

“It’s very hard to know how much is the EAL and how much is the learning difficulty”: Challenges in organising support for EAL learners in Irish primary schools

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Abstract

The growth in linguistic diversity in Irish primary schools presents significant opportunities. Learners for whom English is an additional language (EAL) contribute to the rich tapestry of our classrooms. However, ensuring that their achievement is adequately supported requires attention in both policy and practice. Part of a broader study of EAL in Irish primary classrooms, the present article reports on how teachers from seven schools went about organising support for EAL learners at a time of significant curriculum and policy change. Findings relating to the use of support hours, resourcing, special education needs and assessment are discussed.

Introduction

Since the turn of the millenium Irish schools have continued to grow in their cultural and linguistic diversity. When this trend first emerged relatively substantial investment was put into developing guidelines, support materials and assessments for new English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners (e.g. *Guidelines for Teachers*; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2006). However, with the closure of Integrate Ireland Language and Training (IILT) in 2008 and cutbacks in language support allocations, professional development and resources (Kitching 2006, Nowlan 2008, DES 2012),

mainstream and support teachers face a number of challenges in meeting the language and literacy needs of EAL learners. The current article examines challenges relating to the organisation of support for these learners, drawing on qualitative data from sixteen teachers in seven linguistically diverse schools.

Supporting EAL Learners: Policy, research and trends

The way in which EAL learners are supported requires careful thought and attention if it is to be both effective and inclusive. Internationally, the literature has recognised the importance of building on learners' strengths and supporting diversity. For example, de Jong (2010) argues that the following principles should be visible in support for EAL learners:

- Schooling should affirm bilingual learners' identities
- Language and literacy in the second language should build upon strengths in the first language (additive bilingualism)
- The linguistic and cultural integration of learners should be given precedence

These principles should be borne in mind when considering *how* a given system or school caters for linguistically diverse learners.

The education system in Ireland is still a relative newcomer to supporting linguistic and cultural diversity. A number of studies have pointed to challenges in providing appropriate support for our changing school population (e.g. Wallen and Holmes 2006, Lyons 2010, Smyth *et al* 2009, Murtagh and Francis 2011). For example, Nowlan (2008) and Lyons (2010) both reported a tendency for teachers to adopt monolingual, deficit approaches to EAL teaching, where the acquisition of English was given prominence, and home languages were afforded little value. A lack of awareness regarding diverse home literacy practices alongside limited teacher knowledge of EAL learners' first language proficiency can limit the potential of cross-lingual transfer in the classroom (Kitching 2006, Ó Duibhir and Cummins 2012) and

influence children's perceptions of their home language (Connaughton-Crean and Ó Duibhir 2017). The *Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Science [DES] 1999) was written for a system that pre-dated multilingualism, and therefore provided little support and direction for teachers in this domain. However, the recent publication of the *Primary Language Curriculum* for junior infants to second class (NCCA 2015) and the release of a draft of the language curriculum for third to sixth class (NCCA 2018) has led to a more formal curricular acknowledgment of our changed classrooms, and the linguistic potential they offer.

The way in which additional posts (beyond mainstream class teachers) have been allocated to schools has evolved substantially in recent years. Until 2012, schools were allocated specific language support teachers, based on the EAL profile of individual children in attendance. Traditionally, much of these resources were diverted to withdrawal, where small groups of children received specific language support away from their classroom (DES Inspectorate 2012, Smyth *et al* 2009). In 2012, this allocation was combined with general learning support hours to provide a "simplified allocation" to each school (GAM/EAL hours DES, 2012, p. 6). More recently, Circular 0013/2017 (DES 2017a) gave effect to a new, single allocation of support resources to a school based on its individual profile, combining hours that were previously allocated separately for low-incidence special needs with hours allocated for general learning and language support. Under this model Special Education Teachers (SETs) have responsibility for supporting, not only children with special educational needs (SEN), but also children learning English as an additional language. The rationale for the new model was to provide teaching resources on a more equitable basis, and to provide increased autonomy for schools in deploying these resources (National Council for Special Education 2014). The option for a school to make an appeal, based on particularly high numbers of EAL learners was retained (c.f. DES 2017b).

