



Supporting English as an Additional Language Pupils with Special Educational Needs/ Additional Educational Needs across the Island of Ireland (SEALSEN)

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About SEALSEN – Supporting English as an Additional Language Pupils with Special Educational Needs/Additional Educational Needs across the Island of Ireland.

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List of Acronyms

AEN	Additional Educational Needs
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CL	Cognition and Learning
DE	Department of Education
EAL	English as an Additional Language
EA	Education Authority
IE	Ireland
LSC	Learning Support Coordinator
NI	Northern Ireland
PLP	Personal Learning Plan
PN	Physical Needs
SBEW	School Behaviour and Emotional Wellbeing
SE	Sensory
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SET	Special Education Teacher
SLCN	Speech, Language and Communication
SENCO	Special Education Needs Coordinator
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

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We look forward to continuing our work together in the pursuit of inclusive, equitable, and culturally responsive education for all students on the island of Ireland and elsewhere.

Executive Summary

Introduction and Background

The purpose of this study as part of the SCOTENS funded research project entitled (Supporting English as an Additional Language pupils with Special Educational Needs/Additional Educational Needs across the Island of Ireland) was to examine how **post-primary schools in Ireland (IE) and Northern Ireland (NI)** identify and support pupils who are learning English as an additional language (EAL) and who also have special or additional educational needs (SEN/AEN)¹. The scope of the research encompasses both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland, reflecting a growing and diverse student population. Within this, the study was motivated by concerns that **existing educational approaches often treat EAL and SEN/AEN supports separately**, leading to fragmented provision of services and supports that are available to EAL pupils with SEN/AEN. It addresses a critical gap in the research by exploring present and future integrated strategies that recognise these pupils' *linguistic and cultural assets* as strengths while meeting their learning needs. The goal of SEALSEN is to inform policymakers and educators on creating more inclusive, equitable education systems for EAL pupils with SEN/AEN.

The research employed a **mixed-methods, explanatory sequential design** to gather data across IE and NI. In **Phase 1**, a survey was distributed to post-primary schools in both jurisdictions (approximately 50 schools; 33 in IE and 17 in NI responded). The survey targeted school staff involved in supporting EAL learners with SEN/AEN – including SEN coordinators (SENCOs), teachers, and school leaders to capture quantitative data on current practices, challenges, and perceptions. In **Phase 2**, qualitative data was collected through focus groups and interviews with educators from a subset of these schools (nine schools in total, with representation from both IE and NI). Participants included SENCOs, mainstream teachers, EAL specialists, and senior leaders, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives on how best to serve the needs of EAL pupils with SEN/AEN.

Following on from this, data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques of which the descriptive results are presented in this report. Following on this, thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview and focus group data.

Findings

The SEALSEN study uncovered numerous **convergent findings that are representative of the challenges and opportunities for EAL Pupils with SEN/AEN in both jurisdictions**.

Identification of EAL Pupils with SEN/AEN

Schools in both jurisdictions face significant difficulties in accurately **identifying EAL pupils who may have SEN/AEN**. Within this, educators rely heavily on informal teacher observation and professional intuition, compensating for the lack of appropriate assessment tools. This over-reliance on informal *gut feeling* methods leads to inconsistencies and the risk of **under identification and misidentification**. A particularly complex challenge is **distinguishing language acquisition difficulties from true learning disorders**. Standardised tests, typically normed on native English speakers, **do not adequately account for second-language development**, and as a result EAL learners can be wrongly assessed either by attributing language-based delays to

¹ In this report, the term SEN/AEN (Special Educational Needs/Additional Educational Needs) is used consistently to refer to pupils requiring additional support in their learning. This choice reflects an effort to be inclusive of terminology used across both Northern Ireland (NI) and the Ireland (IE). While SEN is the established term in NI and AEN is increasingly used in IE, combining the terms acknowledges the evolving language in policy and practice across both jurisdictions. The research team is aware of the differing terminologies in use, as for example the term SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) is used in broader UK contexts, particularly in England. Therefore, the use of SEN/AEN is specifically used throughout this report to ensure clarity and consistency.

cognitive deficits or by overlooking genuine needs due to language barriers. Participants involved in the study, described a *Catch-22* scenario where without language appropriate diagnostic instruments (such as first language assessments), some pupils are not provided with formal SEN assessment because they are still learning English. However, and worryingly, without assessment their needs can remain unsupported.

Both IE and NI participants highlighted that **systemic barriers** such as educational psychologists deferring evaluations until a certain English proficiency is reached can significantly hinder the identification of EAL pupils with SEN/AEN. In this regard, the research reveals that **current systems are ill equipped to distinguish and diagnose overlapping language and learning needs**, indicating an urgent need for better assessment frameworks tailored to EAL students.

In School Support and Inclusive Practices

Once identified, EAL pupils with SEN/AEN require coordinated support within schools. The study found that **in school support strategies are often ad hoc and under-resourced**. Dedicated staff such as SENCOs and EAL teachers work in an under resourced education system to assist these pupils, but formal structures for collaboration are limited. By way of explanation, many schools lack a **holistic, integrated approach** to support where instead, language support and SEN support run in parallel with minimal coordination. Participants noted that effective support **bridges academic, pastoral, and cultural domains** (For example, some schools have innovated by pairing EAL pupils with SEN with *language buddies* or using **multilingual classroom assistants** to observe and aid comprehension). However, these practices are not widespread. Furthermore, **inclusive teaching strategies** such as differentiated instruction and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles are recognised as being valuable for *EAL Pupils with SEN/AEN* but have not been systematically implemented in both jurisdictions.

The use of digital tools (e.g. translation apps, visual learning software) emerged as a promising tool to support learning, yet its adoption is uneven due to resource constraints and varying teacher expertise. In summary, the findings indicate that while pockets of good practice exist such as collaborative planning between EAL and SEN staff, or **peer support programmes** to reduce isolation, there is a need for more consistent and well-resourced in school support. In other words, Schools would benefit from clear guidelines and sharing of best practices to ensure that language acquisition support and special educational provision are integrated, rather than operating in a silo-based format as presently exists.

Family Engagement and Communication

The study also highlighted the importance of **home school relationships** in supporting EAL learners with SEN/AEN. However, **engaging families** of these pupils can be challenging for schools in both IE and NI in comparison to their native peers. For example, language proficiency is a significant issue where many newcomer parents are not proficient in English, making it difficult for them to understand school processes, the availability of SEN resources or to contribute to SEN discussions with the school.

Nonetheless, the research also found that some schools employ **diverse communication methods**, such as providing translated materials, using interpreters for meetings, and leveraging bilingual staff or cultural mediators. However, such practices are not universally in place.

Another key finding is the need to **build trust with families**. Parents from immigrant backgrounds may come from cultures that vary significantly to that of both jurisdictions, of which some may have a stigma or fear concerning labelling their children as having a SEN. In some jurisdictions, for example, parents can be reluctant to have a child identified with SEN. Furthermore, limited

parental knowledge of SEN system can lead to misunderstandings or hesitancy to seek support. As a result, **Proactive outreach to parents** is essential whereby schools should create a welcoming, *safe space* and *opportunities* for parents where they can ask questions and share concerns without judgement that will result in stronger partnerships between the school and home environment. Indeed, the SEALSEN study also noted structural factors such as high pupil mobility and socio-economic challenges can impede sustained parental engagement. In summary, **family engagement remains inconsistent** and enhancing it requires a concerted effort by all stakeholders in and outside the school grounds where schools should prioritise clear, culturally sensitive communication and partnership with parents as a central component of supporting EAL pupils with SEN/AEN.

Teacher Professional Development

A significant finding across both jurisdictions relates to that of **gaps in teacher preparedness** to be able to work with the dual needs of EAL pupils who have SEN/AEN. Within this, many educators reported that they were **insufficiently trained** to address the EAL and SEN/AEN issues. This aligns with international evidence (such as the OECD's TALIS survey) where teachers often lack confidence in teaching students from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

In the context of IE and NI, participants highlighted that most existing training treats **English-language support and SEN support as separate topics**, leaving teachers unsure as to how to *adapt strategies for a student who falls into both categories*. In other words, the study also highlights a **pressing need for specialised, sustained, and accessible professional development (PD)** in this area where those involved in this study highlighted the need for professional development in a range of connected areas; for example, how to differentiate instruction for language learners with dyslexia, or how to implement behaviour support for a pupil who doesn't fully understand the language of their native peers.

Current PD opportunities were described as limited and overly theoretical in both jurisdictions. It was also found that there is an uneven access to the PD where some teachers have pursued individual learning (e.g. courses on teaching English as a Foreign Language or courses on SEN). However, a cohesive programme that merges these skill sets is not presently available. In this regard, the findings point to the necessity for **comprehensive teacher training initiatives** focused on culturally responsive teaching, assessment of EAL learners, and inclusive classroom techniques. In the absence of building this capacity, efforts to improve identification and in school support will be hampered by a lack of teacher confidence and consistency through the system.

Policy Frameworks and Systemic Support

The research reveals that **current policy frameworks in both IE and NI have not fully kept at pace with the needs of EAL pupils with SEN/AEN**. In IE, there is **limited specific guidance or official policy** targeting the intersection of EAL and SEN. For example, teachers noted the absence of a defined SENCO role or clear protocols for newcomer pupils with SEN.

While general inclusive education policies exist, they tend not to address the challenges that arise when language learning and special needs coincide. In NI, the term *newcomer* is used in policy to identify pupils with language needs, and there are clearly defined requirements for early SEN identification. However, educators reported that **implementation can be inconsistent**, and practical guidance on adapting assessments or curricula for EAL/SEN pupils is lacking.

On the one hand, while both jurisdictions have in place *positive policy developments* (e.g. IE's **Intercultural Education Strategy** and NI's **Integrated Education Act**), reflecting a commitment to diversity and inclusion. On the other hand, **these policies operate in parallel streams** (one for

cultural, linguistic inclusion and one for special education) with minimal integration. Furthermore, participants involved in the research frequently stated that **policy has not caught up with the cultural makeup of classrooms**. Indeed, there is a clear call for policy reform where those involved in the research strongly recommend that education departments provide **clearer mandates, resources, and accountability** mechanisms for schools to support EAL pupils with SEN/AEN.

Moreover, the research suggests that **cross jurisdictional collaboration** can be beneficial where IE and NI can learn from each other's experiences and potentially complement approaches for consistency across the island. In summary, without strengthened and specific policy guidance, schools and teachers are left largely on their own, resulting in uneven support for this vulnerable group of learners.

Recommendations for Schools and Policymakers

Building on the SEALSEN findings, these recommendations recognise that supporting EAL pupils with SEN/AEN requires an integrated approach, addressing language acquisition and learning needs concurrently and include the following:

For Schools

- Develop **robust school-based protocols to better distinguish between language difficulties and learning disabilities**. This includes creating multilingual pupil profiles (documenting students' prior education, home language abilities, and cultural background) as well as using first-language assessments or observations where possible. Schools together with other stakeholder groups should implement clear referral pathways that require input from EAL specialists before initiating formal SEN assessments, ensuring that language factors are considered. Furthermore, assessment practices should be adjusted to include culturally response robust assessment techniques such as offering oral response options or simplified instructions so that pupils are not unfairly hindered by language proficiency.
- Establish **structured collaboration among school staff**. Regular coordination between SENCOs, EAL teachers, classroom/subject teachers, and support staff is vital where Schools should be encouraged to formalise multidisciplinary teams that review EAL/SEN pupil progress and plan interventions collectively. *Peer support systems* are also recommended by pairing EAL/SEN pupils or mentors (including other students or bilingual classroom assistants) which can help academic and social integration.
- Investing in **inclusive teaching practices** is key to EAL/SEN pupil success where teachers should be trained to utilise culturally responsive strategies such as scaffolding, visual supports, and multi-sensory learning techniques to accommodate diverse needs in the classroom.
- Schools should prioritise **proactive communication with parents and guardians** with culturally robust explanations of the SEN support process, student progress updates, and rights/entitlements in families' **home languages** through translated documents or interpretation services. Multiple formats of communication such in written, oral, and digital form should also be offered to accommodate different communication preferences.
- Schools are advised to create an environment where parents feel welcome to share concerns without stigma which can include scheduling regular informal meetings such as coffee mornings for parents of EAL/SEN pupils, possibly with community organisation support. Partnerships with **community and cultural organisations** can further assist schools in understanding and supporting families' needs, as well as providing extracurricular support for pupils.

