

The Factors Motivating Parents to Choose Irish Immersion Education for their Child with Special Educational Needs

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Abstract

A dearth of research exists internationally as to why parents choose immersion education for their child with special educational needs (SEN). The literature available on why parents choose immersion education for the child without SEN states that bilingualism, the parent's own personal experiences, social networks, and their love of languages are motivating factors. Research on the factors that influence how parents select any school for their child with SEN states that an inclusive school environment and access to additional services are the primary motivators. Through semi-structured interviews, this study investigated the reasons why parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (N=3) and specific speech and language disorder (N=2) chose to send their child to an Irish immersion primary school when they had the option of educating their child through the majority language of the community, English. This article presents a discussion on the parents' motivations to send their child to an Irish immersion school in terms of them wanting their child to attend the same school as their other children, their love for the Irish language and culture, and the positive inclusive school culture of an Irish immersion school. The findings of this research will enable Irish immersion schools to identify the needs of the parents and families and further develop as inclusive learning environments.

Key words: Irish immersion education, immersion education, special educational needs, enrollment, parental choice.

Introduction

The present study focuses on why parents chose Irish immersion primary schools for their children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and specific speech and language disorders (SSLDs) in the Republic of Ireland (RoI) and Northern Ireland (NI). All these children were being raised with English as their home language except for one child (SSLD) who was being raised with both Irish and English at home. In the RoI, students with ASD can be educated in mainstream primary schools, special classes, or in special schools, depending on their needs

(National Council for Special Education, 2016). Within the RoI, the Department of Education uses the term SSLD in circulars that outline the provision of additional support for children with speech and language difficulties, these children have the option to attend a special school or class in order to meet their educational needs (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2021). When there is no place available in a special class it is recommended that additional teaching support should be provided for these children in a mainstream setting (DES, 2021; DES, 2017). In Northern Ireland (NI), if a child has a statement of SEN, they generally attend a mainstream primary school if this is a suitable option (NI Direct, 2022). Those who cannot attend a mainstream school due to their SEN can attend a special class or special school. Special schools were developed to meet the more severe SEN of students for example, those with severe and moderate learning difficulties (European Agency, 2022). Special classes are available within the mainstream education system for students whose learning difficulties include speech and language difficulties and ASD (European Agency, 2022; SCoTENS, 2022). In NI, the term Speech and Language Difficulties (SLD) is used within the Code of Practice (Department of Education Northern Ireland, 2005) for the allocation of additional educational support. Another option available when educating children with SEN in the RoI and NI is immersion education.

There are 184 Irish immersion primary schools throughout the island of Ireland. Most students in Irish immersion schools come from homes where English is the dominant home language (McAdory & Janmaat, 2015; Ní Thuairisg & Ó Duibhir, 2016). It is suggested that pupils enrol in these schools with similar limited levels of Irish language proficiency and that their exposure to the Irish language mostly occurs in the classroom (McAdory & Janmaat, 2015; Ní Thuairisg & Ó Duibhir, 2016). The curriculum, which mirrors that of the majority language community, is taught through the medium of Irish, except for English literacy. In Irish immersion schools, in the RoI (n=149), students receive up to two school years'

immersion in the Irish language, before they commence English as a curriculum subject (DES, 2019a). Early total immersion programmes are provided by these schools to those living outside of *Gaeltacht* heartland areas (Údarás na Gaeltachta, 2022). In the RoI, the *Gaeltacht* can be found in areas of counties Donegal, Mayo, Kerry, Cork, Waterford, and Meath. The term *Gaeltacht* is used to describe the regions in Ireland in which the Irish language is, or was until recently, the primary spoken language of the majority of the community (Údarás na Gaeltachta, 2022). In Irish immersion primary schools in NI (n=35), students receive up to three years' total immersion in the Irish language before they undertake the formal English curriculum in Key Stage 1, Year 3/4 (age 6-7) (McKendry, 2006; Ní Chinnéide, 2009).

For some families of children with SEN, bilingualism is a way of life. In these households, families mostly speak a home language which is not the majority language of the community (Jegathessan, 2011). Families often do this to promote and maintain their culture, traditions, heritage, and values. Other families choose bilingualism for their child with SEN even when their home language is the majority language of their community (Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2012). This study investigates the research question, why do parents choose to send their child with SEN to an Irish immersion primary school rather than an English-medium one given that English is the majority language of the community?

