for the teacher learning that may emanate from the range of PD experiences in which teachers engage (King et al., 2022). This marks a shift in PD conceived as something that is “done” to teachers (Timperley et al., 2007, p. 233), to the idea that teachers are active participants responsible for their individual learning and agents of change within their context (Labone and Long, 2016).

PL is central to teacher professionalism (Kennedy, 2014). Effective PL is a mechanism for improving teacher practice and student outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). However, PL is a complex system (Boylan et al., 2018; Merchie et al., 2018; Strom and Viesco, 2021), which is inextricable from the “complex teaching and learning environments in which teachers live” (Opfer and Pedder, 2011, p. 377). It is the features, as opposed to the form (e.g., workshop or seminar) have been shown to be of greater importance in determining the impact of PL on students and teachers (Gilleece et al., 2023). Core features of effective PL, as identified by Desimone (2009), and widely accepted as orthodoxy (King et al., 2022) consist of: content focus; active learning; collective participation; coherence; and duration. Additional features include a focus on participants’ needs, the role of external providers and specialists and the importance of leadership for PL (Cordingley et al., 2015).

Teacher PL in the Republic of Ireland

In recent years, teacher PL in Rol has been supported and impacted by key policy developments, such as *Cosán*, the national framework for teacher learning devised by the Teaching Council (2016), as well as an increased policy focus on both the evaluation of PL (Gilleece et al., 2023) and PL principles and practices (King et al., 2022). In the Rol, PL opportunities are provided by the Department of Education (DoE), through teacher support services such as the recently amalgamated Oide, Education Centres, agencies of the DoE, third level institutions and other organisations. An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG), Gaeloideachas, Údarás na Gaeltachta, Education and Training Board (ETB) Ireland are among the organisations that offer PL to IME schools.

Cosán reflects the idea of PL as ongoing and lifelong, and an embedded and natural component of teacher PL and school improvement (Banks and Smyth, 2011). It acknowledges that PL may be informal, personal, professional, school-based, or external. *Cosán* identifies PL as both a right and a responsibility, but this is not mandatory engagement following completion of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and induction. PL as a responsibility understands teachers as professionals who are self-motivated to steer their own PL journeys. While inclusion is a priority learning area within *Cosán*, Kenny et al. (2020) note that the framework does not overtly recommend any specific standards or competencies in IE, meaning that teachers working with students who present with SEN are not required to engage in any specific PL to support the IE of these students.

The professional learning needs of immersion teachers

Teachers in immersion classrooms are charged with additional and complex pedagogical demands (Lapkin et al., 2006; Lyster and Tedick, 2014; McPake et al., 2017). In addition to the required knowledge and pedagogy related to an individual’s specific subject, immersion teachers also need to develop the linguistic knowledge and skills necessary for them to effectively teach their subject in immersion classrooms (Tedick and Fortune, 2013). In the case of minoritized language medium instruction, it can be difficult to find teachers who are fluent and literate in the minority language, and confident in using it as the medium of instruction (McPake et al., 2015). Teacher preparation and PL programmes have often been inadequate in addressing the specific needs of the immersion teacher audience, with the consequence that immersion teachers often lack the skills to locate language opportunities within subject content and instruction (Cammarata and Tedick, 2012). Common across the research is the need for higher quality PL specific to immersion teaching, as well as the need for more developed knowledge of immersion pedagogies (Lyster and Tedick, 2014; Mac Gearailt et al., 2021; Ní Dhiorbháin and Ó Duibhir, 2017; O’Boyle et al., 2023). In the Irish context, a demand amongst immersion teachers for PL specific to IME exists (Ó Duibhir, 2018; Ó Giollaigáin et al., 2007). Immersion teachers express that their training does not adequately prepare them for IME (Ó Ceallaigh and Ní Shéaghda, 2017) and ITE does not sufficiently tend to the IME sector (Mac Donnacha et al., 2005; Ó Ceallaigh, 2013; Ó Grádaigh, 2015).

Recently, O’Boyle et al. (2023) have provided an overview of the challenges for teachers and educational practitioners in IME in NI. This research comprised a systematic literature review of 152 articles across a broad range of pedagogical, linguistic and geographical contexts, as well as multi-perspective interviews with key stakeholders. Challenges encountered relate, firstly, to the teaching and learning resources gap, such as testing materials, subject specific textbooks, exam preparation materials and language testing materials, as well as the human resources gap related to the “double role” (p.28) immersion teachers occupy as teachers of a subject as well as a language. Secondly, assessment in this sector is seen to be underdeveloped, requiring teachers to spend additional time designing their own assessments or to use potentially invalid ones. The lack of specialized training in bilingual test construction may not only compromise assessment quality but also impact their professional identity.

