

Students with Early Irish Literacy Difficulties in *Gaeltacht* Primary Schools: Identification and Early Intervention Practices

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Abstract

Research suggests that children who struggle to read in immersion education settings do as well academically as their peers attending monolingual schools. However, the literature also concludes that there are challenges facing immersion schools when meeting the needs of their students, in areas such as the child's home language, appropriate teaching resources, and minority language assessments. To date, little research has been conducted on early Irish literacy interventions in *Gaeltacht* primary schools. This study used a mixed methods approach, surveying 105 schools and interviewing four special education teachers regarding their practices in this area. It contributes to the limited research available by exploring the strategies used in *Gaeltacht* schools to identify students with early Irish literacy difficulties and provide additional teaching support to these students, since the implementation of the *Gaeltacht* Education Policy. It also investigates the challenges faced by schools when undertaking these interventions. An overview is provided of the resources required in this area to enable schools and teachers to better meet the educational needs of all their students.

Keywords: *immersion education, Gaeltacht schools, struggling readers, early intervention, literacy*

1. Introduction

Primary education in the Republic of Ireland (RoI) typically caters to children aged 4 to 12 years old (Department of Education and Science, 2004). It consists of two cycles: Junior Infants to Second Class (ages 4-8) and Third Class to Sixth Class (ages 8-12). There are various teaching positions: The (mainstream) class teacher is responsible for teaching a specific class or group of students across different subjects (National Council for Special Education (NCSE), 2023a). The special education teacher (SET) provides additional support to students who may require extra assistance in specific areas such as literacy, numeracy, or social skills (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2017; NCSE, 2023b). They work closely with students, teachers, and parents

to develop tailored learning plans and provide individual or small group instruction (DES, 2017; NCSE, 2023b). These teachers implement a variety of strategies (NCSE, 2023c). Some common approaches and resources used are differentiated instruction, assistive technology, team-teaching, student withdrawal (individual/pairs/groups), visual supports, multi-sensory approaches, evidence-based interventions, and social skills training (NCSE, 2023c). In the *Gaeltacht* schools, there are also teachers who are employed in the position of *Múinteoir Tacaíochta Teanga* (Language Support Teacher) (DES, 2017). Their role is to provide additional opportunities for Irish language acquisition and enrichment.

This study investigates early Irish literacy interventions used by SET in *Gaeltacht* schools to support students struggling with early Irish literacy. A mixed methods approach was implemented. SETs completed an anonymous online survey on behalf of their schools followed by semi-structured interviews. The strategies used in these schools to support struggling readers were identified and the advantages, and challenges of implementing early Irish literacy interventions are discussed. To date, little research has been undertaken in this area, neither in Irish-medium schools nor immersion education schools internationally. Thus, the purpose of this study was to collect and analyse data which would provide insight into early Irish literacy intervention issues facing *Gaeltacht* schools five years after the introduction of the *Gaeltacht* Education policy according to which schools must implement a two-year full Irish immersion programme in the infant classes (DES, 2016).

1.1 *Gaeltacht* Schools

There are approximately 105 primary schools in *Gaeltacht* areas in the RoI with approximately 7,360 pupils (DES, 2016; Gaeloideachas, 2022). *Gaeltacht* areas were traditionally areas where

Irish was used as the day-to-day language of the community and spoken as a family's first language. However, the population of the *Gaeltacht* has diversified over the last number of decades. Currently, "46% of school-going children in the core *Gaeltacht* areas start school with little or no Irish" (National University of Ireland, 2007, p.11). The role of *Gaeltacht* schools has evolved from mainly supporting the maintenance of the Irish language to supporting its revitalisation as a community language (Mac Donnacha et al., 2005; Ó Laoire & Harris, 2006). This linguistic diversity and complexity, coupled with the increasing use of English in *Gaeltacht* communities, presents significant challenges for the *Gaeltacht* education system (Ó Ceallaigh & Ní Dhonnabháin, 2015). Most recently, *Gaeltacht* schools are being supported by the *Scéim Aitheantais Scoileanna Gaeltachta* (Gaeltacht Schools Recognition Scheme), which aims to improve Irish language outcomes for children in these schools (DES, 2016). The overarching goal of the *Gaeltacht* education policy is to ensure the availability of a high quality and relevant Irish-medium educational experience for all young people living in *Gaeltacht* areas and in this way to support the use of Irish as the main language of families and of *Gaeltacht* communities. One of the criteria for inclusion within this scheme is that schools provide students with two years full immersion in the Irish language in junior infants (age 4/5) and senior infants (age 5/6) (DES, 2016). In *Gaeltacht* schools, the immersion approach means that the learning environment is exclusively through Irish. This enables the fuller development of students' Irish language proficiency. All subjects are taught through Irish and students in these schools do not receive formal English literacy instruction before they start their third year of schooling, in 'first class' (age 6/7). This means that early literacy intervention should occur through the medium of Irish, as the students learn to read through Irish first during the immersion period.

