

Unmasking Essential Irish-Medium Immersion-Specific Teacher Competences

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Abstract

Irish-medium education is designed to promote concurrent and systematic content and language development in the context of disciplinary instruction. Distinct from traditional content or language teaching, it requires a particular knowledge base and pedagogical skill set (Cammarata & Ó Ceallaigh, 2020; Mac Corraídh, 2008, 2021; Ó Ceallaigh & Ní Shéaghda, 2017; Ó Duibhir, 2018). Yet, to date, few studies identify the immersion-specific competences called for in an Irish-medium (IM) educational setting. Although there is a growing recognition that IM teaching makes higher demands in terms of disciplinary expertise and knowledge (Cammarata & Ó Ceallaigh, 2020), what constitutes an ideal IM immersion knowledge base, and the values that underpin it, have yet to be well understood or clearly described (Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2019). The study described in this article set out to identify this ideal knowledge base, consisting of distinctive professional competences, considered essential to teachers in immersion education, from an IM teacher-informed perspective. Utilising an online questionnaire, a student-teacher symposium, interviews and focus-group interviews, data were collected from key stakeholders (n=78) represented among student teachers, practising teachers, principals, and initial teacher education providers across the continuum of IM education in Northern Ireland (NI) and in the Republic of Ireland (ROI). This article reports on the data generated from eight classroom teachers who took part in the larger study, identifies and considers a number of themes and associated competences that emerged from the data, and highlights implications for policy and practice.

Keywords: immersion, Irish-medium education, teaching competences, initial teacher education, immersion-specific

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Irish-medium (IM) education contributes to, and is inspired by, a worldwide model of immersion education, underpinned by international research and an evolving pedagogical approach that sits within a sociocultural constructivist framework (García, 2009; Mehisto & Genesee, 2015). It is just over 50 years since the first IM primary school in Northern Ireland (NI) was opened by a small community of language activists in Belfast (Mac Seáin, 2010; Nic Íomhair, 2020). In the Republic of Ireland (ROI), bilingual schooling was introduced at the start of the 20th century (De Brún, 2016), followed by a series of initiatives aimed at reviving the Irish language in the new Irish Free State (Ó Ceallaigh et al, 2018; Ó Duibhir, 2018). The network of IM schools that currently exists, however, was established in the '70s and '80s in the ROI (Ní Chlochasaigh et al., 2021) and in the '90s in NI (De Brún, 2022)

Today, the journey of immersion education in Irish schools advances along a more strategic trajectory. Some evidence of progress in policy and legislation that expresses a vision for IM education is reflected in strategic goals (Department of Education, NI, 2009; Department for Communities, NI, 2022; Department of Education and Skills, 2016; Government of Ireland, 2010). Also, the IM education community is part of a more organised infrastructure, with advocacy, support and planning roles, provided by organisations such as Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, Gaeloideachas, and An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta. Growth in the numbers of children learning through Irish is also evident. According to data for the school year 2021-22, published by Gaeloideachas, there are 374 IM schools (primary and post-primary) in Ireland and almost 67,000 children registered who are learning through the medium of Irish, either as a target language or as the language of their Gaeltacht community (<https://www.Gaeloideachas.ie>). These figures represent 8% (ROI) and 2.7% (NI) of all primary-school pupils, and 4% (ROI) and 1.1% (NI) of all post-primary students (<https://www.Gaeloideachas.ie>; Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2023). Separately, additional learners through the medium of Irish attend the network of IM preschool settings that provide an essential early immersion foundation for the IM sector (Mhic Aoidh, 2019).

Following this brief introduction to the development of IM education on the island of Ireland, the next part of the article provides a synthesis of the literature on the growing phenomenon of IM education, paying particular attention to IM teacher education. Recent policy developments are highlighted, and their IM content-adequate use explored. An outline of the research design used in the study described here follows, along with a discussion of the study findings.

IM Teacher Education on the Island of Ireland

The story of teacher education provision for the growing IM education sector is colourful and complex. Many of the major developments in IM education have been preceded by innovative initiatives. For example, the introduction of Irish-medium

post-primary education in NI is generally dated back to 1991, with the establishment of Meánscoil Feirste in Belfast; less well known is an earlier initiative in the outskirts of the city between 1978 and 1980. That remarkable community effort depended largely upon the voluntary support of local teachers and the fundraising activities of parents. It was brought to an end due to the increased strain on the community, and the need to prioritise support for the Irish-medium primary school, which was also unfunded at that time. However, the community was encouraged by their learning from this endeavour and the establishment of a funded post-primary school, at a later stage, became inevitable.