There is a documented need for additional PL opportunities for IME teachers in the area of SEN (Andrews, 2020; Barrett et al., 2020; COGG, 2010; Mac Donncha et al., 2005; Ní Chinnéide, 2009; Ní Fhoighil and Travers, 2013). Nic Aindriú et al.'s (2022) study on the PL needs of IME teachers in SEN (N=133) reveals that these teachers would like to learn more about literacy, assessment, interventions and inclusive pedagogies, and that they have a preference towards short courses and/or in-school PL, a factor which has also been reported at post-primary level (Nic Aindriú, in press). The challenges these teachers face in terms of meeting the needs of students with SEN include a lack of time, lack of courses available based on the immersion context and lack of in-school PL options. The subsequent design of an online PL course in SEN for teachers in IME schools aims to address these challenges, targeting the areas identified above, as well as bilingual and second language acquisition (Nic Aindriú et al., 2023).

Planning and evaluating effective professional learning

Contextual factors, such as system, school and classroom and individual, are barriers or enablers which influence PL uptake, participation, learning from PL and/or implementation and embedding of PL learning (Gilleece et al., 2023). Planning of PL should be cognisant of baseline data, such as reasons for engaging with PL, expectations of PL and an evidence base of the knowledge, skills and attitudes prior to the PL (King, 2014; King, 2016). Of relevance to the Gaeltacht also is a meta model of PL designed by King et al. (2023), which is informed by existing frameworks, as well as the broader PL literature. This model highlights the importance of context and is flexible enough to enable PL designers to choose from a range of tools and approaches, as well as allowing researchers to select methods and instruments that most align with their objectives. It is suggested here that the planning and evaluation frameworks provided by the aforementioned may allow for consideration of the specific needs of immersion teachers (O'Boyle et al., 2023), and IME (Andrews, 2020) and Gaeltacht teachers (Ní Thuairisg, 2018). This is critical in the Gaeltacht context, as Ní Thuairisg has found Gaeltacht post-primary teachers' (N=20) participation and engagement in PL to be low due to dissatisfaction with PL provision that does not address their socio-linguistic environment.

In consideration of how PL might support IE in Gaeltacht schools, a professional learning community (PLC), as a transformative model of PL, (Kennedy, 2014) offers potential in the Gaeltacht context. Broadly speaking, a PLC can be viewed as "professionals coming together in a group – a community – to learn" (Hord and Sommers, 2008, p.7). PLCs are associated with improved teaching and student learning and are driven by the needs of participating teachers, while simultaneously honouring their knowledge and experience (Vescio, Ross and Adams, 2008). According to Ní Thuairisg (2018), a PLC of post-primary teachers in Gaeltacht schools may act as a PL vehicle that tends to the specific challenges of practice in this context, while also encouraging the development of a professional identity that is underpinned by a common cultural and linguistic identity. In the Irish context, a PLC for inclusive practice has been shown to positively impact individual teacher attitudes and efficacy towards IE, both at an individual and collaborative level (Brennan, 2017). Furthermore, there is evidence these changes were sustained change in the longer term (Brennan and King, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This review of the literature pertaining to Gaeltacht education, as well as PL and SEN in immersion contexts, finds that teachers in immersion settings require PL in the area of SEN. Furthermore, context is a key consideration in the planning and evaluating of such PL. This may have implications for future practice and policy in Gaeltacht schools. Gaeltacht schools face specific challenges in meeting the needs of their students with SEN. It is positive that PL and provision for students with SEN is addressed in the *Policy for Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022* (DES, 2016). However, there is scant guidance as to how other key policy developments, such as EPSEN (Gol, 2004), and policy related to teacher PL, might translate to the unique socio-linguistic Gaeltacht context. In order to avoid becoming an "educational backwater" (McPake et al., 2017, p.100) in the context of educational reform, it is critical that Gaeltacht schools are provided with PL opportunities for IE that address their specific needs and context. It is also key that such PL is viewed by Gaeltacht teachers as a responsibility as well as a right, as it is recognised that teachers may exercise autonomy in respect of the PL opportunities that will most benefit them and their students (Teaching Council, 2016). In playing an active part and engaging in this debate, Gaeltacht teachers can ensure their concerns are heard and that awareness is raised about their specific issues and developments (McPake et al., 2017). A PLC of Gaeltacht teachers may offer promise to support their PL needs in the area of SEN, in a manner that supports teacher autonomy and is contextually sensitive.

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