1.2 Inclusion and Inclusive Practices

Inclusion can be defined as the process of meeting the needs of a diverse group of pupils, enabling them to participate in learning and all activities in school (Winter & O’Raw, 2010, p. 39). This is achieved through the removal of barriers within the education system, treating all pupils equally, devising accommodations to enable all pupils to access the curriculum, and empowering them to reach their potential (Ainscow et al., 2006, p. 297). Inclusive practice in special education refers to the approach and strategies used to ensure that students with disabilities or special educational needs (SEN) are fully included in mainstream educational settings alongside their peers without disabilities (Finkelstein et al., 2021; Florian & Spratt, 2013). It recognizes that each student with SEN has unique strengths, challenges, and learning styles (Florian & Spratt, 2013). Differentiated instructional strategies should be used to meet the diverse learning needs of students with disabilities. This includes modifying teaching methods, materials, and assessments to accommodate different learning styles, abilities, and interests (Finkelstein et al., 2021).

1.3 Literacy Difficulties in Immersion Education

In *Gaeltacht* schools, for students to be formally identified as having a reading difficulty, i.e., dyslexia, they must undertake an educational psychological assessment through the medium of English as these assessments are unavailable through Irish (O’Toole & Hickey, 2013), as is often the case internationally for minority languages (August & Shanahan, 2017). Dyslexia is manifested in a continuum of specific learning difficulties related to acquiring basic skills in reading, spelling, and /or writing. It occurs on a spectrum with some people mildly affected and others more severely (Snowling et al., 2020). It is typically characterised by difficulties with

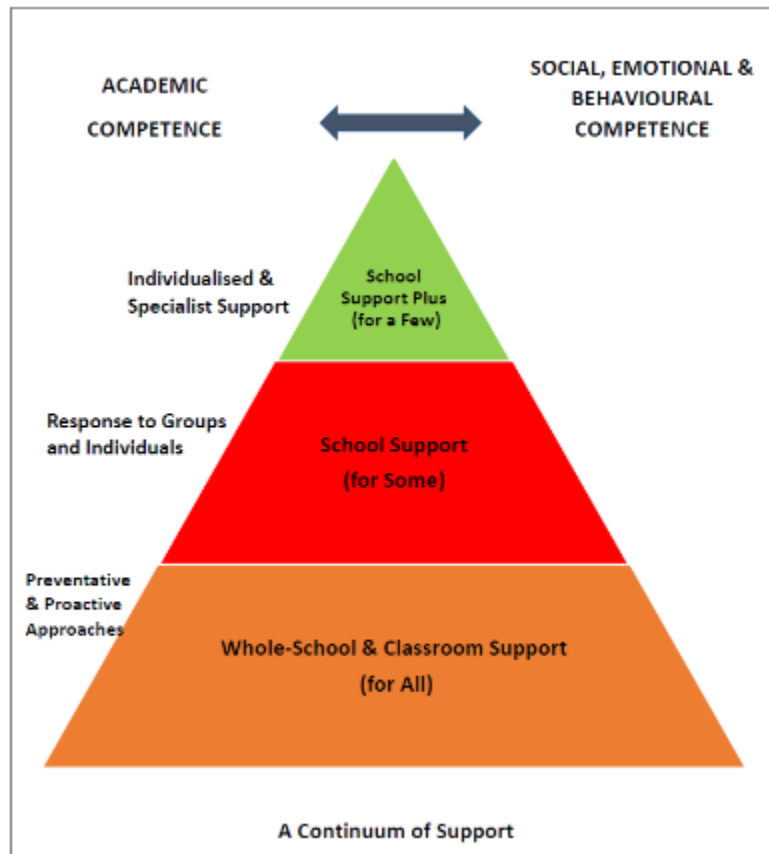
information processing, including difficulties in phonological processing, working memory, rapid naming, and automaticity of basic literacy skills. Problems in organisation, sequencing and motor skills may also be present (Snowling et al., 2020). In the *Gaeltacht* areas, it has been identified as the most prevalent category of SEN (Barrett et al., 2020; Mac Donnacha et al., 2005). Studies were conducted on the cross linguistic transfer of skills for dyslexic children speaking Dutch (van de Leij & Morfidi, 2006), Chinese (Chung & Ho, 2010), Italian (Bonifacci et al., 2017; Palladino et al., 2013) and Norwegian (Helland & Kaasa, 2005) as their first language and English as their second language. The findings showed that children with reading impairments in their first language experience the same level of reading impairment in their second language. Findings also suggest that the severity of their reading difficulty in their first language strongly corresponds with the severity of reading difficulties in the second language.

1.4 Early Identification of Students with SEN and Early Intervention

In the RoI, the Department of Education and Science (2007) has created a framework known as the Continuum of Support (Figure 1) to guide teachers and schools in identifying students with SEN and responding to their needs. The continuum recognizes that students may experience mild to severe difficulties on a transient or long term basis and require different levels of support. The framework is intended to provide a range of supports and interventions for students with additional educational needs.

Figure 1

Levels of Support Provided by Teachers in Schools (The Continuum of Support).



The three levels of support consist of:

- (1) School Support: Schools provide a range of supports to all students within their regular classroom setting. This includes differentiated teaching approaches, personalized learning plans, and adaptations to accommodate diverse learning styles and abilities.

(2) School Support Plus: This offers additional support for students through small-group instruction, targeted interventions, or specific resources . It involves the collaboration of the class teacher, learning support teacher, and other relevant professionals..

(3) School Support for Ongoing Concerns: This level involves more intensive and specialized support for students with ongoing or complex educational needs. This may include consultation with external agencies, access to specialized assessments, individualized educational plans, and additional resources.

The level of support provided to each student is based on their individual requirements and response to previous interventions. In English literacy, the recommended evidence-based interventions include reading recovery¹, literacy lift-off², paired reading³, and reading comprehension strategies⁴ (National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), 2019).