In the years that followed, teachers learned from one another, networks were established to facilitate shared practice through voluntary professional organisations like Gaeloiliúint (NI) and Gaelscoileanna (ROI), and research activity to inform immersion education began to gather momentum (Cummins, 1996; 1998). The pressure on teachers to create their own resources to support an Irish-medium curriculum, in the absence of adequate teaching materials, was evidence of the need for Irish-medium professional services (Knipe & Ó Labhraí, 2004). In 1995, the demand for teacher education in NI, as a priority area of need, led to the establishment of specialist provision for the sector (Farren, et al., 2019; Nig Uidhir, 2006). In the ROI, provision has more recently been expanded to offer undergraduate and postgraduate teacher-education programmes for IM primary and post-primary student teachers. As these programmes have evolved, the unique linguistic and pedagogical competences of teachers in IM schools have come to the fore as an area that merits more focussed research attention (Lyster & Tedick, 2014; Ní Dhiorbháin et al., 2023; Ó Duibhir, 2018; Tedick & Lyster, 2020). We can now look more closely at teacher identity and the characteristics of an effective teacher in IM schools, much of this inquiry informed by teachers themselves (De Brún, 2022; Ní Dhiorbháin et al., 2021; Ó Ceallaigh & Ó Laoire, 2021). The lens of the academic-activist hybrid, previously fixed on the emergence and early development of IM education, can shift focus to the professional needs of teachers and teacher educators. Fifty years ago, when fundraising, recruitment of pupils and teachers, and campaigning for recognition from the education authorities were the priorities, that position could only be imagined.

Irish-Medium Education in a Climate of Change

The challenge of understanding and articulating the competences required of immersion teachers becomes more complex as the network of schools expands. Many of the issues faced in all school settings assume an additional immersion-education dimension in the IM sector (Ó Ceallaigh & Ní Shéaghda, 2017; 2021). Aspects of student diversity and inclusion present a clear example of this (Fortune, 2011; Nic Aindriú et al., 2022; Ní Chlochasaigh et al., 2021; Pobal, 2010). As the ever-accelerating changes reshape our economies and societies, IM schools must strive to keep apace

of such rapid changes and competing imperatives, while simultaneously managing innovations and developments that are specific to the immersion community. To be effective, immersion teachers need to base their practice on established theories and principles and the latest research on teaching and learning, i.e., an updated, coherent, and integrated knowledge base (Cammarata & Ó Ceallaigh, 2020). Many researchers claim that optimal language learning in immersion requires careful attention so that it occurs within a meaning-driven context of specific content instruction (e.g., Cammarata & Hayley, 2017; Cammarata & Tedick, 2012; Lyster, 2007; Morton, 2018; Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2018). But we have yet to fully understand and describe what constitutes an ideal immersion teacher knowledge base for integration (Morton, 2018). While the identification of immersion-specific competences (i.e., professional values, knowledge, understanding, skills, and practices) is essential to drive teacher professional growth and student achievement, research on the critical components of immersion teacher knowledge is still evolving (Cammarata & Cavanagh, 2018; Morton, 2018). A notable lack of research, on a wide variety of topics relating to immersion teacher preparation and development, has been observed (Cammarata & Ó Ceallaigh, 2020), a dearth that is particularly evident in the Irish context (Ó Duibhir, 2018; Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2019, 2021).

In NI, the General Teaching Council outlines 27 teaching competences in *Teaching: The reflective profession* (GTCNI, 2007), only one of which relates to the specific knowledge and skills characteristic of the IM teacher. All of the other competences are generic and not specific enough to address the significant adaptations that may be necessary in the classroom of an IM teacher. A process is currently underway to produce an updated version of the competence framework for Leadership of Learning across the profession (Department of Education, NI, 2016). This revised overview of a professional learning framework in NI is presented graphically as a lens on teacher professional learning, and identifies four broad competence areas: Applying knowledge and understanding; working with others; solving problems; and communicating effectively. Competence statements within each area are set out as essential minimum expectations and may be enhanced by teachers, depending on the specific context of their school (St. Mary's University College Belfast, 2021). The challenge for the IM sector remains in place, therefore, to identify distinctive competences that apply in its own settings and align these to the updated framework. Scholars argue (Guerrero & Lachance, 2018; Tedick & Lyster, 2020) for the importance of aligning specialist frameworks to other core professional standards and competences required for accreditation. The analysis of IM teachers' perspectives on specific immersion competencies will contribute to a similar competence model that can be further considered as a resource for the sector.