- **Implement Inclusive Pedagogy and Use of Technology:** Adopt Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles and differentiated instruction across all subject teaching. This means offering multiple ways for students to engage with material (visual aids, hands-on activities, etc.), express their understanding (not solely in written form, but also through oral presentations, projects, etc.), and stay motivated (connecting learning to students' cultures and interests).
- Teachers should also incorporate students' **linguistic and cultural backgrounds into lessons**, for example, by acknowledging and celebrating diverse languages in the classroom or using examples that reflect various cultures to enhance engagement and self-esteem.
- **Technology** should be leveraged wherever possible by using tools such as immersive readers, translation apps, or interactive learning software that can provide EAL pupils with SEN alternative pathways to access content and demonstrate learning.
- Schools could also maintain a **digital repository** of multilingual resources and specialised materials that all staff can use, ensuring continuity of support.
- Ensure that all teaching and support staff receive **ongoing training** to build capacity to support EAL/SEN pupils. Schools should advocate for and participate in CPD programmes specifically focused on teaching EAL students with SEN. Training should cover practical strategies such as adapting lesson plans for language learners with learning difficulties, cultural competency, trauma-informed approaches for refugees or migrants, and effective use of assistive technologies. Whenever possible, these CPD sessions should be school wide and involve teachers, assistants, and school leaders where a whole school understanding and commitment is implemented. Developing a culture of shared learning; for instance, teachers who attend specialised training mentoring other members of staff can also help sustain these practices.

For Policymakers

- Education authorities in IE and NI should craft comprehensive policies that explicitly address the **intersection of language support and special education**. Rather than treating EAL and SEN in isolation, official guidelines must outline how schools can concurrently support both needs. This includes providing **clear definitions** (e.g. what constitutes an additional language need vs. a special educational need), standardised **identification procedures** that account for English language proficiency, and delineating the *entitlements* of EAL/SEN pupils to various supports.
- Policies should also establish accountability measures so that schools report on and are evaluated in how they serve this group. Within this, a dedicated policy or strategy would legitimise the importance of this issue and drive consistency across all schools.
- Allocate targeted funding to meet the complex needs identified. Both jurisdictions should ensure that funding formulas and grants reflect the additional resources required to support EAL pupils with SEN/AEN (for example, funding for specialised assessment tools, translation/interpretation services, or additional support staff).
- Policymakers are urged to increase investment in the development of appropriate diagnostic instruments (such as tests that are normed for EAL students) and teaching materials that can be used across schools.
- Enhanced funding should also support hiring or training **bilingual support staff and external specialists** (such as speech and language therapists familiar with second-language issues).

- It is recommended that initial teacher education and ongoing certification requirements are updated to include components on **teaching in multilingual, inclusive classrooms**. As such those responsible for developing teaching standards such as the Department of Education in Ireland should **mandate and fund CPD** on EAL/SEN for existing educators including not just teachers, educational psychologists and school leaders. By institutionalising such training (for example, through accredited modules or national workshops), policymakers can assure a baseline of competency. Importantly, training content should be *practical and evidence-based*, drawing on current research and successful interventions, rather than in the main, abstract theory. This may involve collaborating with higher education institutions and expert organisations to develop curricula that equip practitioners with real-world strategies for the classroom.
- The needs of EAL pupils with SEN often span educational, health, and social services. Policymakers should facilitate formal partnerships between schools and other public services (For example, ensuring that health services such as child psychologists or speech and languages therapists) work in tandem with schools when assessing EAL children, or that social services support newcomer families in navigating the SEN system.
- Creating multi-agency support frameworks can promote a wraparound approach, addressing barriers that schools alone cannot overcome in isolation. Furthermore, collaboration with community organisations (such as migrant support centres or cultural associations) at the policy level can provide schools with access to cultural mediators and community education programmes.
- Given that IE and NI are tackling similar challenges, policymakers from both jurisdictions should consider joint CPD programmes, shared research ventures, and communities of practice that bring together educators across the island of Ireland. This could include co developing a repository of shared resources such as assessment tools, translated materials, and training guides that are accessible to schools in both IE and NI. This cooperation can reduce duplication of effort and allow each system to learn from pilot projects or innovations in the other.

Conclusion and Moving Forward

This study highlights that supporting EAL pupils with SEN/AEN is a complex but urgent priority for IE and NI. The evidence derived from SEALSEN provides a clear message in that a systemic, integrated response is required. The findings and recommendations outlined above and contained within the body of this report provide a clear roadmap for action. Moving forward a number of directions emerge:

- Policymakers should use the findings derived from SEALSEN to refine national strategies and ensure that new policies are translated into practice. This may involve setting up pilot programmes in schools to trial the recommended approaches (such as new assessment protocols or joint training initiatives) and closely monitoring their impact. Ongoing evaluation will also be important where data on student outcomes, identification rates, and teacher confidence can help improve interventions and scale up successful models across more schools.
- School leaders and teachers are encouraged to embrace a culture of continuous improvement. However, implementing changes from creating bilingual communication channels with parents to adopting collaborative planning time for staff will require significant resources, strong leadership and commitment. Schools might establish internal working groups or appoint a coordinator for EAL/SEN inclusion to drive these efforts. Networking with other schools (including cross-border exchanges of ideas) can also sustain and enhance momentum and innovation in practice.
- The SEALSEN project also highlights the need for further research in this area. Future studies could explore, for example, the long-term educational trajectories of EAL pupils with SEN/AEN to identify which interventions best support their progress.
- There is also scope for research into developing better assessment tools that separates language proficiency from cognitive ability. Furthermore, investigating pupil and parents voice directly would also enrich understanding and ensure that policy and practice remain aligned with the community's needs. Indeed, academic institutions in Ireland should continue to collaborate with schools in studying these issues, thereby contributing to an evolving evidence base on effective strategies to enhance the life chances of EAL pupils with SEN/AEN.

In conclusion, the SEALSEN research and associated toolkit that is grounded in policy scholarship and empirical evidence, is intended to guide and inspire the necessary changes in policy and practice, ensuring that every learner, regardless of the various cultural identifiers that exists is given the opportunity to in reach their full potential in equitable learning environments.

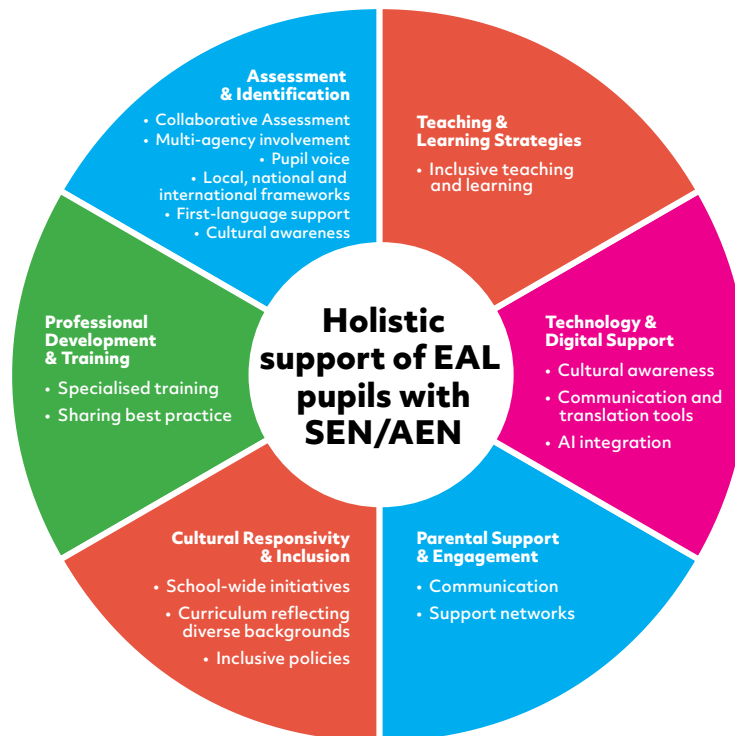
Introduction and Background

The intersection of English as an Additional Language (EAL), learning and Special Educational Needs (SEN) / Additional Educational Needs (AEN) presents one of the most complex challenges in contemporary education on the island of Ireland. Students who navigate both language acquisition and learning differences require nuanced, culturally responsive support that addresses their multifaceted needs while recognising their linguistic and cultural assets as strengths rather than deficits.

Current educational approaches often address EAL and SEN/AEN support in isolation, creating fragmented provision that fails to acknowledge the interconnected nature of these learners' experiences. This cohort faces a distinct set of challenges, including the risk that language acquisition needs are misunderstood as learning difficulties, a paucity of culturally responsive assessment instruments, and insufficient Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for educators working at the juncture of EAL support and SEN provision.

The Rowan and Marlow Framework (Figure 1) has emerged from the recognition that effective support for EAL pupils with SEN/AEN demands a holistic, integrated approach that bridges academic, pastoral, cultural and familial domains. Drawing from the SEALSEN project's investigation of the needs of this vulnerable group across Ireland (IE) and Northern Ireland (NI), this framework synthesises evidence-based strategies, collaborative practices and inclusive pedagogies to create sustainable pathways for success.

Figure 1: Rowan and Marlow - Framework for the holistic inclusion of English as an Additional Language (EAL) pupils with Special Educational Needs/ Additional Educational Needs



By addressing the gap between theoretical understandings, policy and practice implementation, this framework provides educators, policymakers and families with actionable guidance to create truly inclusive learning environments where linguistic diversity and learning differences are celebrated and supported for the purpose of enhancing the life chances of this vulnerable group.

Literature Review

Both IE and NI have undergone notable demographic transformations in recent years, marked by an influx of students from varied cultural, ethnic and linguistic communities. IE has witnessed substantial immigration flows that have reshaped its societal composition, while NI has experienced more moderate but steady increases in ethnic diversity.

These demographic shifts create valuable opportunities alongside significant educational challenges, especially when supporting students who face multiple barriers such as integration and what forms the basis for this study, creating equitable learning environments for EAL pupils who also have SEN. These learners require tailored educational strategies that concurrently address language acquisition needs and learning disabilities. The challenge for educational authorities in both regions is ensuring comprehensive, equitable provision that enables all students, particularly those with complex support requirements to access quality, inclusive education.

Teacher Preparedness and Policy Responses

The OECD's 2018 TALIS study revealed that many educators across participating countries, including those in IE and NI, reported feeling insufficiently equipped to effectively teach students from diverse cultural backgrounds (OECD, 2019). Indeed, according to Herzog Punzenberger et al. (2020) 'more than 50% of teachers in the participating countries did not feel well prepared for the challenges of a multicultural learning environment and were not confident in adapting their teaching to the cultural diversity of students' (p.396). This inadequate preparation can result in unequal educational opportunities and further disadvantage students from underrepresented communities.

However, with cause for optimism, educational frameworks and legislative instruments in both IE and NI have placed a growing emphasis on fostering inclusive and culturally responsive practices. Legislative instruments including IE's *Intercultural Education Strategy* (2021) and NI's *Integrated Education Act* (2022) demonstrate an increasing acknowledgement of the imperative to effectively accommodate cultural diversity within educational settings.