1.5 Challenges Teachers Face When Educating Students with SEN in Immersion Schools

Assessment and early intervention measures improve outcomes in reading ability (Simmons et al, 2008). However, a lack of bilingual assessments means that some children are not identified at the crucial early intervention stage as they are immersed in the minority language (Wise & Chen, 2010) or they transfer out of immersion education to monolingual schools where they are

¹ Reading Recovery © is a licensed, school-based, short-term, early literacy intervention. It is designed for children aged around six, who are the lowest literacy achievers after their first year of school. Reading Recovery © involves intensive one-to-one lessons for 30 minutes a day with a specially trained Reading Recovery teacher. (Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), n.d.)

² Literacy Lift Off is an intervention that gives children lots of opportunities to read books at their own level of competency and gradually lift the complexity of what they can do in both reading and writing. (PDST, n.d)

³ Paired reading is a strategy where parents and children read together (Dyslexia Association of Ireland, 2020)

⁴ Reading comprehension strategies: see NEPS (2019) for further details.

assessed in the majority language (Nic Aindriú, 2022). If bilingual assessments were available and complemented by other forms of assessment it would enhance the assessment process and give a fuller picture of a student's strengths and challenges (Nic Aindriú et al., 2021). Barnes (2017) found that, while some educators used English standardised testing to assess pupils, others devised their own non-standardised assessments. Educational psychologists have also used English assessments which means that children in Irish medium schools are disadvantaged as their total literacy ability is not assessed (O'Toole & Hickey, 2013). A recent analysis of the current teaching and learning resources for children with additional educational needs in the Irish immersion *Gaelscoileanna* and *Gaeltacht* schools was undertaken by Nic Aindriú & Ó Duibhir (2022). It found that many evidence-based resources and interventions are recommended by the Department of Education for primary schools. Unfortunately, these are unavailable through the medium of Irish . This significantly disadvantages Irish immersion schools in terms of being able to meet the needs of their students during the early immersion period.

2. Method

This study used a mixed methods approach to investigate the following research questions:

1. What are SET teachers' experiences of identifying students for early Irish literacy interventions in *Gaeltacht* schools?
2. What are the methods and strategies used to provide early Irish literacy interventions to these students?

Mixed methods research combines qualitative and quantitative methods within a single study or research project (Creswell & Plano Clarke, 2018; Riazi, 2014). Using different methods to

collect data on the same subject can make results more reliable. If the qualitative and quantitative data converge, this strengthens the validity of conclusions (Creswell & Plano Clarke, 2018; Riazi, 2014).

The quantitative component of this study involved collecting and analyzing numerical data to examine patterns and relationships using an online questionnaire. The qualitative component focused on capturing rich, descriptive data via both the questionnaire and individual interviews, to further explore the context, meaning, and experiences of individuals or groups of teachers (Creswell & Plano Clarke, 2018; Riazi, 2014). The data gathered in the interviews triangulated with the previous data collected which strengthens credibility (Abowitz & Toole, 2010). Online questionnaires were used as this allowed for convenient access to participants and faster response rates compared to postal surveys. Automated data collection, scoring, and the reduced cost of this method were also beneficial. The questionnaire contained 25 questions and was designed to elicit both quantitative and qualitative data. Table 1 outlines the topics included in the questionnaire and the literature that underpinned its development.

Table 1

Questionnaire Topics and Influential Research

Topics	Question Types & Number	Influential Literature
School context and teacher background, experience and training	10 questions which were a mix of multiple choice and open-ended questions (e.g., age range, number of years teaching number of students enrolled in the school, location, etc.).	Barrett (2016) Nic Gabhann (2007)

Practices regarding assessment and resources used.	Two multiple choice questions with the option to add open-ended responses on literacy practices.	Barnes (2017) Barrett (2016) Nic Aindriú et al., (2021)
Challenges and advantages of immersion education in their setting	Four multiple choice questions and two open ended questions with options to add open ended responses One open ended question on how challenges could be overcome	Mac Éinrí, (2007) Pilz (2018)
Supports for parents.	Open-ended question on how parents are supported	Nic Aindriú (2022) Kavanagh & Hickey (2013)

The researchers disseminated the online survey via email to all primary *Gaeltacht* schools (N=105). Participants were provided with a Plain Language Statement and an Informed Consent Form⁵. They provided informed consent before they could access and complete the questionnaire. At the end of the questionnaire, teachers were asked to email the researchers if they were interested in participating in stage two of the study. This second stage comprised four semi-structured individual interviews on zoom with SET (N=4). Table 2 outlines the literature that influenced the design of the interview questions. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and an hour, and the participants were informed in advance that the interviews would be transcribed verbatim. Interviews were conducted through the medium of Irish but for the purpose of presenting the data in this article, English language translations of the quotes are provided. Following the interviews, the transcripts were shared with participants for review, a procedure known as member checking.

⁵ This study received ethical approval from Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee.