In the ROI, the Department of Education is currently formulating a policy on Irish-medium education (outside of the Gaeltacht) to support immersion teacher professional growth, immersion educational provision, and student outcomes.

This development will support other strategic documents that extend to the wider professional community. For example, in accordance with Section 38 of the Teaching Council Acts 2001-2015, the policy document, *Céim: Standards for initial teacher education* (Teaching Council, 2020), sets out the requirements which all programmes of qualification for teaching in Ireland must meet in order to gain accreditation from the Teaching Council. The integrated professional induction framework, *Droichead* (Teaching Council, 2017) aims to support the professional learning of newly qualified teachers during the induction phase. Since teacher identity and agency are viewed as core elements to be cultivated in all initial teacher education programmes, the identification of a profession-specific body of knowledge that informs practice relating to immersion-specific competences is critical to advance and complement this work.

The Current Study

The changing landscape of teacher-education provision for the IM sector, particularly in more recent times in the ROI, has sharpened the focus on the professional needs of IM professionals (Mac Corraidh, 2021; Ní Dhiorbháin & Ó Duibhir, 2016; Ó Ceallaigh & Ó Broilcháin, 2020; Ó Ceallaigh & Ó Laoire, 2021; Ó Ceallaigh & Ní Chonchúir, 2021; Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2019; Ó Duibhir, 2018). The wider educational community presents a shared view that evidence of professional competences, considered essential for practitioners in immersion education, would be a useful planning resource to inform IM teacher policy and strengthen professional exchange and knowledge-based practice in schools (De Brún, 2022; Mhic Aoidh, 2019; Nic Aindriú et al., 2022). The research described in this article was undertaken as part of a cross-border project supported by the Standing Conference for Teacher Education North and South (SCoTENS). It set out to produce an overlay of specific competences to fully reflect expectations for the IM practitioner and contribute to a comprehensive professional profile for IM teachers.

The aim of the study was to identify the IM ideal knowledge base, i.e., distinctive professional competences, for immersion-education teachers in Ireland. The principal research questions, informed by the literature review, are:

- What are the distinctive professional competences that are considered essential for IM teachers from an IM teacher-informed perspective?
- How are these immersion-specific competences manifested in practice?

Methodology

Ethical approval for the study was sought and secured from St. Mary's University College, Belfast. A mixed-methods research design was used to collect data from key stakeholders across the continuum of IM education in NI and in the ROI. Student teachers, practising teachers, principals, and initial teacher education providers (n =

78) took part in the study which combined data from an extensive online questionnaire, a student-teacher symposium, semi-structured interviews, and focus-group interviews. This article reports on the views of teachers who participated in semi-structured interviews ($n = 8$) and is therefore based on only one of the data sources in the larger study.

Participants

IM teachers at all career stages, North and South, were invited to contribute voluntarily to the research, by means of purposive sampling, which was used to capture the heterogeneity and typicality of this professional group. Informed consent was sought and anonymity guaranteed via the use of pseudonyms and unique participant numbers. Confidentiality and privacy were assured. Eight 40-minute semi-structured interviews were conducted online with primary and post-primary teachers from a variety of IM contexts (four from NI – two primary and two post-primary, four from the ROI – two primary and two post-primary) to gain a practising IM teacher-informed perspective. A profile of the participants is presented in Table 1. The interviews were conducted in Irish and recorded through MS teams (see Appendix A for a summary of the interview questions).

