

# **Belonging in Irish-medium Post-Primary Education for Students with Special Educational Needs**

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## **Abstract**

Feelings of belonging in school have a positive impact on the holistic development of students. This study investigated teachers' and principals' experiences of creating an inclusive culture in Irish-medium (IM) and Gaeltacht post-primary schools. Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted with participants (N=21) to explore how an inclusive school culture can ensure access to IM and Gaeltacht education for students with special educational needs (SEN). This study is important as there are often negative attitudes towards bilingualism or immersion education for children with SEN. The findings presented discuss the positive practices in place in schools relating to feelings of belonging, inclusion, school and class size and increased levels of student self-esteem.

**Keywords:** Gaeltacht, belonging, Irish-medium education, special educational needs, school culture

## **Introduction**

Inclusive education aims to eliminate barriers to ensure that all students can participate in education, regardless of their abilities or the challenges they face (Department of Education, 2024; Florian, 2014; Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018; Ring, 2024). The premise is that all students can learn effectively when provided with appropriate learning opportunities. To foster inclusion, it is crucial that all students are treated equitably, with necessary modifications made to the learning environment and strategies to guarantee equal access to the curriculum (Finkelstein et al., 2021; Westwood, 2018). Immersion education is a strong form of bilingual education with many benefits, such as cognitive, linguistic, social, and cultural advantages (Gunnerud et al., 2020; Hurajová, 2015; Lindholm-Leary & Genesee, 2014; Simonis et al., 2020). Despite these advantages, concerns have been raised regarding the appropriateness of bilingualism and immersion education for students with special educational needs (SEN) (Hampton et al., 2017; Howard et al., 2021). These concerns are often rooted in misconceptions suggesting that learning a second language may overwhelm or confuse these students or hinder their first language development. Such misconceptions have

discouraged many from enrolling their child with SEN in immersion education and it has also often led to student withdrawals from this form of education to monolingual majority language schools (Nic Aindriú, 2022; Selvachandran, et al., 2020).

In the Republic of Ireland (RoI), there are 45 post-primary Irish-medium (IM) schools located outside of the Gaeltacht, where English is the dominant community language. These schools have a total enrolment of approximately 11,836 students, spanning from 1st year (age 12) to 6th year (age 18) (Gaeloideachas, 2024). Additionally, 29 IM post-primary schools operate within Gaeltacht regions, serving 3,942 students in communities where Irish has traditionally been or remains the primary spoken language (Gaeloideachas, 2024; Údarás na Gaeltachta, 2024). Historically, Irish was the first language in Gaeltacht areas; however, these communities have become increasingly diverse. Currently, only about 66% of the 106,000 residents in these regions speak Irish as their first language (Central Statistics Office, 2022).

It is estimated that around 4% of all post-primary students attend either an IM or Gaeltacht school (Gaeloideachas, 2024). In these schools, all subjects, except for English and modern foreign languages are taught through Irish. Approximately 16.7% of students in these post-primary schools have been diagnosed with SEN (Nic Aindriú, 2025). The most common diagnosis is dyslexia, affecting 6.6% of students. Other frequently reported SEN categories include autism, dyspraxia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and mild general learning disability. The prevalence of SEN diagnoses is slightly higher in Gaeltacht schools (18.22%) compared to IM schools outside the Gaeltacht (16.35%). This discrepancy may be due to the limited school choices available to families in Gaeltacht areas, where most local schools operate through Irish.

This study explored the experiences of post-primary teachers, principals and board of management chairpersons around belonging and inclusion for students with SEN in IM and Gaeltacht post-primary schools. Data was collected through three focus groups (N=19

participants) and two semi-structured individual interviews (N=2). The research question that was addressed by this method was, what are the benefits of IM/Gaeltacht education for students with SEN? One of the themes that arose from the thematic data analysis was a positive school culture and belonging.

### **School Culture and Belonging**

Belonging has long been noted as a basic human need (Allen et al., 2021). It is suggested that one in three students in schools internationally do not feel a sense of belonging to their school (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2019). In this study, Goodenow and Grady's definition (1993, p. 60) of belonging in school is used: "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment."