Table 2*Interview Questions and Influential Research.*

Interview themes	Interview Questions	Influential Literature
Background Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tell me about your school (e.g., size, location, number of teachers etc.) - Tell me about your current teaching role in the school. 	Nic Aindriú & Ó Duibhir(2022)
Teachers working in S.E.N. in <i>Gaeltacht</i> schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What strategies and assessment do you use to identify children who struggle with Irish reading? 	Department of Education and Skills (2016)
Perceived advantages of Irish Immersion education for students with Irish literacy difficulties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What, in your opinion, are the benefits of immersion for a child who is struggling? 	Mac Donnacha (2005) Ó Giollagáin (2007) Ó Laoire and Harris (2006)
Challenges experienced by teachers when supporting students with Irish literacy difficulties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In your opinion, what are the challenges faced by children when learning to read in Irish? - What challenges do you as a teacher experience when working with these children who struggle with reading in Irish? - In your opinion, what additional resources and strategies do teachers need to help children who are struggling with reading Irish? 	Barnes (2017) Ní Chiarúain (2009)
Strategies and resources used by teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tell me about the strategies, resources, and interventions you use to support these children who are 	Nic Aindriú & Ó Duibhir (2022) NEPS (2019)

	struggling to read in Irish.	
Ways in which parents are supported	- What support methods are available to parents in your school to help them support their child who is struggling to read/learn through Irish?	Nic Aindriú (2022) Department of Education and Skills, (2016) Yu (2013)

Both the questionnaire and the interviews were piloted by one of the authors of this paper with two colleagues who were asked for feedback on ease of use, clarity of delivery, time taken to complete and overall impression (Abowitz & Toole, 2010). This was to refine the research instruments, anticipate any technical or communicative problems, and further ensure the validity and reliability of the study, (Abowitz & Toole, 2010). Piloting the research instruments also ensured that the questions were appropriate and would produce data that would answer the research questions. Minor changes were made to the order of the questions and the space available in which to write answers in the questionnaire, as well as to the nature of some of the interview questions in that some were made more open to allow for more expanded and in-depth replies.

2.1 Data Analysis

The quantitative data was analysed using the web-based software Qualtrics in terms of percentages of respondents and choices made in answering each question. Descriptive statistics were used due to the relatively small sample size, which is in turn due to the small number of *Gaeltacht* primary schools. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data (Braun &

Clarke, 2006). The first step, familiarisation, involved the researchers translating and transcribing each interview and reflecting on the answers to the related questions. The process of reading and rereading the interview answers aided this process of familiarisation. Notes were made highlighting data pertinent to the study. Subsequently, the data was coded using shorthand labels to describe the content, coding interesting data features systematically across the entire data set, and collecting data relevant to each code (Braun & Clarke 2006, p.87). Then the authors reviewed the codes, identified patterns among them and generated broad themes. These themes were then reviewed and named. The review involved reflecting on whether the data supported these themes, whether themes overlapped, whether some themes needed to be dealt with separately or whether new themes had emerged that were not reflected in the research question. The findings are presented in the following section.

2.2 Profile of Respondents

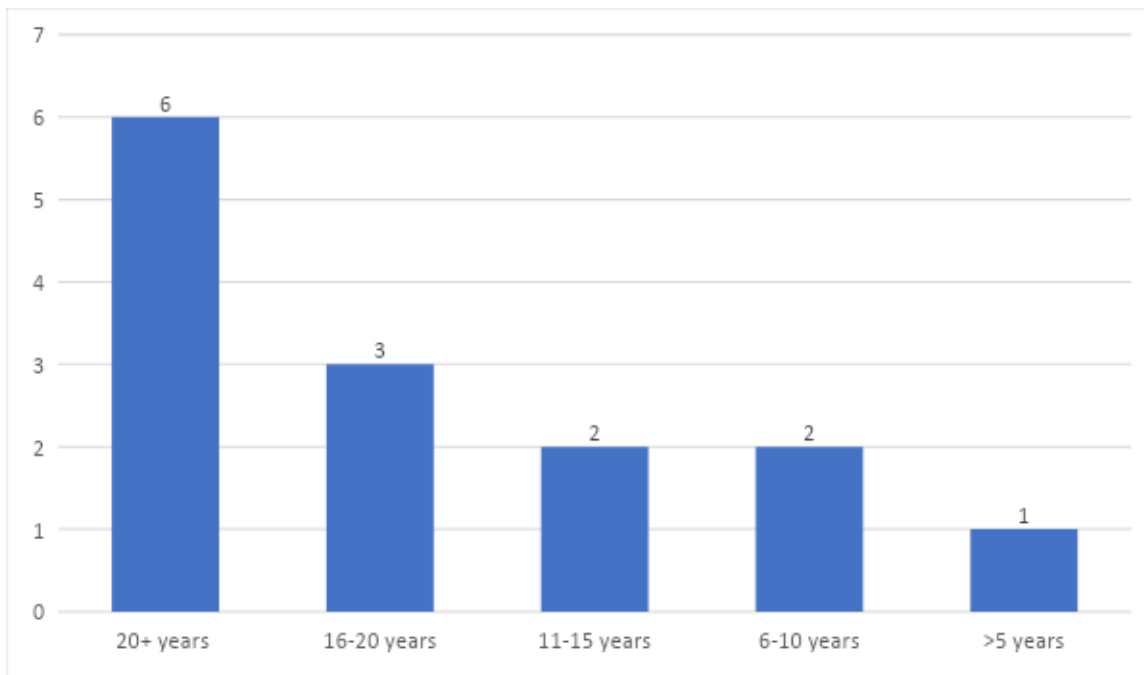
2.2.1 Questionnaires

105 questionnaires were distributed to all *Gaeltacht* primary schools and a response rate of 33% (n=34) was achieved. Each *Gaeltacht* school does not necessarily have a full-time SET because many smaller schools are clustered. Therefore, the response rate looks lower than it is in reality. A SET cluster is when two or more primary schools join their SET allocation hours together to employ one full-time SET teacher to be shared/work between their schools. Unfortunately, information on the exact number of *Gaeltacht* schools who share a SET is unavailable. However, an examination of Circular 25/2022 (Department of Education 2022) reveals that many of the 105 *Gaeltacht* schools have fewer than the 25 hours allocation to appoint a full-time SET in a school. The target cohort may therefore be less than 105.