Current statistics and Identified Challenges

In NI in 2023/24, there were 20,978 registered 'newcomers'². Data also shows that in 2022/23, 3,075 were registered with a SEN (Northern Ireland School Census, 2023). In IE, pupils with a migration background constitute approximately 12% of school-going children (European Commission, 2019).

Research across the island of Ireland also suggests that pupils face a number of challenges, including language issues, prejudice, social exclusion, literacy issues, trauma, mental health conditions and a limited understanding of the resources available (Ren & McGuckin, 2022; Devlin, 2022; Gardiner-Hyland, 2021). A public consultation in NI (Department of Education, 2019) also raised concerns regarding EAL with SEN provision, including:

- Difficulties accessing assessments
- School slowness/unwillingness to accept information from the home country
- Inadequate support provision

² The term 'newcomer' refers to a pupil who does not have satisfactory language skills to participate fully in the school curriculum and does not have a language in common with the teacher (Department of Education, 2024).

The report echoed literature surrounding language barriers, coupled with newcomer parents' limited knowledge of available SEN support (Ren & McGuckin, 2024). Broader research also raises cultural concerns linked to a lack of guidance on SEN, suggesting that this may trigger parents' feelings of stigma and reluctance to have their child labelled as having an educational need (Carrig, 2021). The *Equality Commission for Northern Ireland* (2019) and the *Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission* (2019, pp.16–17) also recommend that the 'revised newcomer policy aims to ensure that SEN of newcomer pupils are promptly identified, assessed and effectively addressed and supported'.

In IE, limited guidance is provided to support teachers in providing adequate support for EAL learners with SEN (Burke, 2018; Department of Education, 2024). Furthermore, in the absence of clarity concerning the SEN coordinators' (SENCOs') role in the Irish context, and no roadmap or guidance for SENCOs (Fitzgerald & Radford, 2020), a key aim of this research is the development of practices for SENCOs in promoting schoolwide approaches to supporting EAL pupils with SEN.

This is in line with Burke (2018) among others who stresses the need for more specific guidance for educational professionals in the Irish education system on how to accommodate EAL learners with additional needs.

European Context and Research Gaps

In a wider European context, there are multiple studies on the educational supports in the classroom for migrant students (See for example, Brown et al. 2025), but limited literature on the topic of supporting migrant students identified with a specific learning difficulty (Jørgensen, Dobson & Perry, 2021). The EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027 (European Commission, 2020) emphasises the importance of creating inclusive and supportive environments for migrant children, particularly those with disabilities. The plan stresses that teachers should be equipped with the necessary skills and resources to manage multicultural and multilingual classrooms, and that migrant children with disabilities require additional support to ensure they can participate in education on equal terms with others.

A report from the *European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education* (2009) also highlights critical challenges in addressing the needs of students with immigrant backgrounds within special education systems across Europe. It highlights that educational practices often fail to adequately support the diverse needs of these students, as many professionals lack the expertise to address both SEN and the cultural/linguistic challenges immigrant students face. This is echoed by Cotán et al. (2023), who emphasise the urgent need for competent administration and for institutions to implement targeted actions that support the training of educators in addressing the complexities associated with this group of pupils. Jørgensen, Dobson and Perry (2021) also stress the importance of enhancing teachers' and SENCOs' expertise in identifying and addressing the complexities of working with migrant students with SEN.

Conclusion

A review of the literature reveals that teacher preparedness has not kept pace with the changing cultural demographics of schools, particularly where language acquisition and additional needs converge, with international evidence pointing to persistent gaps in confidence and practice (OECD, 2019; Herzog-Punzenberger et al., 2020). However, policy and practice in both jurisdictions are moving in the right direction with for example, the *Intercultural Education Strategy* in IE and the *Integrated Education Act* in NI that set out a clear ambition for inclusive schooling. On the other hand, ambition without guidance and resourcing (For example, delays in identification and assessment; hesitation to recognise assessments from a pupil's country of origin; and uneven guidance for staff) is not sufficient to meet the needs of the most vulnerable groups in society. In IE the absence of a formalised SENCO role and a clear, system wide roadmap leaves schools to put together local solutions, with variation in quality. Furthermore, the challenges for newcomer families, language barriers, limited system knowledge, and, at times, fear of stigma add to the challenges experienced by schools on how best to meet the needs of migration background and SEN students. However, there is insurmountable evidence both in IE, NI and internationally on what needs to be achieved to create equitable education systems for all pupils regardless of the various cultural identifiers that exist.

First, align language and learning supports so that assessment, intervention and classroom practice are planned together from the outset and not in a silo-based format. Second, invest in sustained CPD for teachers and school leaders that is specific to the EAL/SEN learners, with high quality CPD, classroom embedded exemplars rather than one off workshops that have limited evidence of impact regardless of the CPD provided. Finally, there is a need to close the lacuna of research that exists through further cross-border CPD initiatives that provide solutions, training and resources for effective practice for EAL pupils with SEN which builds on emerging European work and recent island wide studies. In summary, when policy ambition is matched by workable structures, sustained CPD, and a genuine partnership with families, these pupils gain not merely access but access to a learning environment that is equitable for all pupils regardless of their cultural or SEN identifiers. The proceeding parts of this report tease out these assumptions. First however, a description of the research design used in the study is provided.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to data collection, structured around an explanatory sequential design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Data was collected in two distinct phases across post-primary schools in NI and IE, enabling a comprehensive exploration of current practices and challenges in supporting pupils with EAL and SEN and disabilities (SEND). This was for the purpose of answering the following research questions (RQ):

- RQ 1:** What strategies are employed to support EAL pupils with SEN to engage successfully in their learning, and within the school community?
- RQ 2:** What effective home/school arrangements are in place to support EAL pupils with SEN?
- RQ 3:** What forms of professional development or training are required to support EAL pupils with SEN?

Phase 1: Survey Data Collection

In the first phase, a pre-piloted survey was distributed to approximately 50 schools: 17 in NI and 33 in IE (Appendix 1). A stratified sampling strategy was used to target mainstream post-primary school types: controlled, *maintained and integrated schools* in NI; and *Education and Training Board, Secondary and Community Comprehensive schools* in IE. Participants included teachers of EAL pupils with SEND, SENCOs and members of senior leadership teams.

The survey incorporated quantitative items using Likert scales to capture data on current school provisions and support mechanisms (Cohen et al., 2018). Recruitment was facilitated through publicly available contact information via the databases of the Department of Education (DE) IE and the Education Authority (EA) NI and existing professional networks; promoting the project outputs through educational forums and practitioner communities across both jurisdictions. Following on from this, the survey data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics of which the descriptive results are presented in the proceeding sections of this report.

Phase 2: Focus Groups and Interviews

Following on from the survey analysis, four schools from NI and five schools from IE were selected for participation in online focus groups and interviews using a semi structured interview protocol (Appendix 2). This format offered flexibility and reduced logistical costs for the researchers and those participants involved in the study. All sessions were recorded, transcribed and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework.

This framework was chosen due to its emphasis on the researcher's active role in knowledge production that is unconstrained by rigid coding structures (Byrne, 2021).

Presentation and Analysis of Findings

Survey Results

Roles and Responsibilities

Among 33 IE respondents, SENCO/Learning Support Coordinator (LSC) staff comprise the largest group (39.4%), followed by senior leaders (24.1%) and full-time Special Education Teacher (SET) staff (18.2%) (Table 1). Other roles represent 6.1% of respondents. SEN coordination and leadership roles dominate the sample (63.5% combined). In NI (Table 2), SENCO/LSC professionals similarly dominate EAL-SEN support (35.3%), followed by senior leaders (23.5%). Both jurisdictions reveal a hierarchical support structure where specialised SEN roles and leadership positions carry primary responsibility for supporting EAL pupils with SEN.

% Participants	24.1	39.4	6.1	6.1	6.1	18.2
	Senior Leaders	SENC/LSC	Mainstream +Set 2	Mainstream (Full Time)	Other	SET (Full Time)

Table 1: Participants' roles and responsibilities (IE)

% Participants	23.5	35.3	11.8	11.8	17.6	18.2
	Senior Leaders	SENC/LSC	Support Staff	Mainstream Teacher	SET (Full Time)	SET (Full Time)

Table 2: Participants' roles and responsibilities (NI)

Teaching Experience

The majority of participants in IE have extensive experience, with 24 (72.7%) reporting more than 15 years in the profession. Five teachers (15.2%) have 10–15 years of experience, three teachers (9.1%) 5–10 years, and only one teacher (3.0%) has less than 5 years. With 87.9% of respondents having at least 10 years' experience and minimal representation from early-career educators, this may limit the generalisability of findings across the broader teaching profession.

Experienced educators dominate the NI sample: 64.7% have over 15 years' experience, 17.6% have 5–10 years, 11.8% have 10–15 years, and 5.9% have under 5 years. As such, the majority of NI educators supporting EAL pupils with SEN in our sample are highly experienced professionals.

School Type

Tables 3 and 4 show the school types among respondents in IE and NI. In IE, community college/school is the largest group (13 respondents, 39.4%), followed by voluntary secondary school (eight respondents, 24.2%), Educate Together (3.0%) and other schools (34.4%). The community-based schools represent the dominant category, comprising nearly two-fifths of the sample, with traditional secondary models together accounting for almost two-thirds (63.6%) of all respondents.

% School Types	24.2	38.4	3.0	34.4
	Voluntary Secondary	Community College	Educate Together	Other

Table 3: Participants - School types (IE)

Among 17 NI survey participants, non-selective schools dominate (64.7%), followed by selective schools (11.8%). Integrated, community and other schools each have one response (5.9%). The distribution reflects the prevalence of non-selective schools in NI.

% School Types	64.7	11.8	5.9	5.9	5.9
	Non-Selective	Selective	Integrated	Community School	SET (Full Time)

Table 4: Participants - School types (NI)

Prevalence of SEN/AEN

When asked to indicate which learning difficulties EAL pupils with SEN/AEN commonly have, respondents in IE selected multiple categories (Table 5).

Speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) were selected most frequently (68.8% of responses); followed by cognition and learning (CL) needs (59.4%); and social, behavioural, emotional and well-being (SBEW) needs (50.0%). Sensory (SE) difficulties were identified in 12 responses (37.5%), physical needs (PN) in seven responses (21.9%) and unsure/other in four responses (12.5%).

% Types of SEN/AEN	68.8%	59.4%	50.0%	37.5%	21.9%	12.5%
	SLCN	CL	SBEW	SE	PN	Other

Table 5: Types of SEN/AEN (IE)

This pattern suggests that practitioners commonly observe multiple co-occurring difficulties in EAL pupils with SEN/AEN, with speech and language challenges being the most prevalent, likely reflecting the complex intersection of language acquisition and communication needs in this population.

When asked about the number of EAL pupils with SEN/AEN who have a school support plan in their schools, 32 of 33 IE respondents provided responses (one did not respond). Of 32 responding IE schools, 53.1% report having 10 or more EAL pupils with SEN/AEN requiring school support plans, while 18.8% report 0–2 such pupils. The remaining schools are distributed across intermediate ranges (3–4 pupils: 3.1%; 5–6 pupils: 6.3%; 7–8 and 9–10 pupils: 9.4% each).

In the case of NI (Table 6), cognition and learning difficulties are the most prevalent (70.6%). Social, behavioural, emotional and well-being needs and speech, language and communication needs are equally common (58.8%). Physical needs were also identified (17.6%), while sensory needs and unsure/other categories are least common (5.9%). Despite a small sample, this distribution shows that cognitive, social-emotional and communication challenges dominate the learning difficulty profile for EAL pupils with SEN, with physical and sensory needs being relatively less common.