TABLE 1

Profile of IM Teachers

| Participant | Area | Sector level | IM teaching experience (no. of years) | Teacher's first language (L1) | School type |
|-------------|-----------------|--------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------|
| 1 | ROI | Primary | 8 | English | Gaelscoil |
| 2 | ROI | Primary | 19 | English | Gaelscoil |
| 3 | NI | Primary | 14 | English | Gaelscoil |
| 4 | NI | Primary | 18 | English | IM unit |
| 5 | ROI (Gaeltacht) | Post-primary | 30 | Irish | IM Gaeltacht |
| 6 | ROI | Post-primary | 34 | English | Gaelcholáiste |
| 7 | NI | Post-primary | 27 | Irish | Gaelcholáiste |
| 8 | NI | Post-primary | 14 | English | Gaelcholáiste |

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and a thematic analysis of the data was undertaken by the two researchers involved in the study. Themes were identified through an

iterative, back-and-forth process of open, axial, and selective coding (Saldaña, 2014) through reading and rereading all data. Through a succession of examinations of the relationship between codes, some became subsets of others and were amalgamated (Cohen et al., 2011). The central, agreed-upon, themes in relation to immersion-specific competences were defined and labelled. In the larger study, data were analysed to allow the researchers to identify views of each participant group (for example, post-primary or primary principals, teacher educators, student teachers, post-primary or primary teachers), and highlight commonalities between groups of participants as well as issues where diverse or contrasting observations were made.

Findings and Discussion

Three broad themes emerged from the analysis – target language competence, knowledge and understanding of IM pedagogy, and vision and values, from which IM-specific competences were derived. Teachers' critical discussion of these subsets of competences had depth and substance, and spanned an extensive range of more detailed insights. Findings will now be considered with examples of views expressed to illustrate some of the key theme-related issues raised.

Target Language Competence

Teachers were aware of the importance of their own linguistic competence and their responsibility as a main role model for pupils' acquisition of Irish:

Ach le blianta, le taithí, thuig tú go raibh rudaí níos tábhactaí agus níos práinní i gceist ó thaobh an chineál teanga de.....agus is dócha gur thuig mé gur mise tobar na teanga sa rang agus is dócha, an chuid is mó den am, an t-aon fhoinsí amháin a bhí ag na páistí ar bhonn laethúil

As you gain experience, you come to understand the importance of issues relating to the language.... and probably I understood that I was the source of language for the class, and most of the time I was the only language source for the children on a daily basis (Primary teacher).

Seven of the eight participants made explicit references to teachers' Irish, sharing different perspectives on the importance of a high standard of proficiency. Most considered teachers' enhanced language competence as an ongoing professional objective inextricably linked to a teacher's sense of confidence. Three participants reflected specifically on the newly qualified teacher's diffidence about language competence, outlining some of the steps taken by them, or colleagues, to build language proficiency. Participants also made explicit connections between the language competence of a teacher and pupils' progression:

Feicim i gcónaí nach mbíonn daoine muiníneach ó thaobh Gaeilge s'acu féin nuair a thosaíonn siad agus tá sin lárnach ó thaobh an teagaisc de. Caithfidh siad a gcuid Gaeilge féin a fhorbairt ionas go bhfuil Gaeilge mhaith ag na daltaí chomh maith

I always notice that people are not confident about their own Irish at the beginning of their career, and that is pivotal to teaching. They have to develop their own Irish so that the children can also acquire good Irish (Post-primary teacher).

Participants' views reflect much of the evidence, presented in academic literature, of a connection between the immersion teacher's linguistic competence and the pupil's learning (Mac Corraidh, 2021; Mhic Aoidh, 2019; Ó Ceallaigh & Ní Shéaghdha, 2017; RSM McClure Watters et al., 2019).

Teachers' competence in the target language also encompasses teachers' metalinguistic knowledge and understanding of the structures of the language. Ó Duibhir et al. (2016) conclude their study of explicit form-based instruction of grammar to IM pupils, by highlighting the importance of teacher knowledge, including explicit knowledge of the grammar of the target language. The criticality of a high standard of teacher Irish to include the ability to manipulate the language, and to articulate a message in multiple ways, was recognised in this study. One of the participants, a modern languages teacher, noted that a linguist has an advantage in their understanding of how languages work:

Go bhféadfaí díriú isteach ar ghnéithe áirithe den teanga agus den struchtúr teanga

A language teacher can focus on specific aspects of the language and the structure of the language (Post-primary teacher).

Other post-primary participants from non-language teaching areas also perceived themselves as language teachers and discussed examples of manipulating the language to facilitate better comprehension of scientific concepts. A primary-school participant provided insights into the complexities inherent in language-related challenges, such as the specialist language that is required to teach the curriculum and to prepare pupils for standardised tests.