All the respondents to the questionnaire were currently working as SET in *Gaeltacht* areas. Data on teacher experience was collected, focusing on the time teaching overall, with 14 participants answering this question. Of these, six had been teaching for 20 years or more, three for between 16 and 20 years, two for between 11 and 15 years, two for between six and ten years and one had less than five years experience (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Number of Years Teaching Experience (n=14)



2.2.2 Interviews

The four teachers interviewed worked with students from junior infants to 6th class (Table 3).

Three of the teachers worked in only one school, and one was shared among four schools. Three

had responsibility for providing additional support in Irish, English, and mathematics throughout the school, and one reported that their primary role was early intervention across a range of areas such as literacy, numeracy, and fine motor skills. One had recently changed roles to that of *Múinteoir Tacaíochta Gaeilge* (Irish Language Support Teacher). Numbers were assigned to the participants for clarity and anonymity.

Table 3

Interview Participant Profiles

	Teaching Position	Shared SET position	No. of years of teaching experience	Location (Province)	School Size
Teacher 1	Irish language support teacher/SET	Yes	13	Ulster	Shared with four schools
Teacher 2	SET	No	33	Ulster	Enrolment 100
Teacher 3	SET	No	20	Ulster	Enrolment 79
Teacher 4	SET	No	15	Ulster	Enrolment 25

3. Results

3.1 Strategies Used in *Gaeltacht* Schools to Identify Students for Early Literacy

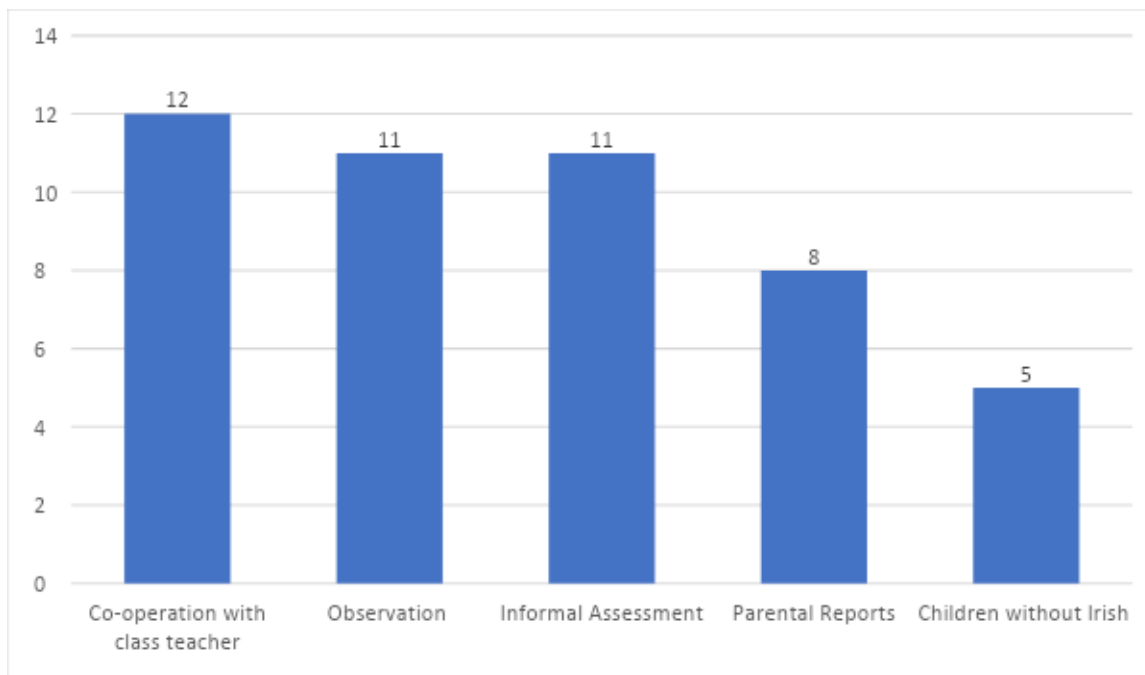
Interventions.

In the questionnaire participants were asked what were the strategies that they used to identify students for early literacy interventions. Participants were provided with a list of options from which they could choose all that applied to them. The most frequently reported methods/strategies were collaboration with classroom teachers (mentioned by 35% of the respondents to the questionnaire, $n=12$) and teacher observation (mentioned by 32%, $n=11$). 32%

(n=11) of respondents also selected informal assessment (Figure 3). Parental feedback and cooperation were selected by 23.5% (n=8) of respondents. Five participants (14%) also listed children who came to school with no Irish as a metric for being chosen for support.

Figure 3

Strategies used to Identify Students With Early Irish Literacy Difficulties.



All four interviewees reported observation and collaboration with the class teacher as the two most effective assessment tools that they use for identifying pupils that need support with Irish reading. Other procedures of note included listening to parents' views and the SET observations in a classroom setting.