% Types of SEN/AEN	70.6%	58.8%	58.8%	17.6%	5.9%	5.9%
	(CL)	(SBEW)	(SLCN)	(PN)	(SE)	Unsure/ Other

Table 6: Types of SEN/AEN (NI)

In the NI survey, when asked how many EAL pupils with SEN/AEN in their schools have individual education plans (IEPs) or personal learning plans (PLPs), the eight responding participants showed varied distributions. Two schools report having 10 or more such pupils, while two schools each fell into the ranges of 9–10 pupils, 5–6 pupils and 0–2 pupils respectively.

Identification of SEN/AEN

Table 7 shows the identification methods used to identify EAL pupils with SEN/AEN, where participants could select multiple options. Teacher-based, in-class assessments represents the largest proportion at 14.5%, followed closely by three methods at similar levels: continuum framework (12.8%), pupil profile (12.7%) and parental information (12.7%). Medical evidence accounts for 9.1% of responses. Four methods each represent 7.2–7.3% of responses: end of year reports, pupil consultation, psychologist report and intake screening. Pupil support team involvement represents 5.5%, while the no information and teacher observation categories each account for 1.8%.

The data demonstrates that schools employ diverse, multifaceted approaches to identification, with classroom-based assessments and formal frameworks being the most commonly utilised methods.

Method	%
Continuum Framework	12.8
Parental Information	12.7
Pupil Profile	12.7
Teacher Assessments	14.5
Teacher Observation	1.8
Pupil Support Team	5.3
Intake Screening	7.2
Psychologist Report	7.3
Pupil Consultation	7.3
End of Year Reports	7.3
Medical Evidence	9.1
No Information	1.8

Table 7: Methods of Identification (IE)

In the case of NI, schools use a multi-method approach to identify EAL pupils with SEN/AEN. The most common methods are intake screening tests (17.9%), parental input at transition (15.4%) and teacher-based classroom assessments (14.1%) (Table 8).

Method	%
Teacher Assessments	14.1
Parental Information	15.4
Intake Screening	17.9
Pupil Consultation	5.1
Support Team	6.4
Pupil Profile	7.7
End of Year Reports	9
Psychologist Reports	10.3
Medical Evidence	12.8

Table 8: Methods of Identification (NI)

Barriers in Identifying and Supporting SEN/AEN

Table 9 summarises IE responses to a multiple-choice question where participants could select more than one barrier encountered when identifying EAL pupils with SEN/AEN. Limited data or previous educational records, communication barriers, and cultural differences were the most commonly reported challenges, while difficulty accessing assessment services was mentioned least frequently.

Barrier	% of responses
Limited data/previous educational records	20.5
Communication barriers	19.5
Cultural differences and perceptions of SEN/AEN	17.8
Limited teacher expertise and training	11.9
Limited resources	11.3
Parental disengagement	9.2
Previous school's structural and procedural differences	4.9
Divergence in linguistic translation(s) or SEN/AEN terminology	4.3
Difficulty accessing assessment services	0.5

Table 9: Barriers to identifying SEN/AEN (IE)

In NI, missing educational records (20.3%) are the biggest barrier to identifying EAL pupils with SEN/AEN (Table 10). Communication barriers (17.2%) and cultural differences (15.6%) are also major challenges.

Barrier	% of responses
Limited data/previous educational records	20.3
Communication barriers	17.2
Cultural differences and perceptions of SEN/AEN	15.6
Limited teacher expertise and training	15.6
Limited resources	10.9
Parental disengagement	9.4
Previous school's structural and procedural differences	6.3
Divergence in linguistic translation(s) or SEN/AEN terminology	4.7

Table 10: Barriers to identifying SEN/AEN (IE)

In the open-ended responses, both surveys reveal additional issues reported by schools, including inadequate external support from health and social services, insufficient policies for EAL with SEN/AEN provision, and difficulties supporting pupils with emotional or trauma-related needs. These challenges frequently intersect, highlighting systemic problems around funding, parental engagement, staff training and policy frameworks needed to meet the complex needs of this vulnerable student population.

Getting over the initial language barrier. Can be difficult to assess if the difficulty is language based or AEN based. (Participant, IE)

Communicating with parents is always an issue and engaging those students in what they are interested in. (Participant, NI)

Class teachers struggling with lack of expertise in the area. (Participant, NI)

Parental Engagement

IE survey responses indicate varying levels of parental involvement in supporting the learning needs of EAL pupils with SEN/AEN. The majority of parents were described as somewhat involved (42.4%), suggesting moderate engagement with their child's educational needs. However, a notable proportion selected 'somewhat not involved' (24.2%), while 18.2% of responses were neutral. Only a small fraction were reported as extremely involved (9.1%) or extremely not involved (6.1%). This distribution suggests that while many EAL parents with SEN/AEN children demonstrate some level of engagement, there remains significant room for improvement in fostering deeper parental involvement. In NI, the majority of EAL parents with SEN/AEN children demonstrate positive involvement in their child's learning, with 58.8% reporting some level of engagement (47.1% somewhat involved and 11.8% extremely involved). However, nearly a quarter remain neutral (23.5%) and fewer than one in five are not involved (17.6%). Overall, the data reflects a spectrum of parental engagement, with most parents taking an active – though not always intensive – role in supporting their child's learning needs.

Within this theme, respondents in both jurisdictions were also asked to identify barriers to parental or caregiver involvement (multiple selections allowed). Key barriers in IE (Table 11) include limited proficiency in the school language (100%), family expectations and educational system understanding (79.0%), isolation and poor social support (52.0%), negative attitudes towards SEN/AEN (48.0%), limited trust (18.0%), fear of appearing uninformed (12.0%), and little value placed on education (6.0%).

% Barrier	100	79.0	52.0	48.0	18.0	12.0	6.0
	Limited Language Proficiency	Family Expectations	Isolation/Poor Support	Negative Attitude to SEN/AEN	Limited Trust	Fear of Appearing Uninformed	Limited value placed on Education

Table 11: Barriers to Parental Engagement (IE)

Similarly in NI (Table 12), language proficiency dominates (75.0%), followed by educational system understanding (68.8%), social isolation (56.3%), SEN/AEN attitudes (43.8%), trust issues (25%) and fear of appearing uninformed (18.8%). Both jurisdictions reflect similar engagement challenges, with language barriers and system understanding representing the primary obstacles to parental involvement.

% Barrier	68.8	75.0	18.8	25	43.8	56.3
	Educational Understanding	Language Proficiency	Fear of Judgement	Trust Issues	Attitudes towards SEN/AEN	Social Isolation

Table 12: Barriers to Parental Engagement (NI)

Support for EAL Pupils with SEN/AEN

In IE, the most common supports for EAL pupils with SEN/AEN are language support (100%), targeted in-class support (91%), cooperative teaching with mainstream classrooms (85%) and differentiation/adaptive teaching (85%) (Table 13)³. Other frequently cited supports include PLPs/IEPs (73%), counselling or emotional support (64%), team teaching (58%), and school support plans (55%). Less common supports include ICT integration (52%), promotion of inclusive school culture (52%), deployment of LSAs/keyworkers (42%) and social-emotional interventions (39%), with a few respondents noting environmental adaptations, continuing professional development (CPD), language clubs or the The Inclusion Quality Mark (IQM) Inclusive School Award.

Type of Support	%
Language support (e.g., withdrawal via EAL programmes)	100
Targeted in-class support (e.g., LSA, SNA)	91
Cooperative teaching and learning with mainstream classrooms	85
Differentiation/adaptive teaching	85
PLPs/IEPs	73
Counselling or emotional support	64
Team teaching	58
Embedding ICT in learning and teaching	52
Promotion of inclusive learning environment/school culture	52
School support plan	55
Deployment of learning support assistant/keyworkers	42
Interventions to promote social and emotional competence	39
CPD for educators	33
Appropriate environmental adaptations	27
Aspiring towards suitably challenging learning outcomes (goal/target setting)	21
IQM Inclusive School Award	3
Language club	3
No supports indicated	3

Table 13: Support for EAL pupils with SEN/AEN (IE)

³ For the item Support for EAL pupils with SEN/AEN, multiple responses were allowed.

In NI, PLPs/IEPs are most common (75%), followed by learning support assistants/keyworkers and differentiated teaching (62% each) (Table 14). Targeted in-class support and social-emotional interventions are also frequent (56%), while ICT use and inclusive school culture promotion are moderately common (50%). Counselling and cooperative teaching appear less often (43%). Language support (37%), school support plans and environmental adaptations (31% each) are comparatively limited. Professional development (18%), goal setting and dedicated key workers (12%) are least common.

Type of Support	%
PLPs/IEPs	75
Deployment of learning support assistant/keyworkers within the classroom	62
Differentiation/adaptive teaching	62
Targeted in-class support (e.g., LSA, SNA)	56
Interventions to promote social and emotional competence	56
Embedding ICT in learning and teaching	50
Promotion of inclusive learning environment or inclusive school culture	50
Counselling or emotional support	43
Cooperative teaching and learning with mainstream classrooms	43
Language support (e.g., withdrawal support via EAL programmes)	37
School support plan	31
Appropriate environmental adaptations	31
CPD for educators	18
Aspiring towards suitably challenging learning outcomes (e.g., goal and target setting)	12
Key worker	12

Table 14: Support for EAL pupils with SEN/AEN (NI)

Interestingly, closer analysis of the data sets suggests that IE is heavily reliant on language and withdrawal supports, whereas NI prioritises individualised planning and classroom-based assistance, with much less emphasis on language programmes or staff development.

Primary external supports used by IE respondents are educational psychologists and EAL teachers, reflecting strong reliance on specialist assessment and targeted language support (Table 15). Other frequently accessed services include Oide⁴ and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), while health services such as speech and language therapy are used less often. Some schools involve teaching assistants or specialist SEN services, though these are less common, with a few reporting no external support.

4 Oide is a professional support service for teachers and school leaders in the Republic of Ireland, funded by the Department of Education. It was established on September 1, 2023, through the merger of four existing support services: the Centre for School Leadership (CSL), Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT), the National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT), and the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST). Oide provides coordinated guidance, training, and development opportunities to enhance teaching and leadership across schools (OIDE, 2025)

% Support Type	29.2	15.3	9.7	5.6	2.8	1.4	1.4	1.2
	EAL Teacher	NCSE	Oide	Health Services	Teaching Assistant	Specialist SEN Services	IQM	ETB

Table 15: External supports (IE)

Regarding external supports in NI, respondents frequently work with educational psychologists (60%) and the Education Authority (NI) (47%). Other commonly involved supports include intercultural education services (IES) (20%), EAL teachers (20%) and teaching assistants (20%). Less frequently, schools collaborate with health services (e.g., speech and language therapy) and specialist SEN services. Some schools report using no external support.

% Support Type	60	47	20	20	20
	Educational psychologists	Education Authority	Intercultural education services (IES)	EAL Teachers	Teaching Assistant

Table 15: External supports (NI)

An additional open-ended question about success stories and good practices also reveals diverse innovative approaches respondents have developed in both jurisdictions to support EAL pupils with SEN/AEN. Respondents in IE report structured transitions with intensive early support, technology use (translation tools, assistive software), collaboration with families and specialists, cultural celebrations, individualised supports, and peer support systems. However, a notable number of respondents had no success stories to share.

Supplying students with devices and showing them some online translation tools so that they can have live translation of the curriculum content when they enter mainstream classrooms. (Participant, IE)

Employed a Ukrainian teacher and an EAL teacher to work as a team to identify and address the needs. (Participant, IE)

We focussed on oral language communication skills, learning through play, emotional awareness and regulation and fine-motor development. (Participant, IE)

Use of Immersive Reader, Copilot-Google Translate all documents and letters for the parents. (Participant, IE)

In NI, respondents also reported a range of support strategies with some resulting in positive outcomes such as university progression and confidence in mainstream learning. Key practices include individualised literacy interventions (phonics, Lexia, PARK, Lexonik Leap), PLPs and outreach support, and small-group or withdrawal teaching with classroom assistants. Other approaches include phased inductions with buddies, peer interaction, cultural celebration activities and creative clubs. Technology supports translation, visual aids and home-school communication, while success relies on strong relationships, trauma-informed approaches and staff collaboration.

