

# **The Views of Stakeholders Regarding Children with SEN in Irish-Medium and Similar Language-Immersion Programmes: A Scoping Review of the Literature**

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## **Abstract**

Recently there has been an increase in the number of children attending Irish-Medium schools across the island of Ireland. Simultaneously, there has been an increase in the number of children reported as having special educational needs across the education system. This review seeks to examine the literature pertaining to the views of stakeholders regarding children with special educational needs in Irish-Medium schools and similar language immersion programmes internationally. The scoping review was carried out in adherence to the process outlined by Arksey & O'Malley (2005). Databases were searched, inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied, and 21 studies were included in the final selection. Themes identified included language competence as a perceived obstacle, inclusion dependent on school supports, professional guidance regarding bilingualism and a view of language as opportunity. The main research method utilised across studies was a mixed methods design, including surveys and semi-structured interviews. The voice of the child in this area has not been explored, and more creative research methods may be required to facilitate this. This is a possible area for future research which will be discussed, as well as professional implications and limitations of this review.

Keywords: immersion education, special educational needs, bilingualism

## **Introduction**

Historically, bilingualism and bilingual education have encountered varying levels of acceptance, with discussions around it sometimes reflecting broader societal challenges, including issues related to race and the marginalisation of minority communities (Martínez-Álvarez, 2019). However, perspectives have shifted in many countries, where bilingualism is increasingly recognised for its social, economic, and cultural benefits (Genesee, 2015). Liasidou (2013) also points to the influence of globalisation and immigration in shaping more positive attitudes toward bilingual education.

Language Immersion Programmes (LIPs) are implemented in various contexts globally in order to facilitate bilingual education. These programmes typically involve teaching all curricular subjects through a target language and immersing children in that language throughout the school environment. According to Johnson & Swain (1997), common features of LIPs include instruction through a second language, a focus on additive bilingualism, alignment with the first-language curriculum, and the bilingualism of teaching staff. There are several forms of LIP. Monolingual immersion programmes aim to develop proficiency in a single, often second, language for learners (Hickey & de Mejía, 2014), while dual-language immersion programmes incorporate the majority language of the community in which the school is based, as well as a second language, which may be the first language of some pupils (Hickey & de Mejía, 2014). These approaches support the development of bilingual competencies and can contribute to both the promotion of majority language fluency and the maintenance of minority languages.

Irish-Medium (IM) schools are one type of LIP. In Northern Ireland (NI), IM schools use immersion education to promote the development of Irish for children whose first language is typically English. There are now almost 8000 children being educated in IM schools in NI (Education Authority, 2023). Children are immersed in the target language (Irish) and formal teaching of English does not begin until Primary Three, when children are typically age six to seven (Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, 2023). IM schools also exist in the Republic of Ireland (ROI), where they are more commonly referred to as Gaelscoil/Gaelscoileanna in the literature. In the school year 2023/2024, over 44,000 children were educated in these settings (Gaeloideachas, 2024).

## Special Educational Needs

Recent years have seen rising levels of Special Educational Needs identified in both the ROI and NI. In the 2023/2024 school year, 22.5% of children in the IM sector (preschool, primary and post-primary schools) in NI were identified as having SEN (Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, 2024). This represents a significant cohort of children yet there is a dearth of research into their experiences of school, bilingualism or immersion education. In the Republic of Ireland, it has been estimated that 9.4% of students in primary IM schools present with a diagnosis of SEN (Nic Aindriú et al., 2020), which is lower than the national average for mainstream schools. This could be due to several reasons including parents transferring their children with SEN out of IM schools (Nic Aindriú, 2022), a lower level of identification of SEN due to difficulties with assessment, or an underlying belief that IM is not suitable for children with SEN (Nic Aindriú et al., 2020; Nic Aindriú, 2021). It is also difficult to compare prevalence rates directly, as different identification methods are utilised in different countries.