Allen et al. (2021) suggest that there are several central themes within the classification of belonging, for example teacher support, curriculum engagement, and fair and effective discipline. School leadership has a central role in the creation of a school culture of belonging and inclusion. It is important that school leaders have a clear vision of inclusion for their schools. Effective inclusive school leadership in these areas focuses on the understanding that students will only achieve well academically if they feel both physically and psychologically safe, time is allocated to developing positive relationships between adults and students in the school, and professional development is prioritised (Allen et al., 2021; Ma, 2003; O'Keeffe, 2013).

The research literature states that students feel like they belong when the adults in the school show that they care about their learning, are actively involved in their learning and care, and are interested in them as individuals (Allen et al., 2018; Slaten et al., 2016). When students feel that they belong in a school it has a positive impact on their academic and overall wellbeing (Allen & Bowles, 2012; Allen et al., 2018; Arslan, 2021; Arslan et al.,

2020). Research suggests positive student-teacher relationships cause increased feelings of belonging for students, building and maintaining positive student-teacher relationships is an attainable and cost-effective strategy for building a strong school culture of belonging (Allen et al., 2021). A positive and secure relationship is one in which there is warmth, supportiveness, trust, involvement, and responsiveness (Allen et al., 2018; Allen et al., 2021). Students who feel like they don't belong in school or have poor relationships with their teachers often exhibit poor behaviour and achieve poorly academically (Abdollahi et al., 2020; Allen & McKenzie, 2015; Arslan & Coskun, 2020).

Simple measures can be taken by teachers to increase student engagement; for example, Cook et al. (2018) estimated that student engagement increased by 20% when teachers greeted them at the door in the morning. Another factor that promotes connectedness is when teachers are aware of individual students' characteristics and interests. Some other strategies suggested include creating a caring and supportive environment, offering emotional supports to students, teachers showing an interest in students, listening to student voice, being respectful and fair, and engaging in positive classroom management strategies (Cook et al., 2018; Pedlar, 2018).

### **Sense of Belonging for Children with Special Educational Needs**

Recently, there has been a growing body of research around feelings of belonging for students with SEN (Cullinane, 2020; Nepi et al., 2013; Prince & Hardwin, 2013). However, there has been no known research conducted in this area specifically in relation to immersion education. Unfortunately, some of the research suggests that students with SEN are less likely to feel like they belong in school (De Bortoli, 2018). Hence it is important that all at-risk students are identified, and efforts are made to help them feel like they belong (Allen et al., 2021). From a social point of view, it has been found that students with SEN often have fewer reciprocal friendships and are lonely (Black et al., 2024)

Students with SEN who feel like they belong and come from an inclusive school community have better school attendance and behaviour (Hamlin, 2021; Korpershoek et al., 2020). Nevertheless, those with SEN often identified that they had a lower sense of belonging when compared to their peers without SEN at post-primary school level (Cullinane, 2020). The sense of belonging experienced by students with SEN can vary based on their needs, for example students with emotional and behavioural difficulties often experience lower feelings of belonging (Dimitrellou & Hurry, 2019).

A whole-school approach to inclusion is essential for ensuring that all students including those with SEN feel valued, supported, and able to succeed (Day & Prunty, 2015; Higgins & Booker, 2022; Nic Aindriú & Ó Duibhir, 2023). The key elements required when providing a whole school approach to inclusion include, inclusive policies and leadership, a collaborative culture, parental involvement, professional development, access to specialist services, inclusive curriculum and teaching practices, and physical accessibility to the school (Day & Prunty, 2015; Higgins & Booker, 2022; Nic Aindriú & Ó Duibhir, 2023).

### **Methodology**

This study explored the experiences of post-primary teachers, principals, and the chairpersons of two school boards of management around belonging and inclusion for students with SEN in IM and Gaeltacht post-primary schools. As the leader of the school's governance body, the Chairperson plays a crucial role in overseeing the implementation of policies, ensuring compliance with relevant legislation such as the EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004), and guiding the allocation of resources to support all learners, including those with SEN. Their involvement in this study offers a valuable perspective on the broader institutional priorities and the practical challenges schools face in delivering inclusive education, particularly within the context of an IM education setting where language immersion can intersect with additional learning needs. Their insights contribute to a more holistic

understanding of how school leadership influences the planning, implementation, and review of SEN strategies in IM post-primary education. Unfortunately, student voice was not included in this study as it was outside the remit of the funding call.