Phased induction to mainstream class: 1:1 EAL lessons and buddy before integrating into mainstream classes. (Participant, NI)

Use of technology using symbols, images and translated phrases to help the pupil participate in class activities – allow EALs students to participate and express themselves without the need to have a language barrier.

(Participant, NI)

Excellent classroom assistants working with pupils. (Participant, NI)

These responses in both jurisdictions indicate that schools are beginning to leverage assistive and AI-powered technologies to bridge language barriers. Live translation tools for curriculum content represents a significant technological advancement, allowing EAL pupils with SEN/AEN to access learning materials in real-time. The findings demonstrate that schools are adopting readily available AI technologies to improve accessibility and family engagement. However, the data suggests this is still an emerging area of practice rather than widely adopted.

Government Policy Effectiveness

The data reveals that nearly half of respondents in IE (45.5%) consider current government policies ineffective in supporting EAL pupils with SEN/AEN, while only about one-quarter (24.3%) rate them positively. The remaining (30.3%) view policies as adequate but not particularly effective. In NI, 41.2% rate government policies as poor and 35.3% as fair. Finally, only 23.5% of those who responded to the survey expressed positive views, with just two respondents each rating policies as good or very good (11.8% each). This suggests that current government policies are largely perceived as inadequate by educators and stakeholders working with EAL learners with SEN/AEN, suggesting a need for policy and by association, practice reform where current frameworks are not meeting the complex needs of this cohort of students.

Furthermore, teachers' explanations for policy effectiveness ratings reveal systemic deficiencies across multiple areas. Key IE criticisms included outdated assessment tools, inadequate resources and funding forcing schools to dilute support for other children, poor access to overloaded specialist services, and significant policy gaps. Many highlighted absent EAL policies and inadequate training with little practical application. Additional concerns include inflexible policies and challenges around teacher supply, examination accommodation and service coordination. Some teachers admitted no policy awareness, while others acknowledged that although policy foundations exist, implementation remains severely inadequate. Responses collectively indicate that current policies fail to address the complex, intersectional needs of EAL pupils with SEN/AEN.

There is not enough support or resources provided. We just have to dilute support for other children. (Participant, IE)

There are no specific EAL policies. EAL is mentioned in terms of SEN allocations and rarely as EAL with SEN. (Participant, IE)

No awareness of policy. (Participant, IE)

Very little guidance for schools with children with SEN, there needs to be wrap around services for parents and children. (Participant, IE)

I don't think policy has kept up with the exponential growth of SEN needs in school populations at present. (Participant, NI)

Training and Development in Supporting Pupils

The most frequently mentioned training in IE is general SEN/AEN professional learning (27.1%), followed by professional learning specific to EAL (18.6%) and training addressing EAL pupils with SEN/AEN (17.1%). Other areas include trauma-informed training (14.3%) and cultural responsiveness development (7.1%), while 10% of mentions indicate no specific professional development in this area. In NI there also appears to be a critical training gap: while 73.3% of teachers have general SEN/AEN professional learning, only 20% have received specialised training for EAL with SEN/AEN pupils. Additionally, 20% report no specific professional development in this area, and only one-third have EAL-specific (33.3%) or trauma-informed training (33.3%). These results highlight that teachers often receive broad SEN or EAL training separately, but fewer access specialised, integrated training to support EAL pupils with SEN/AEN effectively.

An open-ended question about desired professional development content also reveals teachers' specific needs for practical, targeted training. In both IE and NI the responses cluster around key areas: assessment and identification techniques to distinguish between language acquisition difficulties and genuine SEN, practical teaching strategies and classroom approaches, understanding of language acquisition processes, improved communication and collaboration with families and other professionals, access to appropriate resources and materials, and cultural competency training. Teachers consistently emphasise the need for concrete, applicable strategies rather than theoretical approaches, reflecting their immediate classroom challenges.

Understanding the overlap between EAL and SEN/AEN. Distinguishing between language acquisition difficulties and learning needs. (Participant, IE)

Strategies for Inclusive Teaching and Learning Scaffolding techniques for EAL learners with SEN/AEN. (Participant, IE)

A structured concise programme to identify base line & targeted support resources. (Participant, IE)

Language Needs vs SEN Need – identifying the difference. (Participant, NI)

Cultural differences and useful apps for language acquisition. (Participant, NI)

Qualitative Research Findings

The qualitative element of this research involved education professionals across both jurisdictions. SENCOs represent the largest group, followed by mainstream IE participants who have more specialised EAL and SET roles. NI participants hold more combined responsibilities and administrative positions. SENCOs (five total) participated in individual interviews, while the remaining 11 participants took part in structured focus groups (Table 16).

Role	ROI	NI
SENCO	3	2
Mainstream teacher	1	2
EAL teacher	2	
Learning resource coordinator	1	
Principal	1	
SET teacher (full time)	1	
Mainstream teacher and EAL coordinator		1
Head of department		1
SEN administrator		1

Table 16: Participant roles and numbers

Data from both interviews and focus groups was combined and emerging themes presented across all participants collectively.

Theme 1: Identification of Pupils

Both jurisdictions face remarkably similar challenges in identifying EAL pupils with SEN/AEN. These shared difficulties suggest systemic weaknesses that transcend jurisdictional boundaries and point to fundamental gaps in how education systems approach this complex intersection of needs.

Identification Methods and Processes: A Patchwork Approach

The current landscape reveals a concerning over-dependence on informal teacher observation and professional intuition, often compensating for the absence of appropriate formal assessment tools. While teacher expertise and ongoing observation are commonly used to flag potential SEN among EAL pupils, reliance on this creates significant risks of inconsistency and potential bias in identification.

There's an assumption almost that because they couldn't speak English or understand it fluently, that they were put in the lower section sets of classes, which was completely wrong. (Participant, NI)

Initial identification frequently occurs at intake or transition points, drawing on information from primary schools, entrance examinations and parental input, though information transfer remains incomplete and inconsistent. Schools typically employ standardised assessment tools, yet these are predominantly designed for native English speakers and may not accurately capture EAL pupils' needs. The reliance on test scores for eligibility decisions – when those very assessments are acknowledged as inappropriate for EAL pupils – creates a perverse system where language barriers can actually prevent access to SEN support.

I guess I find the identification, you know, it takes such a long time... you can kind of can tell within a few months. Yes, but it's, it just remains as a suspicion for a while that there is no quick test. (Participant, IE)

The positive collaborative approaches between EAL teachers, SENCOs and other staff demonstrate professional commitment through internal referral systems and structured communication, while some schools innovatively use language clubs, social clubs, induction days and informal settings to observe pupils' needs beyond academic performance. However, these creative efforts highlight the inadequacy of formal assessment protocols designed for this population.

We have language classroom assistants – it's easier because then we can check the first language of the child, and the classroom assistant can help us and advise us. (Participant, IE)

Critical Challenge of Distinguishing Language Needs from SEN/AEN

Perhaps the most significant finding is the persistent difficulty in differentiating between language acquisition challenges and genuine SEN. This is compounded by the cultural and linguistic assumptions embedded in standardised assessments, which were never intended for use with pupils still acquiring English proficiency. The absence of first-language assessment tools and diagnostic instruments represents a critical system failure that disadvantages pupils and educators.

If you have a student diagnosed with an additional need and English is not their first language, well, then what is feeding into what's the cause of the additional need. Is it the fact that English is not their first language or is it the fact that they have an additional need? (Participant, IE)

The conversations in staff rooms were very, oh my, what am I going to do? How do I even assess for this? Is it a language acquisition delay that's present, or is it a special educational need? (Participant, NI)

Systemic Barriers: Beyond Individual School Capacity

The barriers to effective identification reveal systemic problems that individual schools cannot resolve alone. Systematic exclusion from formal assessment processes creates a catch-22 situation where the very pupils most in need of specialist evaluation are denied access to it due to language barriers.

The educational psychologist is always refusing to test the child whenever the child cannot speak in English. (Participant, NI)

Even if a student comes into a national school first, then comes to us because we sometimes still have very little information from the national school about them. Like, you know, sometimes we've had students come in that have not been allocated or not been flagged as the EAL. (Participant, IE)

The frequent absence of documentation from pupils' countries of origin, while understandable given migration circumstances, creates an information vacuum that schools struggle to fill.

They've probably not had that assessment anyway wherever they've come from. So you have very little information and you're still continuing to guess maybe a whole academic year as to, you know, what actually is the issue.

(Participant, IE)

More concerning are the cultural and familial barriers – including stigma around SEN and limited understanding of education systems – which suggest that current identification approaches may be culturally inappropriate or insufficiently sensitive to diverse family perspectives and experiences.

There's still a huge stigma, especially for some cultures with any sort of special educational need. And a lot of it was denied. (Participant, IE)

So the easiest for us is whenever we are enrolling the child and during the first meetings, parents are bringing all documents. And then we obviously have assessment from another country, but still, we are able to translate it and get information, you know, about the child's needs. (Participant, NI)

The high absenteeism and disengagement noted among some EAL pupils may itself be symptomatic of inappropriate or delayed identification, creating a cycle where those most in need of support become increasingly difficult to assess and assist.

Theme 2: Transition into the School Setting

Transition Practices and Induction Activities: Inconsistent Support

Schools employ various approaches and activities to support EAL pupils with SEN as they join new educational settings, though the availability and quality of these provisions vary considerably across institutions. Induction days, staff training, summer schemes and orientation programmes are utilised to familiarise pupils with the school environment and key staff members, helping to reduce anxiety and build initial connections before the academic year begins.

We have staff training, and we actually do a full day on SEN and EAL where we will bring up the pupil profiles of those primary staffing children and our staff receive information on the child's background, their need and strategies that would support them in the year going forward. (Participant, NI)

The SENCO from those three primary schools will come into us with the pupils who have an identified SEN need or an EAL need. Then following that our vice principal would have a parent teacher meeting with each of the parents of the child who's coming in with a need. (Participant, NI)

We have a junior, a middle and a senior school all on the one campus. So, I would liaise very closely with the learning resource department within the junior and the middle school to get all of that information. We use the continuum of support. (Participant, IE)

Many schools also implement buddy systems that pair new EAL pupils with established students, while language clubs and classroom assistants – particularly those who share the pupil's home language – are employed to aid social integration and provide immediate linguistic and cultural support during the crucial early weeks. Visual aids, booklets and timetables are commonly provided to help EAL pupils with SEN understand daily routines, navigate the school building, and acquire key vocabulary essential for the educational environment.

However, these supportive practices remain inconsistently applied across schools, with provision often dependent on individual institutional resources, staff expertise and leadership priorities rather than systematic policy requirements, resulting in significant variations in the quality of transition support available.

Information Transfer and Communication

The flow of information about EAL pupils with SEN from previous schools and families represents a critical weakness in the transition process. Information from primary or previous schools is often minimal, delayed or not translated, leading to significant gaps in understanding pupils' needs at entry to secondary education.

Most primary schools. Unfortunately, they don't provide us the level of Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR). (Participant, NI)

Direct engagement with parents is also hampered by language barriers, cultural stigma surrounding SEN and inconsistent disclosure of previous diagnoses, all of which affect the accuracy of information schools receive.

Theme 3: Learning and Teaching Strategies

The information in Figure 2 was gathered from study participants across IE and NI and provides educators with eight strategy areas for effectively supporting pupils who have both EAL needs and SEN, recognising that these pupils require targeted interventions addressing the complex intersection of language acquisition and learning difficulties.