Knowledge and Understanding of Immersion Education and Pedagogy

The complexity of this theme raises multiple issues for consideration including the relationship between the two languages, pupils' home language (L1), which is usually English, and Irish as the target language of the school (L2). Teachers emphasised the need for creativity, tenacity, and strategic thinking in order to encourage pupils to

use the target language. They saw this as a constant process that can monopolise a teacher's time:

An rud is measa, caithim an méid ama i rith an lae ag iarraidh páistí a spreagadh Gaeilge a labhairt....Is rud ollmhór é sin. Is jab eile é

The worst thing is the amount of time needed to motivate the children to speak Irish....That is a huge thing. It is another job (Primary teacher).

At the same time, teachers considered it important to promote the use of Irish in positive ways. It is not just sociolinguistic patterns of language behaviour that are of interest, but teachers showed their commitment to creating an appreciation of Irish and nurturing a love for the language among the pupils:

Tá polasaí againn nach mbíonn muid ag tabhairt amach pionóis agus mar sin de, maidir le daltaí ag labhairt i mBéarla, tá tú ag iarraidh grá a chothú don Ghaeilge. Tá tú ag iarraidh go mbeidh siad ag iarraidh Gaeilge a labhairt ach caithfidh tusa bheith airdeallach air sin an t-am ar fad...iad a spreagadh i mbun comhrá i nGaeilge, iad a spreagadh i mbun freagraí a thabhairt ar ais i nGaeilge

We have a policy not to penalise pupils for speaking English, but rather to nurture a love for Irish. You want the children to want to speak Irish but that requires constant attention...to motivate them to converse in Irish...to encourage them to respond to questions in Irish (Post-primary teacher).

The pressure of time resulting from sustained intense efforts to orchestrate language use is one of the factors that differentiates the IM school from other schools, and impacts on the teacher's role. Another participant made the same observation about sustained motivating efforts required of the IM teacher, referring also to the understanding of immersion principles that underpin these efforts:

Tá saineolas agus scileanna ar leith ag teastáil is dócha chun tabhairt faoin ngné sin atá difriúil ón ghnáthscoil, scoil Bhéarla. Ní bhíonn ar na daoine sna gnáthscoileanna am a chaitheamh ag gríosú agus ag iarraidh páistí a mhealladh le Gaeilge a labhairt, ag déanamh na gcomórtas seo. Dom féin, tógaann sé am

Specialist knowledge and skills are needed to address that aspect of IM education that is distinctive from the ordinary school, the English (-speaking) school. Those (teachers) don't have to spend time coaxing and persuading children to speak Irish. For me, that takes time (Primary teacher).

All eight teachers who took part in the study considered a teacher's understanding of immersion education to be of fundamental importance:

Mar a dúirt mé, mar mhúinteoir, caithfidh tusa bheith eolach ar chúrsaí teanga agus cursa oideolaíochta sa tumoideeachas agus taobh thiar de sin arís, go teoiriciúil, an dtuigeann achan duine a thagann isteach trí dhoirse s'againne go bhfuil difear ann, go bhfuil buntáistí ar leith ann ó thaobh foghlama trí mheán na Gaeilge agus cén dóigh a mbaineann tú úsáid as na buntáistí sin sa seomra ranga

As I said, as a teacher you must be knowledgeable about language and immersion pedagogy. So, in theory, everyone in our school understands that there is a difference, (there are) advantages associated with learning through Irish, and they know how to avail of those advantages in the classroom (Post-primary teacher).

In recent decades, research findings and academic literature have advanced our understanding of key components in essential immersion competences (Mac Corraigh, 2008; Ní Chathasaigh & Ó Ceallaigh, 2021; Ó Duibhir, 2018; Péterváry et al., 2014). This insight into the complexities inherent in the relationship between teacher knowledge and skills, characteristic of the effective immersion programme, was evident in all interviews. In the view of a participant employed in an Irish-medium unit within an English-medium host school, the essential immersion knowledge base includes an understanding of different immersion models. Tedick and Lyster (2020) affirm the importance of this aspect of teacher knowledge, as a strand in the teacher's knowledge base. Researchers agree that specialist knowledge, strategies, and attitudes are interdependent and intersect in dynamic ways (Cammarata & Cavanagh, 2018; Cammarata & Ó Ceallaigh, 2020; Ó Ceallaigh & Ní Shéaghdha, 2017; Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2019).