Three focus groups (N=19 participants) and two semi-structured individual interviews (N=2) were conducted. For the focus groups there were two groups of six participants and one group of seven. Focus group interviews provided insight into participants' attitudes, opinions, beliefs, and experiences regarding the benefits of IM and Gaeltacht education for students with SEN (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). All IM post-primary and Gaeltacht schools were invited to participate via email, which included a plain language statement and informed consent forms. Interested participants responded in writing to the researcher. The focus groups were conducted in person at a conference for teachers and principals from IM and Gaeltacht schools. Attendees who provided written informed consent were randomly assigned to focus groups. The interview schedule was adapted by the researcher from previous studies in this area and informed by relevant literature (Andrews, 2020; Ní Chinnéide, 2009). Each focus group session lasted approximately 60 minutes. Due to personal time constraints and other factors, some individuals could not participate in focus groups. As a result, two participants completed semi-structured interviews using the same interview schedule to maintain consistency (Guest et al., 2017). These individual interviews, conducted via Zoom, lasted approximately 30 minutes.

All focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed with participants' written consent. Discussions were conducted in Irish, with English translations of direct quotes provided below for the international audience.

Ethical approval was sought and granted in accordance with institutional guidelines. Pseudonyms were used during transcription to ensure that no individual could be identified, and no names or personally identifiable details were recorded during the interviews.

Participants were also reminded of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. All data collected were stored securely, with digital files password-protected and access limited to the research team.

Thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017) was used, six phases of data analysis were implemented: (1) the data was read and re-read to gain a deep understanding of the context (familiarisation), (2) data was coded based on key features (generating initial codes), (3) themes were identified in the coding (searching for themes), (4) themes were refined to ensure accuracy (reviewing themes), (5) themes were defined and named to clearly articulate what each theme represents (defining and naming themes), and (6) the report was written based on the findings (report writing).

### **Participant Profiles**

The interviews consisted of participants (N=21) with a range of teaching posts. There were five post-primary IM and Gaeltacht principals, five subject teachers, four special educational needs co-ordinators, three teachers that were part-time special education teachers (SET) and subject teachers, two teachers working full-time in SET and two Chairpersons of Boards of Management. In total, representatives from 16 IM and Gaeltacht schools participated in the study, equalling 20% of Gaeltacht and IM post-primary schools across the island of Ireland. There were 13 participants from standalone IM post-primary schools, two from IM units attached to English-medium schools, and six from Gaeltacht post-primary schools. In relation to the working location of those who participated there were teachers from IM post-primary schools in Northern Ireland and the RoI.

### **Continuous Professional Development (CPD) of Participants**

The level of CPD undertaken by participants in this study in the area of inclusion varied greatly. Almost a quarter (n=5) of participants stated that the only professional development

in inclusive education that they have accessed was part of their undergraduate or postgraduate teaching qualification. Five participants (24%, N=21) spoke about how they had to rely on their own motivation and interest in the area to access professional development and information. All these teachers spoke about how they did courses outside of school hours, either online or in their local education centre, to help them in their day-to-day work. Two participants in the study spoke about how they rely on reading literature and independent study to help them overcome the gap in formal professional development. This, they said, was a valuable and essential part of their preparation for teaching. Six participants (29%) discussed how they accessed in-school professional development using Croke Park hours.

## Findings

In this section, findings are presented on the themes of, (a) inclusion and diversity, (b) school and class size, and (c) increased student self-esteem. For the direct quotes that are provided in the findings section, the Irish text has been directly transcribed and not grammatically corrected, and the English text is a translation by the author.