... when the child is coming to school, we would listen to the parent's views as they know their children best at this stage. Of course, we would let them settle into junior infants for a while but then act on anything that we see as it's easier to address at this stage, then let it go on and perhaps have it embedded. (Teacher 3)

Informal assessment was used in a smaller school while team teaching was being undertaken, as the smaller numbers made it easier to identify the children's needs.

I am able to go into the classroom and just observe. We do team teaching when I join the class teacher. I can work with one class group while she works with the other three in the same room, or vice versa. (Teacher 4)

The findings indicate that the teachers in this study are using the strategies recommended by the DES and the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) to identify students with early Irish literacy difficulties (NEPS, 2019). They rely mostly on informal assessment methods (e.g., observation and collaboration with other teachers) due to the lack of standardised and criterion referenced early literacy assessments available through the medium of Irish (Nic Aindriú et al., 2021). Criterion-referenced early literacy tests are assessments designed to evaluate a child's literacy skills and abilities based on specific criteria or benchmarks. Unlike norm-referenced tests that compare a child's performance to a normative sample, criterion-referenced tests focus on whether a child has achieved predetermined skill levels or milestones in literacy development (Berger, 2013).

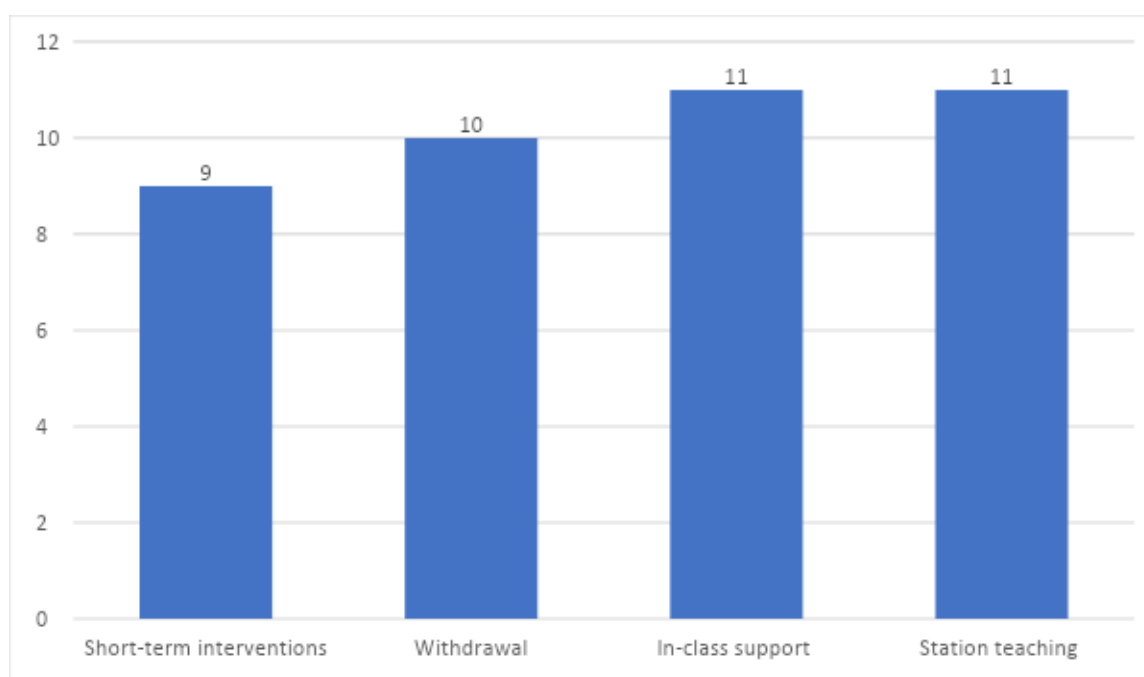
3.2 Strategies and Resources Used to Support Students With Literacy Difficulties

In the questionnaire, participants were asked to identify the strategies/resources that they used to support students with literacy difficulties. Participants could select more than one option. The responses indicate that nine respondents used short term interventions such as phonics drills and

high-frequency word games, eleven used in-class support , eleven used station teaching), and ten used withdrawal additional support groups (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Strategies Used to Support Children Struggling to Read in Gaeltacht Schools.



All interviewees (n=4) reported that they used withdrawal of small groups and individuals as a method for providing additional teaching support. Short term interventions were used by all four teachers, an example of this is provided by a teacher below.

The most used strategy is that of withdrawal in our school. That's the first step, to identify and to withdraw after that. Then I use the Irish phonics schemes, high frequency words practice then. (Teacher 1)

Another teacher relied on the use of phonics and high frequency words.

Flashcards, I know that's old school. Phonics, put a word in a sentence, high frequency words, daily, online resources and games, matching, crosswords, workbooks that match their readers, word wall, bingo games, word snap. (Teacher 2)

Overall, the participants use strategies used and recommended for implementation in other languages (e.g., English) and apply them to early Irish literacy interventions (Nic Aindriú et al., 2021; NEPS, 2019).

We adopt a lot of the strategies in use in English early reading and language for use in our school insofar as we can. So, we do the same kind of language games, bingo, jolly phonics type interventions. (Teacher 4)

All four interviewees actively adapt programmes used particularly for English speaking students and create their own versions to support children in their settings.