Vision and Values

The vision and values discussed by the IM teachers were intrinsically interconnected with their knowledge and pedagogical skills. They demonstrated a commitment to creating a supportive Irish language environment for pupils, within and beyond the classroom. Although this responsibility was demanding, they were intolerant of missed opportunities to promote the use of Irish among pupils, such as a teacher who ignores pupils talking in English, instead of employing strategies to switch the conversation back to Irish. Four of the teachers referred to "ag cothú grá don Ghaeilge i measc na ndaltaí" (cultivating a love for Irish among the pupils) to describe aspects of their role as IM teachers. Sharing values with the pupils was a priority for those interviewed and the centrality of the pupils in their vision for IM education emerged during discussions:

B'fhéidir go mbaineann sé le fíos agus b'fhéidir pearsantacht. Is dócha, má chreideann tú sa rud, má chreideann tú an luach, cé chomh luachmhar is atá sé, go mbeifeá bródúil as. Ceapaim go gcaithfidh sé a bheith i do chroí,

i do bholg, go gcreideann sibh go láidir. Creidimid mar mhúinteoirí sa tumoideachas, go gcreidimid go bhfuil luach faoi leith ag baint leis an taithí sin do na daltaí atá os ár gcomhair

Perhaps it relates to a vision or personality. Probably, if you believe in something, in its value, that it has value, then you will be proud of it. I believe it is in your heart, your gut, so you believe totally in it. As teachers, we believe in immersion education and we believe that the experience is particularly valuable for our pupils (Post-primary teacher).

The value set of the teachers included an acknowledgement of the importance of cultivating a positive relationship with parents. At times, interactions with parents and the community require sensitivity, a view that was expressed in the following comment:

Caithfidh dearcadh dearfach a bheith againn maidir leis an teanga a chothú i measc na bpáistí agus na dtuismitheoirí freisin. Caithfimid bheith báúil leis an phobal níl Gaeilge ag na tuismitheoirí agus caithfimid iad a mhealladh agus na páistí a mhealladh le Gaeilge a labhairt

We need to have a positive attitude towards developing the language among students and the parents also. We need to be sympathetic with the community parents do not have Irish and we should motivate them and the children to speak Irish (Primary teacher).

The benefit to pupils' progression was recognised by the teachers when parents are empowered to support their children's language development and learning (Kavanagh, 2013; Nig Uidhir et al., 2016):

Motháonn tú go bhfuil tionchar na dtuismitheoirí iontach tábhachtach fostá agus tá sé mar jab breise ag múinteoirí Gaelscoileanna mar caithfidh muid tuismitheoirí a spreagadh fostá chun tacaíocht a thabhairt do pháistí agus an teanga atá siad ag foghlaim

You feel that the influence of the parents is very important also and it is an additional task for the teachers in Gaelscoileanna because we have to motivate them to support their children as they learn the language (Primary teacher).

Teachers observed a lack of confidence among some parents when faced with the IM environment and referred to the effort that is required to overcome this barrier. The important goal of supporting parents to be active partners in their child's immersion education also presented one of the main challenges for teachers:

Níl Gaeilge ag formhór ár gcuid tuismitheoirí ach tá tú ag iarraidh iad a fháiltiú isteach agus dul amach as do bhealach le bheith fáiltiúil

Most of our parents do not have Irish but you try to welcome them in to the school. So you really go out of your way to be welcoming (Post-primary teacher).

The sensitivity to parents' needs was intuitive. Teachers described strategies for encouraging parents of young children to bring them to IM social and cultural events in the wider community, strengthening their exposure to Irish and opportunities for use. Issues around parental partnerships, raised by the teachers, reflect the complexities discussed in academic research (Kavanagh & Hickey, 2012; Mhic Mhathúna & Nic Fhionnlaoich, 2021; Nig Uidhir et al., 2016).

Early years' education in the IM sector is of strategic value as it provides the foundation for learning Irish throughout the education system. Many of the immersion-specific competences identified by teachers are considered critical to success in the early years' setting:

Sílim go bhfuil ról sa bhrefis againn ag bun na scoile. Déanaimid seo tríd an súgradh ach tá jab breise againn mar tá muid ag cur eispéiris foghlama ar fáil ach tá an teanga i gcroílár mar sprioc againn. Tá sé iontach tábhachtach go bhfuil muid i gconaí ag pleanáil don teanga, ag cur cuid mhór gníomhaíochtaí suimiúla ar fáil do na páistí le seans a thabhairt dóibh an Ghaeilge a chluinstin agus an Ghaeilge a chleachtadh

I think we have an additional job at the junior side of the school. We do this through play and we have an extra job because we are providing learning experiences with the language at the heart, as our goal. It is very important that we are always planning for the language, providing a wide range of interesting activities for children to enable them to use the Irish they hear and to practise it (Primary teacher).