### Inclusion and Diversity

The benefit of a supportive and inclusive school culture was discussed by almost half of the participants (n=14). One of the principals spoke about how they welcome inclusion and diversity in their school, that all students were welcome, and that this culture is an integral part of working with students to help them feel like they belong.

Go bunúsach baineann sé le  
atmaisféar na scoile, baineann  
sé le go bhfuil muid sásta daltaí a  
thabhairt isteach agus oibriú leo.  
(FG3 R2)

Basically, it has to do with the  
atmosphere of the school, it has  
to do with the fact that we are  
willing to bring students in and  
work with them.

Another participant spoke about the dignity and respect that all members of the school community receive from one another. This is central to the day-to-day life of the school,

ensures that the school culture is encouraging, promotes feelings of belonging among students and has a positive impact on students' school experiences.

Go bhfuil meas ar dhínit  
agus pearsana gach dalta  
agus go bhfuil siad lárnach ina  
geur chuige i dtaca le socraithe  
praiticiúil, sin cúram don  
fhoireann theagasc. (FG2 R2)

That the dignity and personality  
of each student is respected  
and that they are central in  
their approach to practical  
arrangements, which is the  
responsibility of the teaching staff.

It was discussed that when there is an inclusive culture in schools and positive relationships are fostered between staff and students, students are often more open to taking support and guidance from teachers when it is needed. These positive student-teacher relationships can increase feelings of belonging for students.

An pobal, an t-atmaisféar agus  
an caidreamh a chur chun cinn  
idir na daltaí lena múinteoirí.  
Bhí siad uaireanta níos oscailte  
chun cabhair a ghlacadh ó na  
múinteoirí tríd má tá siad tar éis  
caint nó caidreamh a chothú  
leo chun tacú leo chomh maith.  
(FG3 R4)

To promote the community, the  
atmosphere and the relationship  
between the students and their  
teachers. They were sometimes  
more open to accepting help  
from the teachers if they have  
talked or built a relationship with  
them to support them as well.

Furthermore, it was reported that students trusted their teachers and principals to support them and that they recognised that they were genuinely interested in their well-being and development.

Is féidir liom labhairt leo ansin  
agus bíonn aithne agam orthu,  
bíonn siad saghas muiníneach  
ansin asam go bhfuil suim agam  
iontu freisin. (FG3 R5)

I can talk to them then and I  
know them, they are kind of  
confident in me that I am also  
interested in them.

Interestingly, references were made by two participants that there was less negative behaviour and less bullying behaviour in their school. This was said to be because the school and classes were smaller, and this meant that it was easier to identify negative behaviour and to put a stop to it.

Ní bhíonn an chineál bulaíocht  
ann agus tá sé an-soiléir má tá  
daoine ag piocadh ar duine eile.  
(FG2 RE)

The type of bullying doesn't exist  
and it's very obvious if people are  
picking on someone else.

### **School and Class Size**

Many of the participants (n=12) spoke about how their school was smaller than other schools in the local community and that this was an advantage for their students in terms of positive school culture and inclusion. Due to the smaller class size, references were made about the benefits of this for the creation of an inclusive school culture. It was referenced that the smaller nature of the schools may mean that the schools are more welcoming when compared to the larger English-medium schools in the area.

Tá scoil s'againne níos lú go cinnte  
agus tá na huimhreacha  
níos lú sa seomra ranga agus go  
bhfuil b'fhéidir atmaisféar fáilteach  
in san scoil, b'fhéidir nach bhfuil i  
scoil ollmhór Béarla. (FG3 R1)

Ours is a smaller school for sure  
and the numbers are smaller in the  
classroom and maybe there is a  
welcoming atmosphere in the school,  
maybe something that is not in a huge  
English school.

The teachers and students had a better opportunity to get to know each other due to the smaller classes and students with SEN were reported to be more likely to feel like they belong in school.

Go bhfuil an cóimheas idir  
múinteoirí agus méid scoláirí  
níos lú sna scoileanna lán  
Ghaeilge, agus gur féidir le gach  
duine - agus páistí le riachtanais  
speisialta - theacht i dtír ar sin.  
(FG2 RD)

That the ratio between teachers  
and students in Irish schools is  
smaller, and that everyone - and  
children with special needs - can  
take advantage of that.