Special Educational Needs in Irish Immersion Schools

9.4% (n=705) of students in Irish immersion primary schools present with a range of SEN (Nic Aindriú et al., 2020). When the number of students with SEN receiving additional teaching support in Irish immersion schools (16.57%) is compared with the figures for English-medium schools (17%), it is clear that similar numbers of students in both school types present with SEN (Nic Aindriú et al., 2020). Within Irish immersion primary schools,

dyslexia, ASD, dyspraxia, emotional and/or behavioural difficulties, and SSLD are the five most frequently reported categories of SEN (Barrett et al., 2020; Nic Aindriú et al., 2020). Parents of children with these categories of SEN may apply for an exemption from the study of Irish and are likely to be granted one (DES, 2019b, 2019c). In the school year 2020-2021, 2,117 primary and 11,100 post-primary students were granted an exemption from the study of Irish (DES, 2018). Nevertheless, the limited research available suggests that students with SEN in Irish-immersion primary schools can experience benefits in terms of bilingualism, academic benefits for post-primary school, and increased self-esteem/self-confidence (Nic Aindriú, 2021, 2022; Nic Aindriú et al., 2020). However, even though there are potential benefits for these children, parents have chosen to transfer their child with SEN from Irish-immersion to English-medium schools (Ní Chinnéide, 2009; Nic Aindriú, 2022). In mixed methods study on the reasons why parents chose to transfer their child with SEN from an Irish immersion school, the main reasons cited were; (1) parental anxiety and concern that learning through a L2 was too difficult for the child, (2) recommendations to transfer the child to an English-medium school by educational professionals (e.g. educational psychologists and speech therapists), and (3) the child having difficulties learning through Irish (Nic Aindriú, 2022).

ASD and SSLD

Children with these two categories of SEN were selected for this study as they experience language and communication difficulties. Also, these two categories are in the top five most frequently reported categories of SEN in Irish immersion schools in the RoI (Barrett et al., 2020; Nic Aindriú et al., 2020). They were also chosen as the international research suggests that parents of children with ASD are often advised by educational professionals (e.g., educational psychologists and speech therapists) against bilingual education for their children

(Kay-Raining et al., 2012; Kremer-Sadlik, 2005; Yu, 2013, 2016). This advice is given on the basis that bilingual education and learning through a second language (L2) can confuse a child with language/communication difficulties, place an added burden on them, and slow their rate of language acquisition (Beauchamp & MacLeod, 2017; Hampton et al., 2017; Jegathesan, 2011; Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2012; Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2016; Yu, 2013, 2016). The research also suggests that sequential bilingual children with SSLD can take longer to catch up with their monolingual peers with the same category of SEN (Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2016). These negative opinions have caused fear and anxiety amongst parents regarding the suitability of immersion education/bilingualism for their children (Andrews, 2020; Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2012; Ní Chinnéide, 2009; Yu, 2013, 2016). The findings of this study provide insights into why some parents continue to choose Irish immersion education for their child with SEN despite the fact that bilingualism and immersion are often not recommended.

Factors influencing parental choice of school for their child with SEN

The limited research available states that there are several factors that influence parents when choosing a school for their child with SEN (Mawene & Bal, 2018). In a meta-analysis of studies on the factors that influence parents when choosing a school for a child with SEN, it was found that 14 of the 15 studies suggested that these parents sought schools that had the appropriate education programs, facilities, and staff to meet the needs of their child (Mawene & Bal, 2018). Other factors include class size, natural progression/social continuity, and socio-economic factors (e.g., race and income) (Mawene & Bal, 2018). Social continuity can be defined as the desire to maintain the children's existing supporting system such as peers, siblings, or care providers (Mawene & Bal, 2018, p. 323). Studies found that parents wanted their children with SEN to attend the same school as their siblings without SEN due to the

ease of school collections/drop offs and so that they could support each other (Jessen, 2013; Mawene & Bal, 2018). Parents also reported choosing schools that had an inclusive school culture and that did not limit their child's opportunities to learn (Jenkinson, 1998; McNerney et al., 2015). When the factors that influence parents of children without SEN are compared with the factors that influence parents of children with SEN it is clear that parents of children without SEN are more likely to choose a school based on academic achievement and location (Mawene & Bal., 2018). For the parents of children with SEN it was found that the SEN provision and availability of services to meet the needs of their child was more important for them (Mawene & Bal, 2018).