Figure 2: Suggestions for training in EAL and SEN

The approaches encompass areas such as technology and AI tools with multilingual resources; differentiated multisensory support; collaboration among teachers, SENCOs and external agencies; evidence-based strategies including phonics and universal design for learning (UDL); visual supports; EAL-SEN professional development; and inclusive environments prioritising relationships and safety. Rather than treating EAL and SEN as separate challenges, this integrated approach recognises the complex interplay between language development and SEN.

Collaborative and Multidisciplinary Support

Effective support for EAL pupils with SEN emerges most successfully through coordinated teamwork among teachers, SENCOs, classroom assistants and language specialists. Indeed, such collaboration is widely recognised as essential for accurately identifying and addressing the complex needs of this population, consequently requiring regular communication and shared planning strategies. Classroom and language assistants play a crucial role by monitoring pupil progress, while providing real-time feedback to teaching staff and delivering tailored support that addresses both linguistic and learning needs.

We generally have induction days with form teachers. So classroom assistants, language classroom assistants are involved, but it's easier because everybody are following the induction days. So it's like with the form teachers, but language assistants are joining them and language assistants are joining all of newcomer students. (Participant, NI)

As whole staff, we are becoming very aware that we need to identify, make sure we are identifying the needs of our students in the classroom and like, you know, how can we access these resources to help them? (Participant, IE)

Additionally, strategic peer support initiatives and classroom pairing arrangements enhance this collaborative approach by fostering social integration while providing additional scaffolding through culturally sensitive peer relationships.

Use of Technology and Digital Tools

Digital resources and technology are widely used to support language acquisition, communication and differentiated learning for EAL pupils with SEN. iPads, translation tools such as Google Translate and Microsoft Word, and immersive reader applications are employed to help overcome language barriers while facilitating pupils' access to curriculum content. Additionally, particularly in NI, technology-based phonics programmes (e.g., *Reading Eggs*, *Word Shark*, *Read&Write*) are utilised for literacy development and maintaining pupil engagement through interactive approaches.

Use of, you know, technology apps, their every use of immersive reader, which is very, really, really good. (Participant, IE)

I find digital structures really above and beyond everything. Like, not only then do I have the speaking, listening, reading, writing, but literally then the visual impact. (Participant, NI)

Furthermore, digital structures such as resource banks hosted on Microsoft Teams and visual aids delivered via PowerPoint provide organised support for staff and students in accessing relevant materials and strategies. These tools represent practical solutions that schools have implemented to address the dual challenges of language acquisition and SEN, offering immediate translation support, structured learning programmes and accessible resource repositories that can be tailored to individual pupil requirements.

Differentiated and Individualised Instruction

Tailoring instruction to individual needs, abilities and backgrounds represents a core strategy for supporting EAL pupils with SEN. Schools implement differentiation by outcome and task modification, while incorporating practical, hands-on activities to ensure accessibility and engagement for all learners.

So rather than differentiating by task, I would advise the class teacher to differentiate by, by outcome. (Participant, NI)

Like differentiated learning, differentiated teaching, that's very, very important. (Participant, IE)

Furthermore, small-group or one-to-one interventions are employed to provide more focused, personalised support, particularly for pupils with significant needs or those who are new arrivals requiring intensive initial guidance.

Having your visuals and embedding your inclusive practices so that kids are enabled to be able to listen and learn. (Participant, IE)

Additionally, the data reveals that instructional pace is often adjusted to accommodate varying learning speeds, while resources are adapted to match students' language proficiency levels and individual learning profiles. These approaches recognise that EAL pupils with SEN require flexible teaching methods that can simultaneously address language acquisition challenges and specific learning difficulties, consequently allowing educators to provide appropriate scaffolding that meets pupils where they are in their educational journey rather than applying standardised approaches that may not suit pupils' particular circumstances.

Inclusive and Culturally Responsive Practices

Fostering an inclusive environment and valuing cultural diversity support the integration and well-being of EAL pupils with SEN. Schools implement celebratory events such as World Language Day and international days, alongside multilingual signage throughout school buildings, to promote inclusion and develop a sense of belonging among pupils from diverse backgrounds.

On World Language Day, they share a little bit of insight into their culture and their language. We would have a breakfast or there would be a celebration event for that. (Participant, NI)

We've had signage around the school, things like that in their language. And, you know, we've developed into kind of have had international days.

(Participant, NI)

Furthermore, project-based learning opportunities focusing on pupils' home countries and initiatives that encourage pupils to teach classmates phrases in their own languages foster mutual respect and engagement across the school community. Cross-curricular and outdoor learning approaches are also employed to enhance pupil engagement while supporting holistic development that extends beyond traditional classroom boundaries.

Peer Support

Student-to-student peer support emerges as a valuable strategy to support EAL pupils with SEN across academic, social and emotional domains. One participant noted that senior students often serve as buddies or mentors for EAL pupils, providing essential guidance, language practice and emotional support.

Our senior students will work with identified EAL and SEN children who require time out of the classroom just to regulate. (Participant, NI)

Opportunities for peer interaction extend beyond the classroom setting, with interactions in the playground or community proving vital for building supportive relationships and helping students feel secure and integrated within the school community.

Theme 4: Home–School Relations

Diverse Methods of Communication

Various approaches to overcoming language differences between schools and EAL families were identified and were similar in both jurisdictions. The use of professional interpreters, translation services and bilingual staff to facilitate communication with parents who have limited English proficiency was deemed particularly effective. Translating written communications (such as letters, forms, school apps and homework diaries) ensures parents are informed and included. Furthermore, digital platforms and school apps with translation features are increasingly used to bridge language gaps and provide real-time information to parents.

Despite these efforts, language barriers remain a significant challenge, often resulting in misunderstandings, reluctance to communicate and limited parental engagement.

There is that immediate language barrier with home and the communication to identify that a child has a particular need. (Participant, NI)

It's the language barrier where to try and get parents involved. (Participant, IE)

We have a school app that we use, so that is linked to every student in the school, and every parent has the app. The beauty with the app is if we are sending that home to a parent who also has EAL, we can translate it.

(Participant, NI)

I really felt that it would be nice for parents if with all the literature they get sent up or all the apps that one of them might be in their home language.

(Participant, IE)

Furthermore, some parents face barriers to digital engagement due to illiteracy, lack of familiarity with technology or limited access to devices, reducing the effectiveness of these solutions. In both IE and NI there were indications of a reliance on children or siblings as translators, common but problematic, as it can place inappropriate responsibility on students and lead to miscommunication.

Building Trust with Families

There were significant efforts in both jurisdictions to foster trust, understanding and positive relationships between schools and EAL families. This included strategies such as open-door policies and informal interactions to help build rapport. Some participants reported employing home liaison officers and multilingual staff to facilitate relationship-building and address linguistic and cultural gaps.

Sensitive and positive framing of SEN diagnoses helps reduce stigma and foster acceptance among parents from diverse backgrounds, though cultural differences and resistance to school recommendations can still hinder home-school trust and collaboration. One participant in IE noted that high student mobility, absenteeism and loss of key staff disrupt continuity, making sustained relationship-building with parents challenging.

So, it was the child first, the parents and school, and everybody had to work kind of together and things. We were very much kind of going out with the children in the afternoon when the parents were collecting them. And if there was a new kid, you'd always introduce yourself or they'd come to the classroom door. And it was very much an open-door policy. (Participant, NI)

We're also building that relationship between home and school and helping them within the community. (Participant, IE)

One participant noted that a community committee had been established, bridging the gap between the school and the wider community.

The committee helped build trust between the Ukrainian community and the school here because they knew who I was. It was a familiar face. I was somebody that could be trusted. (Participant, IE)

Parental Engagement and Participation

Effective engagement with EAL families is significantly hindered by systemic barriers: lack of teacher training in cultural communication, insufficient funding limiting professional translators and comprehensive support, and administrative burdens with teachers' fear of misperception inhibiting outreach. These institutional obstacles prevent schools from developing the culturally responsive and linguistically accessible approaches necessary for meaningful family engagement.

And I think there's a huge fear with teachers in that they want to do things, but you just can't. But I think training and just building that bridge between school and community is so desperately important. (Participant, IE)

However, effective strategies to enhance engagement include tailored outreach approaches (such as sending home worksheets about home language use and providing translated notifications) that not only encourage parental participation but also provide valuable insights into students' linguistic backgrounds, while supplementary programmes like homework clubs and behaviour for learning initiatives offer additional academic support for students and create meaningful opportunities for family engagement within the school community.

Theme 5: Professional Development and Support

Most participants from both IE and NI report limited and fragmented professional development opportunities that specifically address the intersection of EAL and SEN. Most participants believe professional development in this area to be general in nature, focusing on EAL or SEN separately with little to no training addressing their intersection. Consequently, many staff members rely on self-initiated learning or isolated training sessions rather than receiving comprehensive guidance or support.

In terms of the gaps of what's needed in training, I think maybe it's like more so the understanding that EAL and SEN is not just about differentiating.

(Participant, NI)

But in terms of EAL and SEN. No, nothing specific. No courses have I been put on specifically for EAL or SEN. (Participant, NI)

I don't have that specific training, you know that EAL and SEN. (Participant, Rol)

Many participants collaborate with external agencies, educational psychologists, classroom assistants, language assistants and interpreters to support assessment and communication needs, effectively compensating for limited internal expertise. Participants value resources from organisations such as the Bell Foundation, British Council and Oide, but note a lack of equivalent, Ireland-specific training and resources.

The classroom assistants are the first, you know, like the first people who are able to tell us, listen, I've noticed something in the first language.

(Participant, NI)

We had the Education Authority (EA) out advising just on different resources, but it was probably more generalised as opposed to being specific to SEN.

(Participant, NI)

The NCSE have webinars on EAL and SEN. (Participant, IE)

We established community of practice with speech and language therapists.

(Participant, NI)

We have an educational psychologist that does some testing. (Participant, IE)

This situation has led to consistent calls from participants in both jurisdictions for more comprehensive, integrated professional development, resources and systemic support. There is strong demand for dedicated training modules, practical toolkits and ongoing CPD that directly addresses the intersection of EAL and SEN. Figure 13 details the main areas of training requested by participants in IE and NI.

Discussion and Conclusion

The following will address each of the three RQs, presenting and discussing the findings that emerged from the data in relation to each area of inquiry.

RQ1. Strategies used to Support EAL Pupils with SEN

Several key themes emerged from the data, including the importance of identification and assessment, use of technology and inclusive practices.

(i) (i) Identification and Assessment

The identification of EAL pupils with potential SEN across schools in IE and NI demonstrates a multilayered and contextually responsive approach. Schools reported use of a combination of baseline and standardised assessment tools, professional observations and collaborative staff input to make informed decisions about pupil needs. However, schools recognised that where there was a lack of transitional or baseline information on a pupil's needs, there was much potential for misdiagnosis or under-identification of an EAL pupil with SEND. One study noted the same challenge and found that cultural differences can impact on how pupils can appear to engage differently with the curriculum (Gleeson et al., 2025). Schools also need support and more guidance to have a better holistic understanding of the ways in which a pupil profile may present in a classroom context, as it can be problematic due to cultural differences, and as such it can mask EAL pupils' potential SEND (Carrig, 2021). Moreover, many assessment instruments are inappropriately used, as standardised tools are typically designed for fluent English speakers. This presents an immediate barrier to accessibility and can further marginalise EAL pupils with SEN, hindering their ability to engage meaningfully with the assessment process. Davies (2024) notes that such practices can exclude students, leading to feelings of isolation and disengagement from school.