While previous circulars (e.g. 0015/2009 DES 2009) gave quite limited guidance to schools on supporting EAL learners, comparatively speaking, circular 0013/2017 offers even less guidance. The circular does little beyond recommending that “Schools should ensure that the additional Special Educational Needs Teaching supports are used in their entirety to support pupils identified with special educational needs, learning support needs, and additional literacy needs such as English Additional Language Support” (p.21). An additional document, entitled *Guidelines for Primary Schools: Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools* (DES 2017c), was published to offer support and examples for schools in organising their newly configured support allocation. This document provides little specific direction on supporting EAL, beyond referring readers to IILT resources (dating from 2006) and mentioning both ‘small group support’ and ‘in-class support’ for a child mentioned in a worked example.

How, then, are EAL learners supported within the new allocation model? These language learners are comprehended by the three key actions for schools in deploying support (DES 2017d):

1. Identification of need
2. Meeting need
3. Monitoring and reviewing outcomes

The degree to which EAL learners are visible in the documentation supporting these actions is concerning. For example, the *identification of need* relies extensively on schools using the *Continuum of Support* (CoS). Yet the main document on which the CoS is founded, *Special Educational Needs: A Continuum of Support* (National Educational Psychological Service 2007) makes no reference to EAL learners. The *meeting needs* and *monitoring and reviewing outcomes* actions focus heavily on the types of teaching and learning that one might traditionally associate with learning support or resource hours. However, EAL and SEN

should not be conflated. Evidence already exists to show that some teachers poorly distinguish the two (DES Inspectorate 2012, Nowlan 2008). Internationally, the difficulty in distinguishing between language needs relating to typical second language development and SEN has been well documented (Zetlin *et al*, 2011). Teachers working with EAL learners are likely to encounter difficulties with decision-making at many stages, including early identification, referral, and assessment (Ortiz and Artiles 2010 Zetlin *et al* 2011). For example, without adequate knowledge of both second language acquisition and the nature of language disabilities, a teacher may identify incorrect causes for a child's perceived limited language use in the classroom. Low expectations for EAL learners, alongside culturally and linguistically unresponsive teaching, can lead to lower achievement for this group of students (Zetlin *et al* 2011).

It would appear from this brief review of the literature that provision for EAL learners could not yet be described as 'mature'. In 2006, Wallen and Holmes wrote that "the future academic and linguistic development of children attempting to learn English as an additional language in Irish primary schools depends on factors such as conditions prevailing in particular schools and luck in terms of space allocation, teacher qualifications, interest and commitment" (p.158). The current study considers if some of these factors are still at play.

Methodology

This study reports initial findings from interviews conducted with sixteen teachers working in diverse, multilingual schools in Ireland. Data were gathered by means of semi-structured interviews, which ran for an average of forty minutes. Schools that were known to the researchers in a professional capacity were purposively selected, on the basis of their high degree of linguistic diversity. A minimum of two teachers was interviewed in each of the seven schools included, in order to compare experiences and perspectives from within the same setting. Participants consisted of both classroom teachers, support teachers and one

school principal, ranging from three to twenty-eight years' experience teaching. The sample consisted of both catholic and multi-denominational schools, located in cities and large urban centres in different parts of the country. All interviews were transcribed and analysed using the thematic analysis process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). It should be noted that the interviews took place before and during the period of transition to the new SET allocation model.

Findings

While a number of themes emerged from this analysis, only data relating to the organisation and provision of support for EAL, and the complexity of working with children experiencing learning difficulties *in addition to* their EAL profile are reported in the current article.

Variation in the deployment of support hours

In the context of significantly more devolved decision-making for the allocation of support resources, it is interesting to note the wide variety of in-school support models that were used across a relatively small number of schools. For example, one school had moved to a model involving predominantly in-class support for EAL learners, realised through *Aistear* (NCCA 2009) in the infant classes and team teaching for literacy and numeracy lessons in senior classes. The use of in-class support was strongly supported by one teacher in the school, who saw little value in withdrawal for EAL learners:

You might just have taught them *pencil* outside but then they went back into class and they couldn't remember what the word was. -*School 1, Teacher 2*

The difficulty of having children miss important content in their home class, during withdrawal, was also raised. However, while teachers acknowledged benefits of in-class support, they also cited challenges. These included ensuring that in-class support was targeted

enough to develop children's oral language skills, rather than focusing on print-based skills alone.