The participation of children with SEN in LIPs has been a topic of ongoing discussion. Genesee (2007) raises important ethical and legal considerations, such as the potential impact of immersion education on access to foundational learning, the range of support necessary for inclusion, and whether excluding children with SEN from immersion constitutes a denial of access to a potentially effective method of second-language learning. Howard (2023) attributes the assumption that children with SEN should focus on a single language to the limited capacity hypothesis, which questions their ability to manage bilingual learning. Nonetheless, research has identified potential advantages of bilingualism not only for typically developing children (Fox et al., 2019) but also for children with SEN, particularly in relation to academic development, social engagement, and the acquisition of transferable skills (Genesee, 2015). A review by Martínez-Álvarez (2019) indicates that

many children with SEN are capable of becoming bilingual through immersion programmes although this outcome may be influenced by broader systemic factors and the nature of available supports.

Following Fanghanel et al. (2016), there are a range of individual micro, meso, and macro-level factors that may influence a child with SENs' experience of a LIP. Individual level factors at the micro level include the child's strengths, abilities and motivations. Meso level factors are at a school level and may include the level of additional support available and views and skills of teachers. Macro level factors consider the wider societal and cultural influences in which the child is situated. It is important to note that there are relationships between factors in each of these levels.

Given the prevalence of SEN identification along with the growth of the IM sector, this scoping review sought to synthesize research pertaining to the views of various stakeholders (parents, teachers, children with SEN) in relation to children with SEN attending IM education on the island of Ireland, or similar LIPs in other countries. It also sought to identify gaps in the literature which will inform a wider research project, and to start a conversation around the provision of SEN services for children in IM education.

## **Methods**

Following Munn et al. (2018), a scoping review methodology was deemed appropriate in order to identify knowledge gaps, clarify concepts, or examine the breadth of research on a particular topic, especially given the limited and heterogeneous nature of existing studies in this area. This methodology is particularly suited to emerging fields, such as SEN in LIPs, where the evidence base is still developing (Peters et al., 2018). Arksey & O'Malley (2005) were the first to propose an explicit approach to scoping reviews, detailing five stages which

were followed in this study. The optional consultation stage as described by Arksey & O'Malley (2005), which involves engaging stakeholders to validate findings and identify additional literature, was not undertaken due to resource and time constraints. Although authors such as Westphaln et al. (2021) have since added to Arksey and O'Malley's framework, tailoring it to various disciplines, the core five stages remain the same.

### **Stage One: Identifying the Research Question**

The research question guiding this review was *what are stakeholders' perspectives on the experiences of children with SEN in LIPs?* An initial question had been focused on Irish-Medium schools specifically but due to a lack of studies, it was broadened to include language immersion programmes internationally. All types of specific learning difficulties (dyslexia, dyscalculia, speech and language difficulty or developmental disorder) were included if they had been defined by the authors as a SEN. Children who were classified as 'gifted and talented' or similar were not included in this review, unless they also had a reported SEN.

### **Stage Two: Identifying Relevant Studies**

Several pilot search strategies were devised to search various databases for relevant studies. The databases included were PsycINFO, Web of Science, SCOPUS and ERIC (subscription version). These databases were selected due to their coverage of education, psychology, and applied linguistics research, ensuring relevant studies across disciplines were captured. The final search strategy used is detailed below (see Table 1). All searches were carried out on the 2nd of February 2024.

In a scoping review, relevant studies can also be identified through hand-searching (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). The reference lists of the included studies were used for citation

searching and snowballing. Using this strategy, a further five studies were identified. Grey literature including an unpublished thesis and government report were also included.

**Table 1**

***Search Terms***

<b>Child*</b>		<b>SEN</b>		<b>Irish Medium</b>
<b>OR</b>		<b>OR</b>		<b>OR</b>
<b>Young people</b>		<b>Special Educational Need*</b>		<b>Irishmedium</b>
<b>OR</b>	<b>AND</b>	<b>OR</b>	<b>AND</b>	<b>OR</b>
<b>Adolescen*</b>		<b>Special Need</b>		<b>Gaelscoil</b>
<b>OR</b>		<b>OR</b>		<b>OR</b>
<b>Student*</b>		<b>Special Education</b>		<b>Immersion</b>
<b>OR</b>		<b>OR</b>		
<b>Pupil*</b>		<b>Learning Difficult*</b>		
		<b>OR</b>		
		<b>Developmental dis*</b>		