Parental Motivations for Enrolling their Children in Immersion Education

Limited research exists as to why parents choose to enrol their child in one-way immersion education programmes and the findings of these studies fail to make particular reference to children with SEN. The literature reviewed in this section relates to immersion education schools and does not differentiate on the basis of whether the parents studied had children with or without SEN. Therefore, it is not possible to report on the number of parents of children with SEN included in each study.

In a one-way French immersion programme in Canada, where parents spoke two other languages at home that were not the instructional language of the school (French), their primary reported reason for choosing this form of education for their child was the benefits of multilingualism (Dagenais & Moore, 2008). Wesley & Baig (2012) also studied the primary reasons why parents (n=131) enrolled their children in one-way French or Spanish immersion programmes using parental interviews. Parents (19%) spoke about how their own personal experiences, social networks, 'love of languages,' and the positive experiences of others in immersion programmes influenced their decision. The academic ability of their child was

also a motivating factor, with 15% of parents stating that their child was high achieving and they felt that they needed a challenge. Other factors listed in the study were bilingualism (40%), the development of their child's global and cultural awareness (23%), aspects of school unrelated to immersion (22%), and future opportunities for their child (21%). In a more recent study on the reasons why parents of children with SEN choose French immersion education in Canada for their child, it was found that the primary motivating factors were the benefits of bilingualism, being part of a local community, and attending the same school as a sibling (Selvachandran et al., 2020). Some of the parents also discussed how they wanted to further challenge their child who had good language and communication skills. In the RoI, the limited research available shows that these factors also motivate parents to choose Irish immersion education for their child. It is important to recognise that these studies did not focus specifically on parents of children with SEN. Ní Thuairisg & Ó Duibhir (2016) studied why parents chose Irish immersion primary education for their child and Mhic Mhathúna & Nic Fhionnlaoich (2021) studied the reasons why Irish immersion preschools were chosen by parents. In both studies, most parents (77%, 80%) wanted their child to have Irish as a second language. Over half of parents (54%) in the study by Ní Thuairisg & Ó Duibhir (2016) and almost three quarters (73%) in the study by Mhic Mhathúna & Nic Fhionnlaoich (2021) had an interest in the Irish language, and this influenced their decision. Equal numbers of parents in both studies (62%) cited bilingualism as a reason, and the school's positive reputation was a factor listed in both studies (47%).

Materials and Methods

Participants

Parents of children with ASD (n=3) and SSLD (n=2) were interviewed for this study. The criteria used to select parents for this study were: (1) having a child with an official diagnosis

of ASD or SSLD who attended an Irish immersion primary school in the RoI/NI, and (2) their child's learning difficulties being identified, and the formal assessment/diagnosis process being started or completed before they chose to enrol them in an Irish immersion primary school. Two of the children were still undergoing the formal assessment process when they enrolled in an Irish-immersion primary school. Nevertheless, their learning difficulties had been identified before enrolment in an Irish immersion school. The other children had a formal diagnosis when they started primary school. Table 1 displays the SEN of the children whose parents participated in the present study, the class level of the child at the time of the study, the geographical location of the school which the child attended, the home language of the family, and details regarding the child's diagnosis of SEN. At the time of the study, four of the students were enrolled in an Irish immersion primary school and the fifth, who had attended an Irish immersion primary school, was attending an English medium post-primary school. Those enrolled in the Irish immersion primary schools were attending three different schools. Four of the children had attended an Irish-immersion preschool. All the parents felt that their child was well able for the academic challenge of Irish immersion primary school. Similar to previous studies on the home language of students in Irish immersion schools, it was found that all of the children came from homes where English was the dominant language except for one child who was being raised bilingually through Irish and English (McAdory & Janmaat, 2015; Ní Thuairisg & Ó Duibhir, 2016). The participants in this study were recruited through schools which participated in a larger PhD study on the additional supports required by students with SEN in Irish immersion schools (Andrews, 2020). Parents were given information letters (plain language statements) about the nature of the study and consent forms in both Irish and English. These documents informed the participants of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. This research was granted ethical approval by

the Research Ethics Committee in Dublin City University. All the data gathered was anonymised and identifying details of participants are not presented in the findings.