Other schools continued to adopt a withdrawal approach; teachers felt that it was necessary due to the focused attention small groups afforded. Teachers reported a tendency for EAL learners in older classes to be withdrawn, rather than supported in-class. Where withdrawal did occur, it wasn't necessarily to focus on *language* alone; it was regularly combined with literacy support. Some teachers indicated that a combination of withdrawal and in-class support was in use. For example, teachers reported working with a group of children in withdrawal for part of the week and providing in-class support for them at another point in the week, to observe how well children could apply new language skills in the classroom context. This involved pre-teaching vocabulary and language in significant collaboration between the classroom teacher:

so they've gone out the week before and they've learned the vocab and they've practised ... the conversations ... with the EAL teacher in the withdrawal setting and then that same EAL teacher goes in-class during Aistear time the following week and their job is to ... support the children with EAL to use the vocabulary in the context, so I think that's really really effective.

–*School 2, Teacher 2*

Another school used their support allocation to organise station teaching, in which EAL learners were afforded extra attention, in smaller groups, within the home classroom:

We'd work maybe, a small group with oral language so that's a perfect opportunity ... for EAL children when there's a small group working together with one teacher... you can really chat to them and ... really see where they are because sometimes it can be very difficult when you've a class of thirty children sitting in front of you. - *School 3, Teacher 2*

While teachers were engaging purposefully with trialling and amending approaches to support EAL learners, a degree of uncertainty existed around what might be considered good

practice in this area. Some teachers pondered if a separate, immersion programme may better serve their students:

... well do we take all the children that come and give them an eight week intensive English course? Or do we keep them in their classes, do we move them? Send them down to a lower level class to do the English? ... I suppose it's, it's something that we constantly have to look [at]. – *School 2, Teacher 1*

While the nature of additional support varied substantially, and many teachers expressed uncertainty about exactly *how* they should allocate teaching resources, the work of additional teachers in supporting EAL learners was seen to be invaluable:

I would ... not have managed my few years here if it wasn't for the support that either comes into the classroom, or for the child being withdrawn -*School 3, Teacher 2*

Level of Teacher Resources for supporting EAL

Many teachers commented on the level of resourcing provided to support EAL learners in school, referring to the *number* of teachers provided, in particular. Schools reported extending support for EAL learners beyond the two years recommended in the relevant circular. While teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the idea that two years of support was sufficient, they nonetheless worked within their resources to provide complementary teaching:

In Ireland, they're only supposed to get 2 and ½ years of EAL help. But we do stretch that.

Because they fall under the learning support umbrella then. -*School 5, Teacher 2*

In general, teachers felt that the level of support provided for EAL was insufficient:

[We] have a high percentage of EAL students but we're still looking at the same support network and support service and it's not really tallying with the numbers that you'd have. -

School 3, Teacher 1

Looking ahead to the implementation of the new model, some teachers expressed concerns about how resources would be best allocated to EAL:

The difficulty will be I suppose, on how we come to that decision. What criteria we're going to use to actually decide who gets what amount of hours. And then, all the backlash of that from parents. How is that going to pan out? - *School 6, Teacher 2*

Challenges in distinguishing EAL from other special educational needs

In line with the international research, teachers in this study cited difficulties in distinguishing between challenges relating to second language acquisition and difficulties relating to SEN, or speech and language difficulties.

Some teachers identified the significance of first language learning for second language learning, and how this may inform their assessment:

And if they're not good at their own language it's not a good sign. – *School 5, Teacher 2*

Yet linguistic diversity also caused confusion for some teachers. For example, the types of utterances that one might expect from a beginning language learner raised questions:

...was speaking to a parent today who's concerned about her child and how he's doing in school, and we were having a conversation on whether we think he has a learning need or is it that he has severe EAL needs because he's speaking three languages at home and she says that a lot of the time he will come out with all three languages in one sentence. - *School 1, Teacher 1*

Teachers acknowledged that their own level of expertise and knowledge of language acquisition often made it difficult for them to accurately pinpoint the nature of a child's difficulties:

I don't have specialist training enough to, to be able to know what to do. Like it's very hard to know how much is the EAL and how much is the learning difficulty, like what is actually causing the... the greatest difficulty for the child. – *School 2, Teacher 2*

When teachers, based on concerns about a EAL learner's progress, sought a referral for external support, they encountered further perceived challenges:

And we would come across a lot of issues trying to get children assessed who we feel there would be, it's more than EAL, but the psychologists won't diagnose anything. – *School 2, Teacher 1*

Use of assessment data

The new support allocation model places emphasis on the use of appropriate assessment information to inform decision-making. However, participants expressed significant concerns about how the primary assessment tool for EAL in Irish schools, the Primary School Assessment Kit (PSAK IILT 2007) could be used to inform teaching and learning:

We use the PSAKs which are extremely out-dated. When you've a test that shows a pinafore and a chalk board, when they are not in existence any more in a school. – *School 2, Teacher 1*

One teacher indicated that class teachers, receiving the results of the PSAK conducted by support teachers, would not necessarily understand what the scores meant, or how it might inform their instruction. Teachers also expressed significant concern about the amount of time it took to conduct the assessments; time which, they felt, would be better spent on *teaching* children English.

Teachers expressed concerns about the validity of the standardised tests available for literacy and numeracy in Irish schools, as they relate to EAL learners:

because those tests that we have are not designed for the EAL child. And so you're trying to put them into a, something that is not truly reflective of where they're at. – *School 6, Teacher 2*

While teachers' concerns about the nature of standardised tests were notable, they also drew extensively on other assessment measures, including tools like checklists and teacher observation.

Conclusion

While this study is based on a relatively small sample, nonetheless, the findings raise questions about the support available to teachers of EAL learners when implementing the new allocation model. In addition, many of the concerns and challenges reported in previous studies were re-stated by participants.

Participant teachers adopted a variety of approaches to support EAL learners in their school, prior to and during the advent of the new allocation model. While this tallies with the vision for local decision-making on how best to support children's needs, it must be noted that teachers felt, at times, unsure of how best to support EAL learners in their school. A 'trial and error' appeared to be in place, with teachers amending their approaches in response to their successes and failures. However, while the teachers' commitment to trying out and evaluating different approaches is commendable, there is no doubt but that more up-to-date and specific guidance on deploying support hours for EAL would be welcomed by schools. Supporting EALs seems to be an 'add-on' in the new support model documentation and runs the risk of language learners being de-prioritised during in-school decision making.

Teachers in this study expressed concern about the expertise available to support children who experienced delays or difficulties that were not exclusively related to their status as an English language learner. The perceived lack of support, specific to EALs, from external services, along with a lack of EAL training, led to concerns that intervention for children with

additional needs was being delayed. There is a need for more specific, published guidance for both teachers and other professionals, on how EAL learners with *additional difficulties* can be accommodated within schools through the continuum of support. Professional development is needed on ‘regular’ second language acquisition, so that teachers can be confident in their observations of, and interactions with, EAL learners, and understand what may be considered typical or atypical.

In deploying support teachers and navigating children through the continuum of support, schools require access to appropriate assessment tools¹. Teachers in Ireland regularly rely on scores from standardised tests as one of the key sources of information in decision-making around support allocations. Teachers in this study acknowledged their misgivings about using these tests with EAL learners. In order to be useful and trustworthy, assessments must be both valid and reliable. Teachers in this study expressed dissatisfaction with the PSAK, which continues to be used to screen EAL learners in primary schools. If schools are to make fully-informed decisions about how resources are allocated at school level, the assessment measures available to them need to be both up-to-date and sensitive to the strengths and needs of EAL learners.

Future guidance on the SET allocation model needs to go beyond token references to EAL learners. Guidance produced to assist schools in appropriately deploying their support allocation needs to make more explicit reference to *how* EAL learners can be accommodated. The new allocation model offers enormous potential for offering tailored and context-specific support to our linguistically diverse school population. However, professional development and appropriate policy guidance must compliment this provision if the aims of the new model are to be realised.

¹ Schools in the UK choose from a range of assessment tools e.g. Cambridge’s starters, movers and flyers programme and assessments.

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