**Stage Three: Study Selection**

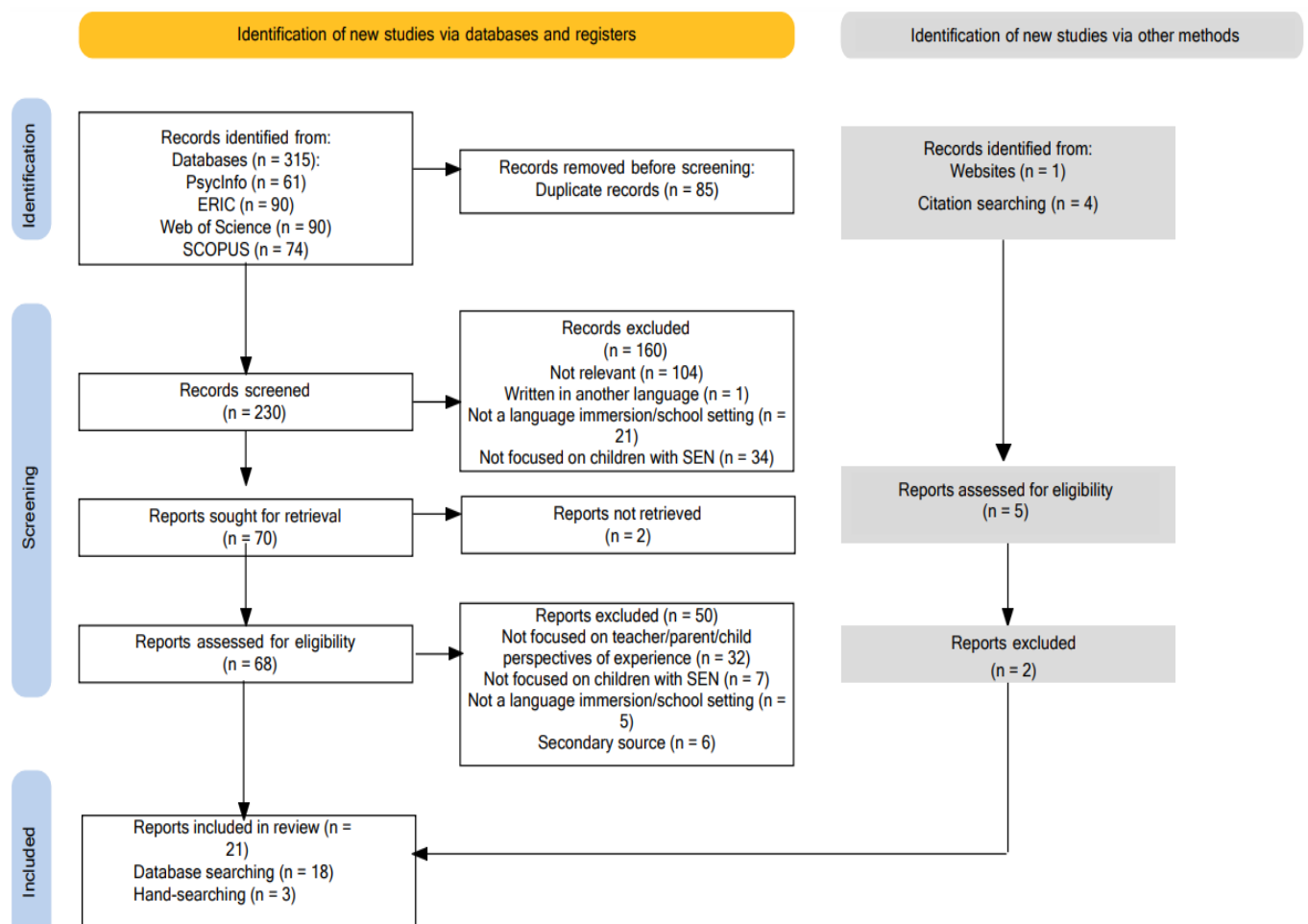
Searching the databases yielded a total of 315 results which were exported to reference manager EndNote 21 (Clarivate Analytics). Duplicates were first removed and then the remaining articles were screened by title and abstract. As familiarity with the results increased, inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed post-hoc. These were then applied, and 160 articles were manually excluded for a number of reasons (See Figure 1):

- The studies were not written in English or Irish.
- The articles were not focused on LIPs in a formal school setting.
- The articles were not focused on children with SEN.
- The articles were not relevant to the subject.