Table 1

Class Level, Home Language, Diagnosis, and Location of the

Irish Immersion School for the Children of Parents Participating in the Study

	Class Level	Home Language	Form of Assessment	Class Level at which Diagnosed	Had it been suggested pupil should transfer due to SEN?	Location
Parent of Child 1: ASD	6th Class (Age 11-12)	English	Private	Before primary school (Before age 4)	Yes	RoI
Parent of Child 2: ASD	3rd Class (Age 8-9)	English	Irish immersion School	Junior Infants (Age 4-5)	No	NI
Parent of Child 3: SSLD	2nd Class (Age 7-8)	English	Public (local health board)	Before primary school	No	RoI
Parent of Child 4: ASD	5th Year Post-Primary (Age 16-17)	English	Public (local health board)	Junior Infants (Age 4-5)	Yes	RoI
Parent of Child 5: SSLD	Senior Infants (Age 5-6)	Irish/English	Public (local health board)	Before primary school (Before age 4)	Yes	NI

Method

This study investigated why parents choose to send their child with SEN to an Irish immersion primary school rather than an English-medium one given that English is the majority language of the community. Semi-structured face-to face interviews of

approximately 30 minutes duration were conducted with the parents. The questions posed in these interviews were adapted from previous research in this area (Ní Chinnéide, 2009; Travers et al., 2010):

- a) Tell me about your child with SEN who is attending an Irish immersion school?
- b) What languages are spoken in your home?
- c) What age was your child when these needs were identified/diagnosed and how were they identified/diagnosed?
- d) Why did you choose to send your child to an Irish immersion school?
- e) Has it been suggested that you might consider transferring to an English-medium school due to their SEN? If so, what was the reasoning for this?
- f) Can you list the benefits your child gets from attending an Irish immersion school?
- g) Have you any other comments you wish to make regarding your experiences of Irish immersion education for children with SEN?

Four of the interviews were conducted through the medium of English and one interview through Irish. Direct quotes from the interview conducted through Irish are presented below using an English language translation. All interviews were transcribed and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework of thematic analysis. Analysis was undertaken on a semantic level, where each participant's contribution was analysed for 'surface meaning' and on a latent level, where ideas, assumptions, and ideologies were identified and examined (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data management software Nvivo (QSR international PTY Ltd, 2018) was used to organise the data in a meaningful and systematic way.

Results

In this section of the paper the results of the thematic analysis of the data are presented using the following themes: siblings or family attending an Irish immersion school, Irish language and culture, inclusive school culture, Irish language proficiency, and the challenges faced by parents when educating their children with SEN through the medium of Irish.

Siblings or Family attending an Irish Immersion School

In line with the findings of other national research into the reasons why parents choose Irish immersion education for their child, parents in this study were motivated to send their child with a SEN to an Irish immersion school because their child had a sibling attending the school (Mhic Mhathúna & Nic Fhionnlaoidh, 2021; Ní Thuairisg & Ó Duibhir, 2016). Three of the children (1 SSLD, 2 ASD) had siblings or family enrolled in the Irish immersion school they attended. The parents of these children described how their child with SEN also attending an Irish immersion school was a natural progression/social continuity. “A local Gaelscoil opened when our first daughter was due to start school, so I sent the two girls to Irish school, so it was just a natural thing that he followed” (Parent, Child 4).

The parent of Child 1, saw the benefits of this form of education that their nieces and nephews had received and they decided that they wanted their child to have the same opportunities regardless of their SEN. Particularly in relation to them being immersed in the Irish language and learning it naturally.

My older sister’s children had been educated through Irish....I saw the difference that it made, not just to their language or their use of it but more so to their love of it, and that’s what impressed me most, and that’s what I wanted, and that’s what we wanted for our children (Parent, Child 1).

This finding corresponds with international research that found that parents wanted their children with SEN to attend the same school as their siblings without SEN due to the ease of school collections/drop offs and so that they could support each other (Jessen, 2013; Mawene & Bal, 2018).