Furthermore, schools expressed concerns specifically around identifying and recognising a presentation of dyslexia in EAL pupils. Rosamond et al. (2003) contend that it is challenging to understand the difference between a language need or an AEN. Again, assessment tools that purport to identify the possible presentation of dyslexia are often tailored for use with fluent English speakers, making the identification and assessment of dyslexia as an AEN for an EAL pupil challenging. In the main, schools indicated that they needed more support in terms of a broader range of targeted assessments to support EAL with SEND pupils (Bell Foundation, 2025). Targeted assessments are crucial to ensure EAL with SEN pupils' needs are recognised and prioritised upon entry to post-primary settings (The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, 2019).

(ii) The Role of Technology

Schools supported EAL pupils with SEN by employing a range of practical, inclusive strategies. This study highlights the importance of technology in supporting EAL and SEN pupils (Davies, 2024; Büyükahıska,, 2017; Tour, 2020; Duque et al., 2024; Kalemkuş, 2025). However, several schools raised issues around accessing digital tools outside of school for the purposes of supporting home learning. Many schools would like to have more adequate ICT infrastructure and professional development on the use of digital tools to support equitable access (Duque et al., 2024).

(iii) Inclusive Pedagogy and Integrated Support

Timely, tailored and targeted interventions were used within all schools as best practice in supporting EAL pupils with SEN (Daniel, 2025). Schools used differentiated materials and multisensory teaching with the use of visual aids (cue cards, translated booklets, working walls) to support comprehension and classroom engagement. Targeted smaller SEN classes allowed for tailored instruction, while one-to-one and peer support helped newly arrived pupils integrate. As suggested by Tan et al. (2017) and Creese (2006), collaborative practices between SENCOs, EAL teachers and classroom assistants ensured joined-up support and personalised interventions. Building trust with pupils and families with the use of translators and multilingual staff was also key to effective engagement. Collaboration among staff was supported by comprehensive whole-school training on the needs of EAL pupils with SEN; this was seen as essential to ensure consistent, informed and inclusive support across all levels of the school community (Johansson & Lindqvist, 2021). Despite these strategies, schools still reported a need for more targeted resources and specialised external support to meet the complex needs of this pupil profile (Burke, 2018; Dobson & Jørgensen, 2024).

RQ2. Effective Home/School Arrangements

Supporting pupils with EAL and SEN requires robust systems that promote inclusive communication and collaboration between families and educators. Schools reported effective practices aimed at bridging linguistic gaps and enhancing parental engagement.

(i) Translation Support

IE schools reported use of the Compass system, which enables family-directed translation, allowing parents to access school communications in their preferred language. This approach helps reduce barriers to engagement and supports more active involvement in their child's education. NI adopted a model of systematic multilingual staff deployment, ensuring that schools have personnel capable of communicating with families from diverse linguistic backgrounds. However, this presents challenges. Recruiting and retaining multilingual staff requires significant resourcing and budget allocation, and while these staff may possess strong language skills, they are not always trained in SEN support or equipped with the pedagogical knowledge needed to address complex learning needs. This can limit the effectiveness of their role in supporting pupils with dual needs. This view supports Cotán et al. (2023), who have called for better training to help teachers and support colleagues address the complex needs of EAL with SEN pupils.

Across both systems, the use of automatic translation apps for school communications offers a scalable solution to language barriers. These tools can enhance accessibility and streamline information sharing between schools and families. However, reliance on automated translation must be approached with caution, as nuances in educational and SEN-related language may be lost or misinterpreted.

(ii) Cultural Perceptions of SEND

As reported by some schools in this study and as observed by Marku et al. (2022), parents' understanding of what SEND is and what it implies for their child is often shaped by their own cultural experiences and beliefs. Therefore, the intersection of EAL and SEN can be particularly complex, as the language used to describe support needs may be misunderstood as well as mistranslated. These differences may affect how parents interpret school communications and engage with support strategies, potentially leading to misalignment in how they understand their role on how best to support the educational needs of their child (Oliver & Singal, 2017). O'Farrell and Kinsella (2018) highlight the importance of a 'therapeutic alliance' between teachers, health professionals and parents, noting that linguistic and cultural differences can strain this relationship.

They explain that parents of this pupil profile often have 'lower social and cultural capital' that leaves them excluded and disengaged from accessing or understanding supports and services available to them (ibid).

Overall, while these home/school initiatives represent meaningful steps toward inclusive practice, their success depends on sustained investment, targeted training and ongoing evaluation to ensure that pupils with EAL and SEN are fully supported in both home and school environments.

RQ3. Professional Development and Training

Professional development and training are essential for teachers supporting pupils with both EAL and SEN. These learners present complex needs that cannot be addressed through separate training in language or SEN alone. Teachers require integrated approaches combining language support, SEN strategies, and cultural competence. Without targeted training, schools' risk inconsistent identification and fragmented provision.

(i) Targeted CPD

Across both educational systems, schools reported a lack of targeted professional development focused on the intersection of EAL and SEND.

In IE most schools had not received targeted training. They engaged with general CPD that does not adequately address the dual complexities of language acquisition and additional needs. CPD in this area remains notably absent, leaving educators underprepared. Similarly, NI schools reported limited targeted training in the field of EAL with SEN. Available training focused broadly on newcomer pupils rather than specifically EAL pupils with SEND. In both systems, educators frequently depend on external resources and organisations (e.g., Bell Foundation, NCSE, IES) to upskill around EAL with SEND. However, access to these supports is inconsistent and formal programmes are scarce. This picture of the CPD landscape corroborates findings from the OECD 2018 TALIS that reported a need for increased support for schools in addressing the complex needs of EAL pupils with SEND. As recommended by Fitzgerald and Radford (2020), SENCOs also require targeted assistance to navigate these dual challenges effectively. Teachers also need access to relevant policies, training and resources to ensure inclusive, equitable educational practices (Burke, 2018; Cótan et al., 2023).

(ii) Assessment Tools

Assessment of EAL with SEN pupils is a problematic area. Educators feel that many of the EAL assessment tests and resources are not fit for purpose, as most target native and fluent English language users. The language barrier to access the assessment tests, tasks and tools can therefore prohibit EAL pupils from completing assessment items successfully (Tan et al., 2017). If a pupil has a SEN this further impedes accessibility in completing the assessment tasks. Generally, there appears to be a 'normative ableist' approach to use of assessment tools for EAL with SEN pupils (Oliver & Singal, 2017).

Delays in assessment compound these challenges, as pupils may go extended periods without appropriate support, leading to missed learning opportunities and increased educational disadvantage (Jørgensen et al., 2021).

To address this, there is an urgent need to diversify and adapt assessment tools to be more inclusive and responsive to both linguistic and cognitive differences. This includes integrating dyslexia-focused tools that use visual supports, simplified language and multisensory approaches. Additionally, assessments should offer alternative formats – such as oral responses, pictorial cues and scaffolded tasks – to reduce language load and better capture pupils' true abilities. By designing tools that are culturally and linguistically sensitive, and that accommodate a range of learning needs, educators can ensure more equitable and accurate assessments for EAL pupils with SEN (Tan et al., 2017).

(iii) Culturally Responsive Teaching and Trauma Informed Teaching

In light of the increasing number of pupils with EAL across both educational systems, largely influenced by recent geopolitical developments, educators have expressed a growing need for professional development in trauma-informed and culturally responsive pedagogical practices. Trauma-informed practices (e.g., establishing predictable routines, creating safe spaces for emotional regulation, adopting relationship-based approaches) are essential for promoting psychological safety and engagement (Palanac, 2019). Similarly, culturally responsive teaching can be enhanced through the use of multilingual resources, inclusive curriculum content, and alternative assessment formats such as oral responses, pictorial cues and scaffolded tasks. These approaches not only affirm pupils' cultural identities but also help mitigate language barriers and cognitive overload (Tan et al., 2017).

Both IE and NI face similar challenges supporting EAL pupils with SEN/AEN. IE demonstrates greater role specialisation with dedicated EAL teachers, SET teachers and learning resource coordinators, while NI shows more combined responsibilities and administrative positions such as SEN administrators and hybrid mainstream teacher/EAL coordinator roles. However, these staffing differences are minimal compared to overwhelming similarities in identification challenges, transition practices, teaching strategies and home-school relations.

This indicates that barriers faced by EAL pupils with SEN/AEN represent systemic issues transcending jurisdictional boundaries, with both countries employing comparable approaches to language differences and family communication. Overall, the findings underscore a pressing need for specialised, sustained and accessible professional development that equips educators to support EAL pupils with SEND effectively, with greater consistency across both educational systems.

Recommendations

This report outlines research-informed recommendations for supporting pupils with EAL and SEN/AEN. It is important to acknowledge that teachers and school leaders are already working in highly demanding, time-poor, and often under-resourced environments. Across both NI and IE, educators have demonstrated remarkable professionalism and adaptability, developing innovative approaches to meet the complex needs of EAL pupils with SEN/AEN. These recommendations are not intended as prescriptive solutions, but rather as reflective prompts that build on existing good practice. They aim to support and affirm the work already being done in schools, recognising that any further developments must be realistic, context-sensitive, and grounded in the lived realities of teaching and learning.

These recommendations address three critical areas: strategies for supporting EAL pupils with SEN in learning and school community engagement, effective home-school arrangements, and professional development requirements. They recognise that supporting EAL pupils with SEN requires integrated approaches that address language acquisition and learning differences simultaneously, rather than treating them as separate challenges.

FOR SCHOOLS

Assessment and Identification

- Develop comprehensive school-specific protocols to distinguish between language acquisition difficulties and genuine learning needs, incorporating multiple data sources including systematic data collection, classroom observations across subjects, peer comparisons with pupils from similar linguistic backgrounds, first-language assessments where possible and consultation with families about pupils' abilities in their home language.
- Create detailed multilingual pupil profile templates that capture educational history, previous assessments, any trauma experiences, family educational background, socioeconomic factors and cultural context from pupils' countries of origin.
- Establish clear, multi-step referral pathways that account for the complex intersection of language acquisition and potential learning difficulties, including mandatory consultation with EAL specialists before proceeding to formal SEN assessment.
- Create assessment accommodations that reduce language load while maintaining academic rigour, such as providing extra time, using visual supports, offering simplified language instructions, allowing oral responses instead of written work and providing translation support for key vocabulary.

Professional Collaboration and Staffing

- Formalise robust collaboration structures between SENCOs, EAL teachers, classroom assistants, mainstream teachers and external professionals through weekly planning meetings, shared documentation systems and joint professional development opportunities.

Peer Support Systems

- Establish peer support groups where EAL pupils with SEN can connect with others sharing similar experiences, reducing isolation and building confidence through shared understanding.
- Create opportunities for reverse mentoring, where EAL pupils can share their cultural knowledge and language skills with English-speaking peers, building self-esteem and mutual respect.

Family Engagement and Communication

- Provide comprehensive SEN information packages in families' home languages that include detailed explanations of SEN support within the IE/NI education system, rights and entitlements, and the assessment process.
- Create multiple communication channels including face-to-face meetings with interpreters, translated written materials, visual presentations and digital platforms that families can access in their preferred language and format.
- Create safe spaces for families to share concerns and ask questions.

Curriculum and Pedagogical Approaches

- Implement UDL principles systematically across all subjects, with particular attention to providing multiple means of representation (visual, auditory, tactile), engagement (cultural relevance, choice, collaboration) and expression (oral, written, creative, technological) for EAL pupils with SEN.
- Establish targeted small-group interventions that combine evidence-based language support methodologies with proven SEN strategies.
- Implement systematic approaches to celebrating linguistic diversity through multilingual signage throughout the school, regular cultural events that highlight different traditions and languages, and integration of diverse perspectives into curriculum content across all subjects.
- Develop culturally responsive teaching practices that value and incorporate pupils' linguistic and cultural backgrounds into learning activities, helping to build confidence and engagement while supporting academic progress.