The remaining 70 articles were then reviewed as full-text items. Two were unavailable online and could not be retrieved through inter-library loans or other means. 50 were excluded as they did not meet inclusion criteria. Reasons for exclusion included studies that were reviews or secondary sources, or did not include the perspectives of parents, school staff, or children regarding their experiences attending LIPs.

**Figure 1**

***PRISMA Flow Diagram***



## **Stage Four: Charting the Data**

Twenty-one articles were included in the final study. These were read in full several times. Relevant information was extracted from each one and combined into a summary table. As suggested by Arksey & O'Malley (2005), this information included author, location, method, and key findings. Findings of the studies included were then examined and synthesised into common themes. Stage 5 (collating, summarising and reporting the results) is detailed in the next section.

## **Findings**

### **Search Results**

Table 2 shows the breakdown of studies according to location, sample, publication year and document type. The publication year of the studies ranged from 1999-2023. 42.9% studies were published during 1999-2019, with 57.1% being published from 2020 onwards. This indicates an increase in publications in this area over the last four years. The included studies offer an international perspective; countries of origin include the Republic of Ireland, UK, USA, and Canada. One study looked at the context across four countries which included the UK, USA, Canada and the Netherlands. More studies originated from the ROI than any other country. The participants included parents, school staff and children with SEN as outlined in the inclusion criteria. 33.3% of studies used data from more than one of those populations. Only one study focused exclusively on the perspectives of children with SEN. Most documents included were peer-reviewed journal articles (n = 16); however, there were also two chapters from an edited book, one expert commentary, one government report and one unpublished doctoral dissertation.

**Table 2*****Search Results***

<b>Year of Publication</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Document Type</b>	<b>Methods</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Sample Size</b>
1999-2005 = 1	Ireland = 9 UK = 3	Peer-reviewed journal article = 16	Questionnaire & Interviews = 6	School Staff = 6	1-10 = 12 10-20 = 4
2005-2011 = 2	USA = 3 Canada = 5		Assessment	Parents = 5 Children = 1	20-100 = 3
2012-2017 = 5	International = 1	Chapter from edited book = 2	and interviews = 2	Combination = 7	
2017-2023 = 13		Expert commentary = 1 Government report = 1	Semi-Structured Interviews = 9 Participatory Research = 1 Questionnaire = 1 Observation = 3		

Although no exclusion criteria were developed around study methodology, almost all studies included a qualitative component, possibly due to the focus on experiences. The studies utilised methods including semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis (see Table 1). Seven employed a mixed-methods approach. This involved a combination of quantitative methods to identify the type/prevalence of SEN in immersion education schools, along with qualitative interviews to examine the views of relevant stakeholders. Six of the studies were case studies and one used a creative approach with children taking photos of their school and talking about their pictures in semi-structured interviews. There was one expert commentary. Barret et al. (2020) used a survey with both closed and open-ended questions. Aligning with the qualitative methodology employed by

many studies where the focus may have been on the richness of data as opposed to number of participants, sample sizes were small, with over half of studies having between one and ten participants.

Details of data analysis were not reported in all cases (Mady & Arnett, 2009; Ní Fhoighil & Travers, 2012; Ní Chinnéide, 2009; Patton & Matthews, 2020). Thematic analysis was the most commonly employed technique, used in 13 studies. Additionally, one study employed Narrative Analysis, while the other utilized Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

## **Mapping of Key Concepts**

### *Approach to SEN*

Special Educational Needs were defined differently, and various types of SEN were included in the final study selection (see Table 2). In some studies, SEN were conceptualised as any significant need identified by parents or teachers, whereas in others SEN were only recognised in terms of a formal diagnosis. There was also variety within studies as many included children with differing profiles, rather than focusing on one type of SEN. Some studies did not explicitly state what profile of children were included in the studies (Barrett et al., 2020; Ní Chinnéide, 2009; Rousseau, 1999; Zhang, 2020).