Another dimension to the teachers' strategic vision for Irish and IM education reflected a commitment to protect the standard and use of Irish in the Gaeltacht:

Tá na múinteoirí sa scoil Gaeltachta chomh bródúil as an Ghaeilge atá acu. Le hocht mbliana anuas – ní tréimhse fhada í sin i saol múinteora – is cuimhin liom cé chomh saibhir agus a bhí Gaeilge na ndaltaí. Ach thugas faoi deara leis an chéad bhliain i mbliana go raibh an dinimic athraithe cuid mhór..... Muna n-éiríonn linn díriú isteach air seo i gceart agus tabhairt faoi le feasacht agus le saineolas de shaghas éigin, beidh fadhbanna ann thíos an bóthar

Teachers in the Gaeltacht school are so proud of their Irish. For the past eight years, and that's a long time in a teacher's life, I remember how rich the children's Irish was. But, this year, with first year [students], I see that dynamic changing a lot.... If we don't manage to address that properly, informed by awareness and expertise, we will have problems down the road (Post-primary teacher).

Other teachers, from outside Gaeltacht areas, referred to the Gaeltacht as a resource that supported their own professional development.

During interviews, teachers discussed the importance of finding opportunities for reflection on the IM profession and on ways to improve their practice. They gave many examples of school-based initiatives to support professional learning and considered responsibility for these initiatives to lie with the individual teacher as well as with management. One teacher described research projects conducted in their school and the resulting culture of enquiry that was created to inform change:

Tá X againn anois agus sin ról s'aici mar Cheannaire Foghlama. Tá sise ag amharc agus ag déanamh taighde ar: "cad é an chuma atá ar theagasc atá fiúntach agus éifeachtach ó thaobh an tumoideachais de?"

We now have X (on the staff) and that is her role as a Learning Leader. She is researching the question: "what does effective, meaningful immersion teaching look like?" (Post-primary teacher).

The IM teachers who took part in this study embraced a vision that was transformative and outward looking. The breadth of that vision is reflected in the range of themes and associated teacher competences referenced in the discussion above and presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2*Essential Competences for IM teachers, by Theme*

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 | Target Language Competence |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accuracy and richness of teacher's language • Language awareness – understanding linguistic structures of Irish and having the skill to manipulate the language and simplify its form to an age-appropriate level for pupils |
| 2 | Knowledge and Understanding of Immersion Education and Pedagogy |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding the principles and practices of immersion education • Understanding the process of second-language acquisition • Extensive range of teaching strategies that promote pupil understanding and delivery of the curriculum in a target language • Specialist approach to content-language integrated teaching, informed by research • Differentiated teaching that takes cognisance of pupils' diverse home language backgrounds • Specialist approach to teaching in IM early years • Effective collaboration with IM classroom assistants • Negotiating the relationship between Irish and English and resourcefulness in use of pupils' full linguistic repertoire |
| 3 | Vision and Values |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competences specific to the IM unit: maximising opportunities for shared professional learning; problem solving; administrative challenges; promoting understanding of IM education among colleagues • Commitment to IM ethos and cultural heritage • Recognition of the Gaeltacht as an important yet fragile resource, impacting on prioritisation of language competence among teachers • Leadership for improvement of teaching and learning. Application of process of reflection, identifying problem, researching and planning solution. Facilitating communication between schools for shared learning • Commitment to continuous professional learning. Understanding of importance of partnership with parents and how to inform and guide parents to support learning of IM pupils |