Not only do the teachers get to know students personally, but it was also reported that the personal connections are fostered across all staff up to the level of school principal. This makes it easier for strategies and approaches to be reviewed and modified as required. Furthermore, it was discussed how the students felt comfortable meeting, chatting, and confiding in the teachers and principal.

De bharr go bhfuil an phobail níos lú, domsa mar phríomhoide tá aithne agam ar nach mór gach duine. (FG3 R5)

Because the community is smaller, for me as a principal I know almost everyone.

It was reported that everyone's voice can be heard and listened to due to the smaller class size and the safe space created by this. Teachers suggested that lessons can be more creative, fun and interactive due to the positive classroom environment and smaller class sizes.

Scoileanna Gaeilge, tá na huimhreacha níos lú so bíonn sé níos easca craic 's spraoi a bheith leo sa rang agus an Ghaeilge a fhoghlaim le spraoi agus spéis. Go mbíonn suíomh cineáil 'safe environment' ann sa gnáthrang chomh maith leis an rang speisialta.... [tá siad] in ann a bheith níos mó rannpháirtíocht sa rang linn. (FG2 RE)

Irish language schools, the numbers are smaller, it's easier to have fun in class and learn Irish with fun and interest. That there is a safe environment in the mainstream class as well as the special class.....[they] can have more participation in the class with us.

In relation to student learning it was suggested that students feel more comfortable in the smaller classes and this, in turn, has a positive impact on their learning and participation. This was particularly an advantage for subjects which may be challenging for students.

Tá na ranganna an bheag ag cuid de na hábhair agus tá sé sin ag tacú go mór léi [dalta a bhfuil RSO acu] agus tá sí compordach agus déanann sé an difir dí. So is dóigh gur buntáiste mór é sin i mo chomhthéacs. (FG1 R12)

Some of the subjects have very small classes and that is supporting her [a student with SEN] a lot and she is comfortable, and it makes a difference. So, I think that is a big advantage in my context.

### **Increased Student Self-Esteem**

It was discussed by a third (n=7) of participants that increased student self-esteem is a benefit of IM and Gaeltacht education for post-primary students. One participant discussed how this was due to the way that many of these schools focused on the development of students' soft skills, such as communication, teamwork, creativity, adaptability, problem-solving, critical thinking and conflict management. The development of these skills led to students being

more confident in themselves and more willing to participate in group, class and school activities.

Fosta tá béim ar leith ar scileanna nach ghnáth scileanna iad, na ‘soft skills’ tá a fhios agat mar bhaineann sé le féinmheas agus iad a bheith féinmhuiníneach. (FG2 RB)

There is also a particular emphasis on skills that are not normal skills, you know the soft skills because it is about self-esteem and being self-confident.

Other participants stated that the students had increased self-esteem due to having Irish as a second language and being bilingual. The Irish language created a shared identity for the students and staff.

Cuid de na buntáistí, dar liomsa, you know, féin-muinín go bhfuil an dara teanga acu, go mothaíonn siad mar chuid de rud éigin mar chuid do phobal nó mar theaghlach na scoile. (FG3 R1)

Some of the advantages, in my opinion, you know, self-confidence that they have a second language, that they feel part of something as part of a community or as a school family.

It was suggested by one participant, that students were central members of the school community, who were listened to and supported. This contributed to their feelings of pride and increased self-esteem. Students were proud of their language and the recognition that they got and through this had increased feelings of belonging.

Tá siad mar chroílár an scoil agus tá a fhios acu go bhfuil siad mar chroílár an scoil, sin beagáinín bród agus muinín dóibh. (FG3 R6)

They are the heart of the school, and they know that they are the heart of the school, that’s a little bit of pride and confidence for them.

Linked to this increased self-esteem, it was reported that students had an increased sense of self-identity. There was a discussion about how students were more aware of individual and cultural differences, and this made them more accepting of others and differences. This had a strong positive impact on the feelings of belonging of all students and the promotion of an inclusive school culture.