**Table 2*****Types of SEN Included in Studies***

<b>SEN</b>	<b>Number of studies focused solely on this type of SEN</b>	<b>Number of Studies which included this SEN type</b>
Literacy Difficulties/Dyslexia	4	7
Autism Spectrum Disorder	2	5
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder	1	4
Language Impairment	0	6
Mild General Learning Difficulties	0	1
Dyspraxia	0	1
Behavioural Difficulties	0	1

Specific difficulties in literacy were the most commonly researched SEN type in this review. Children with literacy difficulties or dyslexia were the focus of four studies (MacIntyre Coyle & Nic Aindriú, 2023; Mady & Arnett, 2009; Ní Chiaruáin & Travers, 2012; Patton & Matthews, 2020) and included in six others (Kangas, 2017; Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2021; Nic Aindriú, 2020; Nic Aindriú et al., 2020; Nic Aindriú, 2022; Selvachandran et al., 2022). Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) were the focus of two studies (Baker et al., 2021; Howard et al., 2021) and were included in five others (Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2021; Nic Aindriú, 2020; Nic Aindriú, 2021; Nic Aindriú et al., 2022; Nic Aindriú, 2022). Language Impairment was listed as one of several SEN types included in six studies (Kangas, 2017; Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2021; Nic Aindriú, 2020; Nic Aindriú, 2021; Nic Aindriú, 2022; Selvachandran et al., 2022) but was not the sole focus of any study.

Other types of SEN explicitly referenced included mild general learning difficulties (Nic Aindriú, 2022), Dyspraxia (Nic Aindriú, 2022), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (Cobb, 2015; Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2021; Nic Aindriú 2022; Ní Fhoighil & Travers, 2012), and behavioural difficulties (Selvachandran et al., 2022). de Valenzuela et al. (2016) focused on developmental disability, including students with intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, and ASD, as well as specific language impairment. In her expert commentary, Ware (2019) focused on Profound Learning Difficulties and the paucity of research available within this population.

### *Approach to immersion education*

The selected studies focused on various types of immersion education in schools including one-way and dual language immersion programmes. In studies originating in Ireland, the UK and Canada, the children generally come to school with English as their first language (reflecting the majority language of the country they live in), and the target languages (Irish, French, Welsh) are minority languages. The context of the US based studies is usually dual immersion programmes where children are learning both English and another language (Spanish in the case of the studies included in this review).

## **Summary of Key Themes**

### *Theme 1. Home Language/L1 Competence as an Obstacle*

A belief held by staff and parents was that there could be particular challenges for children who were not competent in at least one language entering into an immersive language environment (Barrett et al., 2020; de Valenzuela et al, 2016; Kangas, 2017; Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2021; Nic Aindriú 2022). The participant responses indicated a concern that this profile

of child would struggle with all communication, regardless of setting. Selvachandran et al. (2022) found that children's language ability level influenced parental attitudes towards the suitability of a LIP. From schools' perspective, there was an apparent fear on the part of educators of spending too much time on a second language when that child also required input to develop their first language. de Valenzuela et al. highlighted an 'either/or' (2016, p.38) approach to children who had SEN and were learning another language. The authors suggested that if both SEN support and support for a language was required, priority was usually given to SEN support alone rather than language support or a combination of both. In accordance with this, a teacher in de Valenzuela et al.'s study said

I mean I don't know if this is advice anyone else would give but I find it hard to justify spending time learning another language when they need to put that time in to learning English, which is the case for a lot of children with language impairments you know they have delayed language skills as well. (2016, p.38)

The identification of children with language difficulties was also discussed (Kangas, 2017; Mady & Arnett, 2009). It was acknowledged that some school assessment procedures may unfairly contribute to the idea that children are not proficient in either language, even when they may be able to communicate in the language(s) outside of testing procedures (Baker et al., 2021; Kangas, 2017). Additionally, teachers and parents commented that children with SEN were slower to acquire the target language initially (Howard et al., 2021; Nic Aindriú, 2022), However, positive outcomes were seen over time as seen in the participant quotation below.