I translated the Dolch word list insofar as I could, although that can be difficult at times and added in the words that I saw were coming up time and time again in the Irish reading. (Teacher 1)

Translating resources and assessments has been highlighted in other research in this area (Nic Aindriú et al., 2021). It is clear from the data in this study that early intervention strategies are being employed by teachers in these schools, which can improve pupils' outcomes (NEPS, 2019). A lot of effort is being made to ensure that students do not lose out on the significant early intervention period (Barnes, 2017; Nic Aindriú et al., 2021) even though suggested approaches like SNIP⁶ and Toes by Toe⁷ (NEPS, 2019) are not available for Irish language struggling readers. This finding corresponds with those of previous research that concludes that special

⁶ SNIP: The programme is aimed at increasing reading and spelling and uses the primary high frequency words (SNIP Newsletter, n.d)

⁷ Toe by Toe: A highly structured phonics-based reading manual to help anyone who finds reading difficult (Toe by Toe, 2023)

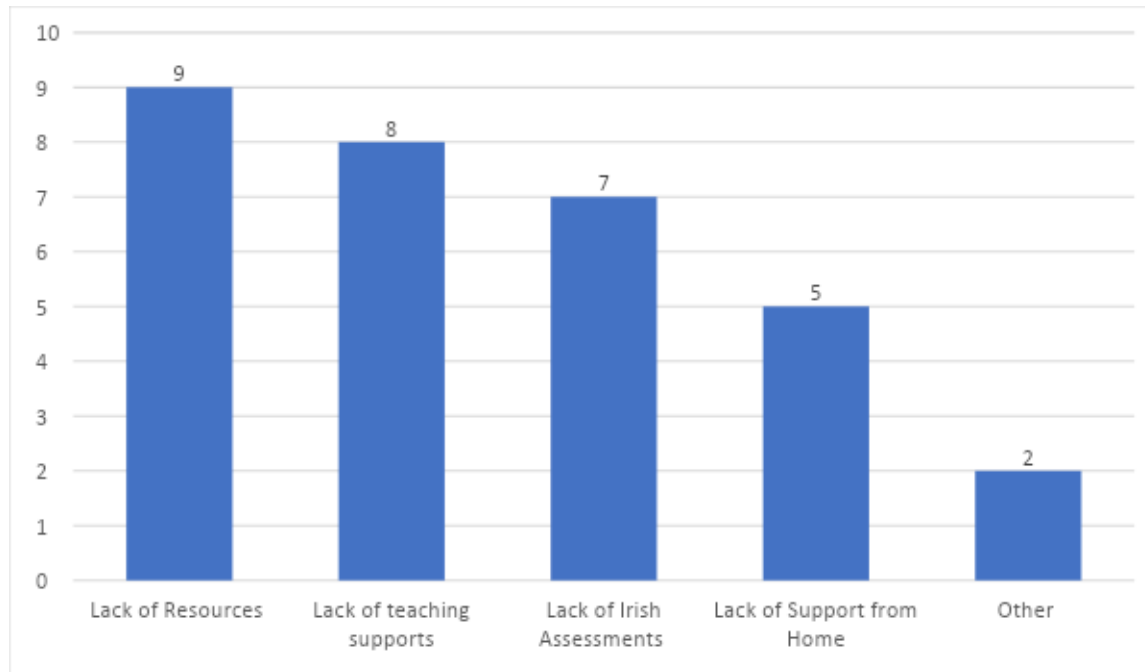
education for Irish language and literacy is an area still in need of much investment (Ní Fhoighil & Travers, 2020; Nic Aindriú & Ó Duibhir, 2022).

3.3 Challenges Experienced by Teachers When Supporting Students With Early Irish Literacy Difficulties

The challenges experienced by teachers when supporting students with early Irish literacy difficulties were also explored in the questionnaire (Figure 5). Answers were provided by 31 participants to this question. A lack of resources was named by almost a third of participants who answered this question (29.03%, $n=9$), followed by lack of available supports (e.g., more time needed to provide Irish literacy support to students) (25.8%, $n=8$). Lack of assessment in Irish literacy was listed by 22.58% ($n=7$) and lack of support from home by 16.12% ($n=5$). There were 25 responses to the question in relation to the home languages of the children who attended the schools. Some participants ($n=25$) provided information on the home language of students in their school. It was found that 48% ($n=12$) of schools reported that students come from predominantly English-speaking homes, and 16% ($n=4$) reported Chinese, Polish (8%, $n=2$) and Indian as the home languages of their students. Only 36% ($n=9$) reported that children come from homes where Irish is the spoken language daily. This concurs with research conducted (Ó Ceallaigh & Ní Dhonnabháin, 2015) around the decreasing use of Irish in homes.

Figure 5

Challenges Experienced by Teachers While Supporting Children.



In the interviews, every teacher mentioned the challenge that Irish is not the spoken language in many children's homes. This demonstrated the diversification occurring in the Gaeltacht communities (National University of Ireland, 2007).

...there is not a lot of Irish spoken in the homes, maybe one parent out of two might have Irish. (Teacher 1)

This is a challenge for parents when supporting their child with homework, for example. It also means that exposure to the Irish language is confined to the school setting.