Conclusion

The research described in this article, and in the broader literature, suggests that the nature of IM teaching is extremely complex, important to study, and yet to be fully understood (Ó Ceallaigh et al., 2019; Nic Aindriú et al., 2021; Ó Duibhir, 2011). The identification of key values, pedagogical skills, and knowledge specific to the IM context is necessary, however, for promoting high levels of academic achievement and bilingual/biliteracy development. Effective pedagogy depends not only on behavioural change and the acquisition of new knowledge – it is intricately shaped,

as revealed in this research study, by unique personal and professional IM values, dispositions, contextual factors, and roles and relationships in and beyond the IM classroom. The development of supportive professional cultures within which IM teachers can learn is vitally important to cultivate essential immersion-specific competences for the IM sector. Opportunities for IM and Gaeltacht teachers to engage in ongoing, in-depth, systematic, and reflective examinations of their practice are critical. Teacher professional learning experiences should involve opportunities for collaboration, professional dialogue, and analysis. Both the quality of engagement, and the data in the larger study, from which the teacher interviews analysed in this article were drawn, were enriched by the opportunities for stakeholders, principals, teachers, and students, from diverse IM settings throughout Ireland, to meet one another and participate in shared fieldwork events.

The authors acknowledge the small scale of the study presented here. There is no attempt to generalise findings. Instead, the rich data shared by eight highly experienced teachers from diverse IM settings are offered as insightful and valuable feedback that has the potential to inform important further development of the IM sector. The generous contributions of the teachers are greatly appreciated.

North-South partnerships were found to be especially valuable to share, cultivate, and learn about the context-adequate use of immersion-specific knowledge. The establishment of closer collaboration offers potential for further shared learning and shared resources. This will support IM teachers across the island of Ireland to acquire the specialised knowledge required to enact the critical content-appropriate pedagogies of the IM sector.

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Appendix A

Teacher Interview

Ceisteanna Agallaimh ar Leith Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Próifil an Mhúinteora Teacher Profile

- Cé mhéad bliain atá tú ag múineadh?
- Ar mhúin tú in aon scoil eile roimhe seo? Scoil Ghaeltachta/Lán-Ghaeilge/Scoil Bhéarla?
- Cad iad na cailíochtaí atá agat?
- An bhfuil Gaeilge agat ó dhúchas?
- Cúlra scolaíochta
- Cad iad na hábhair a mhúineann tú? (iar-bhunscoil amháin)
- Ar ullmhaigh do chlár oideachais tosaigh tú chun ábhair a mhúineadh trí mheán na Gaeilge?
- Cad iad na freagrachtaí sa bhréis atá ort mar mhúinteoir i scoil lán-Ghaeilge/Ghaeltachta?
- Ar fhreastal tú ar fhorbairt ghairmiúil a bhaineann le d'ábhar a mhúineadh trí Ghaeilge? (iar-bhunscoil amháin)
- Ar fhreastal tú ar fhorbairt ghairmiúil a bhaineann le do chumas teanga a chur chun cinn mar mhúinteoir ábhair i ngaelcholáiste/mhúinteoir i ngaelsccoil?

Téama 1 Treoirlínte Reatha Current Guidelines

“Teachers will have developed, in Irish medium and other bilingual contexts, sufficient linguistic and pedagogical knowledge to teach the curriculum”

- Cad atá i gceist le ráiteas mar seo, dar leat?
- An bhfuil sainscileanna eile i gceist nach bhfuil clúdaithe i ráiteas mar seo?

Téama 2 Croíchumais an Mhúinteora Tumoideachais Immersion Teacher Core Competences

- Cad iad na sainscileanna/saineolas atá ag teastáil ó mhúinteoirí an tumoideachais chun teagasc agus foghlaim ar ardchaighdeán a chur chun cinn trí Ghaeilge?
- Cad iad na toscaí a chuireann isteach ort agus tú ag teagasc ábhar agus teanga le chéile? (tuiscint an ábhair, úsáid na teanga)
- Cad é an dúshlán is mó a bhíonn le sárú agat agus tú ag teagasc d'ábhar trí mheán na Gaeilge?

Téama 3 Sainscileanna don Oideachas Ilteangach, Ilchultúrtha Specific Skills for Multilingual and Multicultural Education

- Cad iad sainscileanna an tumoideachais a chuireann aon chomhthéacs oideachais atá ilteangach agus ilchultúrtha chun cinn?

Téama 4 An Múinteoir Tumoideachais mar Cheannaire

The Immersion Teacher as Leader

- Cad iad na riachtanais um fhorbairt ghairmiúil atá fós agat?
- Conas a chuirfeá na sainscileanna sin chun cinn?
- Cé atá freagrach as na sainscileanna seo a fhorbairt?
- Conas a chuireann tú an fhoghlaim chun cinn i measc na foirne?