I think at the beginning (. . .) they can be a little slow when they're processing information but then when they get into upper Elementary they have pretty good comprehension skills in comparison to other kids with disabilities that are monolingual. (Baker et al., 2021, p. 12)

### *Theme 2. Inclusion Dependant on Supports in Schools*

The importance of language support in schools for children with SEN in LIPs was raised in many studies in this review. Deficits in this area were highlighted as a key challenge in terms of inclusion. A lack of supports in terms of specialised teaching allocation (deValenzuela et al., 20216; MacIntyre Coyle & Nic Aindriú, 2023; Selvachandran et al., 2022), and assessments/resources in the target language (MacIntyre Coyle & Nic Aindriú, 2023; Ní Chinnéide, 2009; Patton & Matthews, 2020) were identified. Also highlighted, was a lack of training and continuous professional development opportunities for LIP teachers in relation to children with SEN (Barrett et al., 2020; Ní Chinneide, 2009; Patton & Matthews, 2020; Selvachandran et al., 2022; Zhang, 2020). Due to the lack of these supports, LIP teachers felt unprepared to effectively include some children with SEN (Barrett et al., 2020; Zhang, 2020). Selvachandran et al. (2022) found that this led to parents seeking external or private supports to help their child. Baker et al. (2021) and Rousseau (1999) both reported positive outcomes for children with SEN when appropriate support programmes were put in place. The sometimes-smaller class sizes and strong sense of community within LIPs was also reported to be important in supporting children with SEN (Nic Aindriú, 2020; Zhang, 2020).

### *Theme 3. Professional Guidance Against Bilingualism*

Another recurring theme centred on advice, given by professionals such as Educational Psychologists or Speech and Language therapists to parents, suggesting that a monolingual environment may be a better option for their child (Baker et al., 2021; Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2021; Nic Aindriú, 2022). Some of the respondents questioned whether this was evidence-based or took the individual needs of their child into account. One parent said that “It was suggested by psychology. That was kind of their first thing, even when they didn’t really know him that well their automatic response was to have him in an English school”

(Nic Aindriú, 2022, p.68). This could be as a result of the lack of evidence in this field as highlighted in several articles, lack of knowledge or understanding of immersion education or the lack of valid assessments in the Irish language that are available to use. Practitioners such as Educational Psychologists consequently rely more heavily on their own professional judgement (NíChinneide, 2009). Recent research suggests that children with SEN can acquire functional second language reading skills through LIPs (Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2021) and may find it easier to learn to read in their second language depending on the orthography of that language (Nic Aindriú, 2021).

As a result of these professional opinions, many parents often felt the need to act as an advocate for the inclusion of their child with SEN which was challenging at times. Mady & Arnett (2009) and Cobb (2015) identified how parents often felt excluded or unheard in important decision-making processes. Parent respondents made comments such as “I just went to meeting after meeting and email after email, I can’t tell you how much of my day was spent at that school, trying to advocate for my kid” (Selvachandran et al., 2022, p. 1128).

#### *Theme 4. The View of Language as Opportunity*

Many papers included quotations from parents and school staff citing the perceived benefits of bilingualism; academically, socially and culturally (Barrett et al., 2020; Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2021; Howard et al., 2021; Nic Aindriú et al., 2021; Nic Aindriú et al., 2022; NíChinneide, 2009; Selvachandran et al., 2022). There was a belief that learning another language had the potential to widen a child’s horizons in terms of future prospects and worldview. As Howard et al. (2021) pointed out, many of these benefits apply to all bilingual learners and not only children with SEN. Parents and teachers also considered the long-term benefits of an additional language when considering the best options for the children with

SEN. It is important to note that two of these studies (Barrett et al., 2020; Nic Aindriú et al., 2020) were based in the Republic of Ireland where completing secondary school-level examinations in Irish is a requirement for some university courses. Parents commented on the greater opportunities perceived to be associated with competency in an additional language. This vocational benefit was also evident in the study by Howard et al. which was partially based in Wales where Welsh is also a requirement for some careers. This is illustrated by the following quotations:

It's why I want to keep him in the Irish school, because I think it would be another bonus to him. Even if he does have learning difficulties, it will be a door that's open to him. If he was in an English-speaking school, I feel that door would be closed. (Nic Aindriú et al., 2022, p. 120)