Technology Integration and Digital Support

- Utilise immersive reader technology, visual learning platforms and interactive multimedia resources that provide multiple pathways for accessing and demonstrating learning while supporting language development and SEN accommodations.
- Establish digital resource banks containing translated materials, visual supports, cultural information and specialised learning tools that can be easily accessed and shared among staff.

Community Partnerships and Support Networks

- Establish partnerships with community organisations, cultural associations and religious groups that can provide additional support, cultural interpretation and family engagement opportunities.
- Create support networks connecting families with similar linguistic or cultural backgrounds to reduce isolation and build community connections beyond the school environment.

Training and Development

- Develop and mandate comprehensive CPD programmes specifically addressing the dual complexities of language acquisition and SEN rather than treating them separately.
- Train all staff in creating differentiated materials that simultaneously address language development and SEN accommodations.
- Create formal partnerships with external organisations (Bell Foundation, NCSE, IES) to ensure consistent access to specialised training across all schools rather than ad hoc arrangements.
- Train all staff in effective communication strategies with EAL families, including working with interpreters, cultural sensitivity in discussing SEN, and understanding different cultural perspectives on disability and educational support.
- Train teachers in trauma-informed pedagogical approaches that recognise potential displacement, loss or educational disruption.

FOR POLICYMAKERS

- Develop comprehensive EAL-SEN policies that specifically address the intersection of both needs rather than treating them as separate challenges. These should include clear definitions, identification procedures, support entitlements and accountability measures that recognise the unique complexity of this population.
- Fund and mandate comprehensive training on the intersection of EAL and SEN for all teachers, SENCOs, educational psychologists and support staff working in schools with high EAL populations. This should be ongoing, evidence based and include practical strategies rather than theoretical overview only.
- Establish partnerships with universities and research institutions to ensure professional development is based on current research and evidence-based practices.
- Establish formal partnerships between education departments, health services, social services and community organisations to ensure coordinated support for EAL pupils with SEN and their families.
- Increase funding for targeted resources and specialised external support to meet the complex needs of EAL pupils with SEN, addressing current gaps identified by schools.

Cross-jurisdictional collaboration (IE and NI)

- Establish joint professional development programmes between IE and NI that leverage expertise from both jurisdictions.
- Create communities of practice transcending political boundaries.
- Develop shared repositories of assessment tools, learning materials and cultural resources accessible to schools in both jurisdictions, reducing duplication of effort while maximising resource efficiency.

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Appendix 1

Section	Question / Item	Question Type / Response Format
A. Participant Information	1. ID	Auto-generated
	2. Start time	Auto-generated
	3. Completion time	Auto-generated
	4. Email	Short answer
	5. Name	Short answer
	6. Last modified time	Auto-generated
	7. Please indicate that you have read the information letter and consent to taking part in this research study.	Required consent (Yes/No)
B. Background Information	8. In which education system do you work?	Multiple choice (e.g., IE / NI / Other)
	9. What is your role in school?	Multiple choice (e.g., Mainstream teacher, SET, Principal, Other)
	10. IE ONLY: If a mainstream teacher with SET hours, how many SET hours do you teach per week?	Short answer (numeric)
	11. Please detail any leadership roles and responsibilities that you may hold in relation to supporting EAL with SEN/AEN pupils.	Open-ended
	12. How many years teaching experience do you have?	Numeric / range
	13. What type of school do you work in?	Multiple choice (Primary / Post-primary / Special / Other)
	14. If you answered 'other' in Q13, please provide details below.	Open-ended
C. Identification and Needs of EAL Pupils with SEN/AEN	15. Please indicate which learning difficulties EAL pupils with SEN/AEN commonly have as detailed on their SSP/IEP/PLP.	Multiple choice (select all that apply)
	16. ROI only: Please indicate the number of EAL with SEN/AEN pupils in your school who have a School Support Plan (SSP).	Numeric
	17. Please indicate the number of EAL pupils with SEN/AEN pupils in your school who have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) or Personal Learning Plan (PLP).	Numeric

	18. How does your school identify EAL with SEN/AEN pupils? (Select all that apply)	Multiple choice (e.g., Teacher observation, Assessment, SEN referral, Parental input, Other)
	19. If you have indicated 'other' in Q18, please provide details below.	Open-ended
	20. What barriers do you or your school face when seeking out information or identifying EAL with SEN/AEN pupils' needs?	Multiple choice + Open-ended
	21. If you have indicated 'other' in Q20, please provide details below.	Open-ended
D. Parental Involvement	22. How involved are parents of EAL with SEN/AEN pupils in supporting their child's learning needs?	Likert scale (1–5: Not at all – Very involved)
	23. Please select applicable barriers for any parental/caregiver involvement.	Multiple choice
	24. If you selected 'other' in Q23, please indicate why below.	Open-ended
E. Supports and Resources	25. What specific supports are in place for EAL with SEN/AEN pupils in your classroom and school?	Multiple choice + Open-ended
	26. If you selected 'other' in Q25, please indicate what other supports were used below.	Open-ended
	27. What are the main challenges you or your school face in providing support to EAL with SEN/AEN pupils?	Open-ended
	28. If you selected 'other' in Q27, please indicate why below.	Open-ended
	29. What supports, external agencies or services does your school use and/or collaborate with to support EAL with SEN/AEN pupils?	Multiple choice + Open-ended
	30. If you selected 'other' in Q29, please indicate what else was used or accessed below.	Open-ended
F. Professional Development and Policy	31. What types of professional development have you received to support EAL with SEN/AEN since you completed your initial teacher education and induction?	Multiple choice + Open-ended
	32. If you selected 'other' in Q31, please indicate other professional development supports used or accessed below.	Open-ended

	33. How effective do you find current government policies in supporting EAL with SEN/AEN pupils in your educational system?	Likert scale (1–5)
	34. Please explain your answer to Q33.	Open-ended
G. Inclusion and School Environment	35. How well are EAL with SEN/AEN pupils included within mainstream classrooms in your school?	Likert scale (1–5)
	36. How do EAL with SEN/AEN pupils interact with peers in your school?	Open-ended
	37. Please describe any interventions your school uses to promote positive peer relationships.	Open-ended
H. Challenges and Success Stories	38. Can you share the biggest challenges your school faces when supporting learning for EAL with SEN/AEN pupils?	Open-ended
	39. Can you share success stories or examples of good practice and innovation that your school has implemented?	Open-ended
I. Future Professional Development	40. If you were to complete a short professional development course to support EAL with SEN/AEN pupils, what areas and topics would you like it to cover?	Open-ended
J. Follow-Up and Contact	41. Please indicate if you are happy to be contacted to take part in an online interview as part of this research project.	Yes/No
	42. Please state your full name and email address below	Short answer

Appendix 2

Interview Protocol used in the Study

Study Overview

Research Focus: Exploring current practices, challenges, and support strategies for English as an Additional Language (EAL) pupils with Special Educational Needs/Additional Educational Needs (SEN/AEN) in post-primary schools across Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Section A: Opening and Context (5 minutes)

- 1. Can you tell me about your role in the school and how long you've been working in this capacity?**
 - *Probe:* What does a typical day/week look like for you?
 - 2. Approximately how many EAL pupils with SEN/AEN are currently in your school?**
 - *Probe:* What types of needs do you most commonly encounter?
-

Section B: Identification and Assessment (10-12 minutes)

RQ Focus: Understanding identification methods and challenges

- 3. Can you walk me through the process your school uses to identify EAL pupils who may have SEN/AEN?**
 - *Probes:*
 - What assessment tools or methods do you use?
 - At what point in a pupil's journey does identification typically occur?
 - Who is involved in the identification process?
 - 4. What are the main challenges you face in distinguishing between language acquisition needs and learning difficulties?**
 - *Probes:*
 - Can you give me an example?
 - How do you address this challenge?
 - What would help make this process easier?
 - 5. How do you access information about a pupil's educational history or previous assessments, particularly from their country of origin?**
 - *Probes:*
 - What barriers do you encounter?
 - How often do you receive comprehensive information?
-

6. What role do educational psychologists and other external professionals play in the identification process?

- *Probes:*
 - How accessible are these services?
 - What challenges do you face in accessing specialist assessments?
-

Section C: Transition and Induction (8-10 minutes)

RQ Focus: Understanding transition practices and support

7. How does your school support EAL pupils with SEN/AEN when they first join the school?

- *Probes:*
 - What induction activities do you provide?
 - How do you help them settle into the school community?
 - What role do peers play in this process?

8. How does information about pupils' needs transfer from primary to post-primary settings?

- *Probes:*
 - What information do you typically receive?
 - What gaps exist in this information transfer?
 - How could this process be improved?
-

Section D: Teaching and Learning Strategies (12-15 minutes)

RQ Focus: Strategies to support learning and engagement (RQ1)

9. What specific teaching strategies or approaches do you use to support EAL pupils with SEN/AEN in their learning?

- *Probes:*
 - Can you give me specific examples?
 - How do you differentiate instruction?
 - What works particularly well?

10. What role does technology play in supporting these pupils?

- *Probes:*
 - What specific tools or applications do you use?
 - How effective are they?
 - What barriers exist to using technology effectively?

11. How do you balance language support with SEN support in your teaching approaches?

- *Probes:*
 - Do you use withdrawal support or in-class support?
 - How do you coordinate between EAL and SEN provision?
-

12. Can you describe how collaboration works between different staff members (mainstream teachers, SENCOs, EAL teachers, classroom assistants)?

- *Probes:*
 - How often do you meet?
 - What does this collaboration look like in practice?
 - What challenges exist?

13. How do you create an inclusive and culturally responsive learning environment?

- *Probes:*
 - What specific practices do you use?
 - Can you share a success story?
-

Section E: Home-School Relations (10-12 minutes)

RQ Focus: Effective home/school arrangements (RQ2)

14. How do you communicate with parents/carers of EAL pupils with SEN/AEN?

- *Probes:*
 - What methods do you use?
 - How do you overcome language barriers?
 - Do you use translation services or multilingual staff?

15. What barriers have you encountered in engaging with these families?

- *Probes:*
 - Language barriers
 - Cultural differences in understanding SEN/AEN
 - Trust issues
 - Other factors

16. What strategies have you found effective in building trust and engagement with families?

- *Probes:*
 - Can you share a specific example?
 - What role do cultural mediators or liaison officers play?

17. How do you support parents in understanding the education system and their child's rights and entitlements?

- *Probes:*
 - What information do you provide?
 - In what formats?
 - How do you ensure understanding?
-

Section F: Professional Development and Support (8-10 minutes)

RQ Focus: Training requirements (RQ3)

18. What professional development have you received related to supporting EAL pupils with SEN/AEN?

- *Probes:*
 - Was it specific to the intersection of EAL and SEN, or separate training?
 - How useful was it?
 - What gaps existed?

19. What additional training or support do you feel you need to effectively support these pupils?

- *Probes:*
 - Assessment strategies
 - Cultural awareness
 - Communication with families
 - Specific teaching strategies
 - Understanding trauma-informed approaches

20. What external support do you access (e.g., educational psychologists, specialist services, community organizations)?

- *Probes:*
 - How accessible are these services?
 - What barriers do you face?
 - What additional support would be helpful?
-

Section G: Policy and Systemic Issues (5-7 minutes)

21. How would you rate the effectiveness of current government policies in supporting EAL pupils with SEN/AEN?

- *Probes:*
 - What works well?
 - What are the main gaps?
 - What policy changes would you recommend?

22. What are the main resource challenges you face?

- *Probes:*
 - Staffing
 - Materials
 - Time
 - Funding
 - Access to specialists
-

Section H: Successes and Future Directions (5 minutes)

23. Can you share a success story or example of good practice from your school?

- Probe: What made this successful?

24. If you could change one thing to better support EAL pupils with SEN/AEN, what would it be?

25. Is there anything else you'd like to share that we haven't covered?