Irish Language and Culture

All parents spoke about the importance of the Irish language and the Irish culture of the school in their decision to send their child to an Irish immersion school (Mhic Mhathúna & Nic Fhionnlaoich, 2021; Ní Thuairisg & Ó Duibhir (2016). In this context, Irish culture relates to the Irish language, music, art, folklore, and sport (e.g., GAA). “It is a good thing in terms of culture, and he plays Gaelic football and hurling and things like that. There are a lot of Irish language speakers on his team” (Parent, Child 5).

Similar to the findings of other studies, some spoke about their love for the Irish language and culture (Mhic Mhathúna & Nic Fhionnlaoich, 2021; Ní Thuairisg & Ó Duibhir, 2016). A love for the language of the school was also reported as a motivating factor by parents in other forms of immersion education (Wesley & Baig, 2012). Parents (1 SSLD, 2 ASD) who were past pupils of Irish immersion education spoke of/about their love for the Irish language and how it was ‘natural progression’ for their child with SEN to attend this form of education and to have a similar educational experience to them. Two parents spoke in-depth about how they wanted their children to have the same positive experiences that they did in school, such as a supportive school community and the benefit of bilingualism. “I was always passionate about my language and culture” (Parent, Child 4). Like international studies, the school culture and benefit of bilingualism was referred to by all the parents (Dagenais & Moore, 2008; Selvachandran et al., 2020; Wesley & Baig, 2012).

Inclusive School Culture

One of the parents spoke about the benefits of learning through a L2 for their child in terms of teaching pedagogy and language development. This parent felt that the cross linguistic transfer of skills and the repetition that happens in terms of teaching language and literacy skills in both Irish and English in an Irish immersion school would be of benefit for their child. This finding is similar to that of international studies who state that parents of children with SEN are looking for schools with inclusive school cultures and adequate teaching support to meet the needs of their child (Mawene & Bal, 2018). This parent chose Irish immersion education for their child even though their child would be entitled to speech and language therapy support for their child daily if they attended an English-medium school. This is due to the fact that there are no special classes for children with SSLD available through the medium of Irish in the RoI or NI.

There are no better speech models than Irish-medium education, because of things like repetition, things like that and revising concepts (through two languages). These are the things that they (educational professionals) were recommending for primary school (Parent Child 5).

Irish Language Proficiency

All parents spoke about how their child may not have had the opportunity to learn Irish as a L2 if they attended an English-medium school. This is because Irish language exemptions can be obtained by students with SEN in English-medium schools if the parents and school agree (DES, 2019a, b). At the time of the study, one of the children was attending an English-medium post-primary school. This child transferred to an English-medium special class in 3rd class (discussed further in the next section). When the child transferred, they did not have the opportunity to learn Irish because it was not taught in the special class. However, their

parent fought hard for their child to continue to learn Irish and the child has obtained a high level of proficiency.

They didn't do Irish as a subject and from that September until December he actually didn't do any Irish at all and I had to write to the principal to request that he be put into a mainstream class for the Irish lesson (Parent, Child 4).

One parent who worked in an English-medium school as a Special Needs Assistant spoke of their professional and personal experience of the benefit of their child being immersed in the Irish language. “So, for us, for Gerry, that’s never been a problem, because he’s been immersed in it. Because it’s not the language that’s the main problem, it’s the way it’s being taught, you know” (Parent, Child 1).

Another parent (SSLD) spoke about how they chose this form of education for their child because they felt that it would challenge them more than attending an English-medium school and also, it would help in terms of further language acquisition in the future.

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 (Parent, Child 3).

It is interesting that this parent wanted to challenge their child by them learning through Irish as a L2 even though they present with language and communication difficulties. The challenge of immersion education was also noted as a motivating factor for parents in other immersion education studies, e.g., Wesley & Baig (2012) and Selvachandran et al. (2020). Also, parents of children with SEN in international studies wanted their children to have the ability to reach their potential (Mawene & Bal, 2018).

Within the interviews, the parents were asked what benefits they felt their child had received through attending an Irish-immersion school. All the parents interviewed discussed

the benefit of their child being bilingual. “He will have two languages at a young age and that will help when he is older and trying to learn another language” (Parent, Child 5). However, two of the three parents of children with ASD said that whilst their children could understand and speak Irish, they often refused to speak it.

He was very oppositional. That was part of his Asperger’s. Anxiety brought on this oppositional behaviour so he refused to speak Irish. I don't think... his learning wasn't really affected because he was making all his targets and able to learn but he just refused to speak (Parent, Child 4).