They have a broader view of the world. They know that there's not just one culture that you have to follow, but there are other ways of seeing the world. (Howard et al., 2021, p. 434)

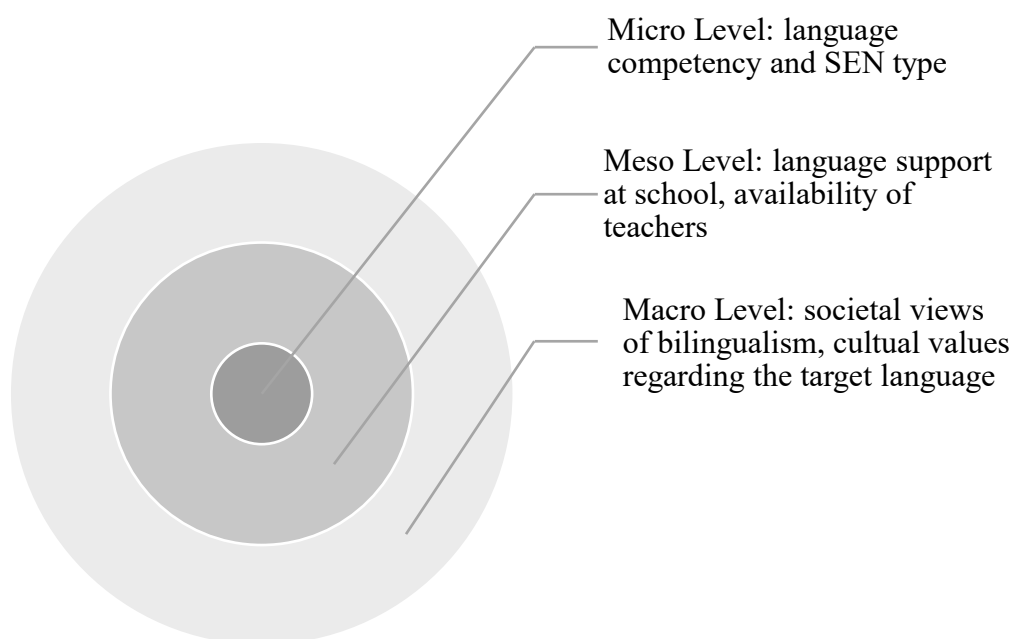
I have always felt like learning another language is giving someone the possibility ... the understanding that there is a possibility of ... something other than us. (Selvachandran et al., 2022, p. 1126)

## **Discussion**

In this section, the key findings, which can be classified according to micro, meso and macrosystem level factors as illustrated in the Figure 2, are discussed and embedded into existing frameworks. Limitations of this study as well as implications for future practice are also highlighted.

## Figure 2

### *Findings at Different Levels of the System*



Recurring findings at the individual level included language competence and the type/level of SEN. For example, findings highlighted perceptions that LIPs may be less suitable for children who are not competent in at least one language when entering the programme (Barrett et al., 2020; de Valenzuela et al, 2016; Kangas, 2017; Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2021; Nic Aindriú 2022). However, studies reported benefits in terms of social interaction and academic performance for children with SEN attending LIPs (Baker et al, 2021; Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2021). This variability may be due to differences in how SEN is defined across studies, and differences in classroom strategies and assessment processes to address diverse learning needs. Additionally, the heterogeneity within the SEN population itself, spanning from speech and language impairments to neurodevelopmental conditions, complicates the interpretation of outcomes.

At the meso-level, a number of studies viewed the difficulties experienced by children with SEN through a systemic lens, focusing on challenges such as the availability of bilingual teachers (Baker et al., 2021; Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2021), time constraints (de Valenzuela et al., 2016) and the supports available to teachers and students with SEN in schools (Nic Aindriú et al., 2022; Patton & Matthews, 2020). Research alludes to competing priorities, between SEN support and language support in schools. Howard et al. (2021) highlighted tension between practitioners' concern for language development and families' desire for their child to become bilingual. However, Kangas (2017) suggested that when special education and language supports are valued equally and implemented simultaneously, outcomes for children with SEN are enhanced. Successful integration of these supports often depends on school-wide policies that prioritize collaboration between language specialists, SEN coordinators, classroom teachers and parents.