Tá féiniúlacht acu agus má tá féiniúlacht láidir agat, tá tú sásta glacadh le féiniúlacht achan duine eile. (FG1 R13)

They have an identity, and if you have a strong identity, you are willing to accept the identity of another person.

## Discussion

This study is significant as it is the only known study available on belonging in IM and Gaeltacht education for students with SEN, and the findings may be transferrable to primary IM education settings. It suggests that many of these schools are promoting a supportive and inclusive school culture for all students. This was evident at all levels within the schools that participated in the study, with school principals and all school staff promoting a positive, inclusive culture in the schools as is recommended in the literature (Allen et al., 2018; Allen et al., 2021; Dulfer et al., 2012). It was clear from the findings that teacher and principals were working actively to create welcoming whole school environments where all students were valued and this creates a culture of inclusion and acceptance of differences (Day & Prunty, 2015; Higgins & Booker, 2022; Nic Aindriú & Ó Duibhir, 2023). Strong relationships between students and school staff led to greater trust and openness for students and therefore they were more likely to ask for help or guidance when needed (Allen et al., 2018; Slaten et al., 2016). This is particularly important when learning through a second language and students have questions or need clarification. Participants suggested that the respectful and dignified school culture fostered a sense of belonging, and reduced negative behaviours such as bullying, as has been identified in international studies of belonging (Hamlin, 2021; Korpershoek et al., 2020).

Participants reported that students felt more comfortable, engaged, and included in these smaller settings. One of the benefits identified of the smaller classes and schools was that teachers and principals knew students personally, making it easier to support their individual needs and promoting a strong sense of community within smaller schools leads to

better behaviour and academic outcomes (Allen & Bowles, 2012; Allen et al., 2018; Arslan, 2021; Arslan et al., 2020).

The level of increased self-esteem and pride that students got from being bilingual and learning through Irish was discussed, this is consistent with international research around the benefits of language and identity (Tabouret-Keller, 2017). Learning through Irish and speaking Irish created a shared identity amongst students and staff that bonded the school communities together. This is a benefit that may not have been available to students if they attended an English-medium school, particularly due to Irish language exemptions for students with SEN (Department of Education and Youth, 2024). It was reported that students with SEN in IM and Gaeltacht schools felt proud of their identity and were valued as central members of the school community. It may be suggested that this strong sense of self-identity leads to improved behaviour and greater acceptance of diversity among students as discussed by the participants of this study. Smaller class sizes, strong student-teacher relationships, additional support resources, and bilingualism contribute to a positive educational experience for all students.

Going forward, recommendations for practice include that all IM schools are supported to foster inclusive school cultures through strong leadership, relationship-building, and professional development, while also leveraging the advantages of smaller learning environments. This could be done through the implementation of more CPD that is tailored specifically to meet the needs of IM teachers, with an emphasis on bilingual and immersion-specific challenges in inclusive education (Nic Aindriú et al., 2022, 2023). The establishment of communities of practice among IM and Gaeltacht schools to share strategies, challenges, and resources related to inclusion would foster collaboration between mainstream IM and Gaeltacht post-primary schools and would encourage cross-pollination of good practice (Mulholland & O'Connor, 2016). There is a need to support IM and Gaeltacht schools with

targeted resources that enable inclusive practices, especially in linguistically and culturally diverse contexts. Current inclusion frameworks (e.g., Continuum of Support, Special Education Teacher Allocation) should be adapted for the IM context, reflecting the immersion learning environment. Schools need clear, immersion-specific guidance on how to support students with SEN without compromising the immersion language goals of the school.

When interpreting the findings of the research it is important to be mindful of the limitations of the study, such as the small sample size and the fact that it only focused on SEN in IM post-primary schools. The accounts presented reflect school leaders' and teachers' interpretations of students' experiences rather than direct testimony from students themselves. As such, there is a need to remain cautious not to overstate or “oversell” the perceived effectiveness of current practices based solely on these perspectives. Acknowledging this limitation helps mitigate the risk of bias and reinforces the importance of incorporating students' voices in future research to provide a more balanced and authentic picture of SEN provision in IM post-primary education.

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