The second parent mentioned that their child did not speak much Irish, but they were unsure what the reason for this was.

I don't know if he finds it hard, but he just refuses to, because... I don't know if it's because he feels it's being pushed on him, or because everything he says as Béarla (English), they repeat as Gaeilge (Irish). So, it's like, oh, I know, but he sort of gets mad (Parent, Child 2).

Nevertheless, all the parents stated that their child could understand and speak Irish on some level and as mentioned above this was a motivation for them sending their child to an Irish immersion school like parents of children in other forms of immersion education (Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2016; Mhic Mhathúna & Nic Fhionnlaoidh, 2021; Ní Thuairisg & Ó Duibhir, 2016; Wesley & Baig, 2012). This factor has also been identified when children are learning a language that is not the majority language of society. It has often been identified in heritage speakers and therefore it might not necessarily be related to the child’s SEN (De Houwer, 2020).

Challenges faced by Parents when Educating their Children with SEN through the Medium of Irish

In the interviews, parents identified a range of challenges that they encountered because of their child with SEN attending an Irish immersion school. Three of the parents experienced feelings of anxiety and concern around whether they had made the right educational choice for their child (Ní Chinnéide, 2009). The first parent spoke about how they found it hard to accept that their child would receive more additional support if they attended an English-medium

school than they do attending an Irish immersion primary school (Ní Chinnéide, 2009). This made them question whether they had made the right choice for their child.

I think because I know that he would be getting that (extra) help and support if he was attending an English-medium school and at the start I was in doubt as to whether I had made the right choice to send him here (Irish immersion school) (Parent, Child 5).

The second parent was also worried about the additional support that their child would receive in the Irish immersion primary school (Ní Chinnéide, 2009). This particularly focused around the allocation of a Special Needs Assistant.

The biggest challenge would have been, especially for a child like Tim who is very intelligent but had autism, is that the worry was that the SENO¹ would look at his educational kind of scores and maybe even come in and look at him and he seems to be doing absolutely fine. But he really needed support (Parent, Child 1).

The third parent also had concerns about whether they had made the right choice, they wondered if it would be easier for their child to learn through English. They also discussed how they found the fact that they did not have Irish as a challenge in terms of helping their child with schoolwork at home (Kavanagh, 2013). This parent said that they often relied on their older children who had attended Irish immersion school to help them translate or that they used Google Translate for this also. “I did question whether or not to keep him in the primary school he's in” (Parent, Child 3).

At the time in which this study was conducted, all of the children with the exception of one (Child 4) were still attending an Irish-immersion school. This student had transferred to an English-medium special class for children with ASD in third class. The parent decided to transfer their child from an Irish immersion primary school due to the fact that they felt the school lacked an inclusive school culture. This was a challenge for them that they could not ignore.

We always felt that the school, the Gaelscoil (Irish immersion primary school) that he was in, they didn't really want him.....almost every day there'd be somebody coming out to us to say he'd done this, that or whatever (Parent, Child 4).

¹ A special educational needs officer (SENO) has the responsibility for specific schools, primary, post primary and special, within their area. They ensure that a child with SEN receives the support they are entitled to. (NCSE, 2022)

This experience of a lack of inclusive school culture contrasts with another parent from the group whose child has had a positive experience in an Irish immersion primary school. The advice they have for parents is:

You need to go in. You need to talk to them; you need to see the environment that they're in. Once you see it, it's not so scary anymore. And the fact that the kids are able to communicate, and they're not just left there totally oblivious because the múinteoir (teacher) is talking as Gaeilge (Irish), it's not like that at all. So, I would say, be open minded and definitely give it a try, because we have no regrets (Parent, Child 2).

These findings demonstrate that each school has a different school culture and that this should be considered by parents when choosing a school for their child with SEN as the inclusive culture of the school is an important motivating factor (Mawene & Bal, 2018).