Considering the macrosystem, the societal views of the importance of bilingualism may also have a role to play in how relevant stakeholders understand the experiences of children with SEN in immersion education. This was evident in this study in terms of the value some stakeholders placed on bilingualism leading to their preference for LIPs. Socio-political views around bilingualism also influence the meso-level factors in terms of investment and resourcing. It is particularly relevant in considering the context in NI where the preservation of the Irish language and culture through IM schools encountered significant setbacks from the founding of the first IM school in 1971 up to the late 1990s (Ó Baoill, 2007). Following the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, obligations were placed on the Department of Education in relation to the Irish language and IM schools (Ó Baoill, 2007). There has since been significant development in this sector, however it is acknowledged that further strategic planning, funding and resources are required which has been difficult as the Northern Irish Assembly was only recently restored.

In summary, this review sought to examine the literature pertaining to the views of stakeholders on the experiences of children with SEN in LIPs. Recurring themes suggest that while there is evidence of the cognitive, social, and linguistic benefits of bilingual education for children with SEN, access and experiences are shaped by a complex interplay of individual, institutional, and societal factors. Consideration needs to be given to the abilities of the child, as well as the environment in which they are learning. Within school settings, tensions around prioritisation of supports highlight the need for integrated, inclusive practices that do not position language development and special education as competing priorities. At the broader societal level, the current political landscape, cultural values, and historical context continue to influence the implementation and resourcing of LIPs. These findings are similar to those of Martínez-Álvarez (2019), which outlined the intersection of ability, race and bilingual identity in shaping opportunities for emergent bilingual children with SEN. Both sets of findings point to the need for a systemic approach to addressing barriers for children with SEN in LIPs.

### **Areas for Future Research**

Several studies (Patton & Matthews, 2020; Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2021) highlighted a lack of research in the area in general that can be used to inform policy and practice. It is clear from this review that a dearth of research exists on the views of the children and young people with SEN in particular in these settings. This may be due to the possible perceived difficulties in eliciting the voice of some children with SEN (Ware, 2019). As stated by Howard et al. (2021, p. 446) ‘research is required to further understand students’ own perspectives on whether bilingualism is an asset or an obstacle to their educational progress’. In light of this, more creative, participatory research methods could be explored and utilised in this area to ensure that the student perspective is more clearly foregrounded.

## **Implications for Professional Practice**

Many implications arise from this review in terms of professional practice for those working in or with language immersion environment. At a micro-level, consideration should be given to the time needed by children with SEN to learn the target language. This review found that the timeframe for language acquisition was typically longer for those with SEN. It is also important to maintain a child-centred approach when working with children with SEN in LIPs as research is not conclusive regarding outcomes. At a meso-level, professionals working with the families should also consider the advice they give to parents and ensure it is based on the individual needs of that child and their context. Enhanced communication should be developed between all relevant stakeholders, considering the best language to use and the possible need for interpreters. These communication channels should remain open and ensure that all parties are listened to, especially in decision making processes. LIPs may also benefit from increased supports. This could be operationalised in several ways; greater input at initial teacher training level, targeted continuous professional development courses, resource development in terms of assessments in the target language and teaching materials to support target language special education. Finally, at a macro-level, it is hoped that this research will open conversations about the supports available to children with SEN in LIPs that may inform future policy.

## **Limitations**

This study reveals notable gaps in the existing literature. Most importantly, research on children with SEN in LIPs is underexplored. Additionally, prior studies have largely overlooked the voices of the children themselves. The data collection methods used to date have been limited in scope. There is a need for more diverse approaches such as action research and participatory research methods.

## Conclusion

This scoping review aimed to map the literature relating to the experiences of children with SEN in Irish-medium education and similar LIPs. 21 studies were selected for inclusion in the review, with 57.2% of these originating in Ireland or the UK and 57.1% being published in the last 4 years. Across all literature reviewed there were factors at a micro, meso and macro-level that appear to affect the experience of children with SEN in LIPs, as well as a significant lack of the voice of children themselves. This represents a gap in the research and an area that warrants further examination. This would help families make informed choices about schools for their children, as well as guide teachers and professionals when working with these children directly.

## Disclosure Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

## Funding

No funding was received for conducting this study.

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