Lots of children aren't coming from Irish speaking homes. Parents find it challenging if they don't have Irish at home, with homework especially. (Teacher 2)

Another reported that if the child's parents are fluent in Irish, this is an advantage when it comes to completing schoolwork, commenting, "..... *If there is Irish in the home things are a lot easier.*

And if they don't have Irish, it makes things more difficult.” (Teacher 3). Another teacher reported this while discussing immersion education and the supports available for parents, as follows, “.....well I think I've mentioned already that the challenge of not having the language in the home is certainly one.” (Teacher 4)

3.4 Additional Supports and Resources required by SET in Gaeltacht schools

The researchers explored what additional support and resources teachers felt were required to improve the teaching and learning of students with early Irish literacy difficulties. Table 4 provides an overview of the suggestions made by 11 respondents.

Table 4:

Additional Supports and Resources Required by Teachers

Theme	Response
More time	<p>More time allocated and fewer children.</p> <p>More SET allocation hours</p> <p>More time for the likes of station teaching in the younger classes.</p> <p>More hours for Special Education. 20 hours isn't enough for the whole school. One full-time post is not enough. And more hours needed for Language support teacher.</p>
More support	<p>If we had more support, we would be able to spend more time with and help the children.</p> <p>Support for in-class.</p> <p>More support to deliver learning support in both languages.</p>

<p>More resources</p>	<p>More investment in resources and have them available like English language resources.</p> <p>More suitable resources available.</p> <p>There is a lack of resources.</p> <p>More books in Irish that are engaging and age appropriate.</p> <p>More Irish books in Ulster dialect.</p>
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The view that more SET teachers were needed was reinforced by the four interviewees.

It's very difficult for me to give 100% to every single school that I visit when I'm only there a little over five hours each week. So definitely there should be more teachers like me employed. (Teacher 1)

Access to assessments in the Irish language was a topic that was raised by all participants in the interviews.

.... assessment definitely, especially diagnostic assessments. Things available in Irish for example from the O.T. and from the speech and language therapists. At the moment if you have a question mark for example for a child with dyslexia you know that if that child is going to be assessed he's going to be assessed in English. (Teacher 2)

It was also suggested that there would be a real advantage to having Irish translations of English resources to suit the Irish language and save time. At the moment, these teachers are adapting them themselves.

More simple checklists like those available in Jolly Phonics for Irish phonics would be great. Creating one's own is very time consuming and teachers are hard-pressed for time. And these teacher- designed ones are not standardised. (Teacher 4)

4. Discussion

The findings of this study are particularly important as dyslexia is the most frequently reported category of SEN in primary *Gaeltacht* schools (Barrett et al., 2020; Nic Aindriú et al., 2020). Therefore, there is a need to ensure that students in these schools have access to inclusive education practices, appropriate assessment and early interventions to ensure that they reach their potential (Simmons et al., 2008). It is clear from the findings that the teachers in *Gaeltacht* schools are working proactively to implement the recommended continuum of support and an inclusive learning environment (DES, 2007). While teachers welcomed the additional teachers recruited under the *Gaeltacht* recognition scheme (Language Assistants) (DES, 2016), the findings of the study suggest that *Gaeltacht* schools may benefit from further allocation of SET teachers, particularly to give them more time to support students in Irish literacy.

Similar to previous research, the schools commented on how they used withdrawal, team teaching, and station teaching to meet the needs of their students (Barrett, 2016). However, other studies reported that it was mostly larger schools that were undertaking team-teaching. This is an interesting finding as *Gaeltacht* schools are mostly small in nature. This suggests that there may have been a shift in teaching approaches with more schools now implementing team teaching. The findings also reinforce the point made in previous research that there is a need to develop specific Irish language assessments and resources to support children with early Irish literacy difficulties (Nic Aindriú et al. 2021; Wise & Chen, 2010) This would aid the teachers in their work with the students in *Gaeltacht* schools and would ensure that students were appropriately identified for early Irish literacy interventions (Barnes, 2017; NEPS, 2019; Nic Aindriú et al., 2021).

Increased linguistic diversification of the *Gaeltacht* areas raises the question of students with English as an additional language (E.A.L.) in *Gaeltacht* schools and their literacy needs. The area of multilingual students attending *Gaeltacht* schools or *Gaelscoileanna* specifically is under researched as it is a relatively new phenomenon. This is an area that warrants further exploration by researchers, especially in light of Ukrainian refugees enrolling in these schools. Indicators of good practice for immersion education in schools include catering to all pupils' needs, both native English speakers and learners of English (native Irish speakers/other languages) and pupils with SEN.

The implications of this study may be important for future policy and practice development in *Gaeltacht* schools . Teachers in *Gaeltacht* schools should be provided with the opportunity to attend more professional development that focuses on meeting the additional educational needs of students learning through Irish (Nic Aindriú et al, 2022). Whilst it is clear that there has been much progress over the last decade or so in the area of the development of Irish language resources and assessments, there is still a need for further development in this area (Nic Aindriú & Ó Duibhir, 2022). There is a need for more investment in the development of standardised assessments and evidence-based interventions/practices in Irish as recommended for use by the DES (NEPS, 2019). Further research would be beneficial in the area of test and evidence-based practice/intervention development to ensure the development of appropriate resources for the *Gaeltacht* education sector.

The primary limitation to generalizing the results of this study is its small sample size.. The fact that all of the interviewees were from Ulster is also a limitation. However, to offset the first limitation, rich description of the data is provided. Despite its limitations, the findings of this study provide insights into the practices in place in schools and can positively impact the

development of future policies and practices in the area of early Irish literacy assessment and interventions.

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