Discussion

The findings of the present study are significant as they suggest that parents of children with SEN choose immersion education for their child for the same reasons as parents of children without SEN such as the positive reputation of immersion education, positive reports from friends and family in relation to immersion education, and their love for the language of instruction of the school (Dagenais & Moore, 2008; Mhic Mhathúna & Nic Fhionnlaoich, 2021; Ní Thuairisig & Ó Duibhir 2016; Wesley & Baig, 2012). Interestingly, many of the parents in this study had attended Irish immersion education themselves and they wanted their child to have the same positive educational experience as they had regardless of whether they had SEN. This finding relates to social continuity as identified in other international studies (Jessen, 2013; Mawene & Bal, 2018). This might suggest that parents who attended Irish immersion education themselves have a better understanding of the ethos of Irish immersion education and thus have fewer concerns about the suitability of this form of education for their child. One of the parents in the study wanted to challenge their child so they chose this form of education for them (Selvachandran et al., 2020).

Findings also suggests that it is important for parents to send their children with SEN to the same school as their children without SEN (Mhic Mhathúna & Nic Fhionnlaoidh, 2021; Ní Thuairisg & Ó Duibhir, 2016; Selvachandran et al., 2020). The fact that parents wanted their child to be educated with their siblings demonstrates that parents want their children with SEN to have the opportunity to belong in the local school community (Jenkinson, 1998; Mawene & Bal, 2018; McNerney et al., 2015). However, there are fewer Irish immersion schools with special classes for students with ASD than English-medium schools and this is not always possible. Also, there are no special classes for children with SSLD available through Irish. This finding may be of importance in terms of demonstrating the need for more special classes to be offered in Irish immersion schools to allow for siblings to attend the same school and/or a school in their local community. Particularly as internationally it has also been found that parents of children with SEN are most likely to choose a school that can appropriately educate and challenge their child (Jenkinson, 1998; McNerney et al., 2015; Mawene & Bal, 2018).

Within the study, three parents described how they questioned whether they had made the right educational choice for their child (Andrews, 2020; Ní Chinnéide, 2009; Nic Aindriú et al., 2020). They often wondered if it would be easier for their child to learn through English. Nevertheless, they continued with their choice of educating their child through Irish due to their love of the Irish language and culture and also the benefit of bilingualism that it afforded their child (Nic Aindriú, 2021). This is interesting considering that parental anxiety/concern about the suitability of Irish immersion education for children with SEN has been cited as one of the primary reasons why these students transfer to English medium schools (Ní Chinnéide, 2009; Nic Aindriú et al., 2020). One parent in the study decided to transfer their child from an Irish immersion primary school to an English-medium special class because they felt that the school lacked an inclusive school culture. These findings

suggest that more information may be required by parents of children with SEN around the benefits and challenges of educating their child through Irish (Ní Chinnéide, 2009). It also suggests that they parents need additional support from Irish immersion schools when their child with SEN is enrolled in the school. Furthermore, it demonstrates that all schools have a different ethos and culture, this is a factor that should be considered when parents are choosing an Irish immersion school for their child.

The findings also show that these parents want their children to have the opportunity to learn Irish and that they feel that this is achievable for them (Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2016). This in turn raises further questions about the debate surrounding the suitability and necessity of Irish language exemptions for students with SEN in English-medium schools (DES 2019a, b). One parent's experience demonstrated that providing an Irish language exemption is not always necessary. When their child transferred to an English-medium special class, they had to request that their child could continue to learn Irish, and they were due to sit a higher-level Irish leaving certificate paper. This corresponds with the international research which demonstrates that children with SEN can acquire a L2 (Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2016).

While the sample size is small, this study gives insights into why some parents choose bilingualism/immersion education for their child when it is not compulsory and in some cases, not recommended, and is important from that perspective to help ensure the inclusivity of immersion programmes. It is difficult to conduct research with parents of children with these categories of SEN due to the low numbers of these students enrolled in Irish immersion schools. However, the findings of this study are important and add to the limited international research on the reasons why parents of children with SEN decide to send their child to immersion education schools, particularly when they have often been advised against it (Kay-Raining et al., 2012; Kremer-Sadlik, 2005; Yu, 2013, 2016). The findings of the present

study may be transferable to other immersion education contexts throughout the world such as Canada, Spain, Scotland, Wales, and New Zealand. We echo the call of Selvachandran et al. (2020) for more research in this area so that we can create inclusive immersion schools and help educational professionals to make evidence-based decisions.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our gratitude to all the participants of this study and to *An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta* for funding this research.

Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

Funding

This study was funded by *An Chomhairle um Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta*.

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