

The factors which influence completion and non-completion in Irish-medium post-primary education from the student perspective.

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Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award PhD is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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Dedication

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List of Abbreviations

Board of Management	BOM
Central Applications Office	CAO
Delivering Equality in Schools	DEIS
Department of Education	DoE
Dublin City University	DCU
Economic and Social Research Institute	ESRI
European Commission	EC
European Union	EU
Frequently Asked Questions	FAQ
Identity-based motivation	IBM
Informed Consent Form	ICF
Irish-medium	IM
Irish-medium Education	IME
Junior Certificate / Junior Cycle	JC
Leaving Certificate	LC
Modern Foreign Language	MFL
National Educational Welfare Board	NEWB
National Framework of Qualifications	NFQ
Northern Ireland	NI
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development	OECD
Plain Language Statement	PLS
Post-Primary Online Database	P-POD

Primary language	L1
Quadrant 1-4	Q1-4
Relational Agency Theory	RAT
Republic of Ireland	ROI
Secondary Language	L2
State Examinations Commission	SEC
Transition Year	TY
United States of America	USA

List of Terminology

<i>An Caighdeán Oifigiúil</i>	The official standard.
<i>An Foras Teanga</i>	The Language Body. A North-South body established by the British-Irish Agreement Act (1999) to promote the Irish language throughout the whole island of Ireland.
<i>An Garda Síochána</i>	The police force in the Republic of Ireland.
<i>Aonaid Lán-Ghaeilge</i>	Irish-medium unit within an English-medium School.
<i>Coimisinéir Teanga</i>	The Language Commissioner.
<i>Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta</i>	The representative body for Irish-language medium education in Northern Ireland.
<i>Comhaltas Ceolteoirí Éireann</i>	A non-profit cultural group involved in the preservation and promotion of Irish traditional music.
<i>Conradh na Gaeilge</i>	The Gaelic League. <i>Conradh na Gaeilge</i> is the democratic forum for the Irish-speaking community.
<i>Dáil Éireann</i>	The Irish Parliament.
<i>Foras na Gaeilge</i>	The body responsible for the promotion of the Irish language throughout the island of Ireland.
<i>Gaeilge</i>	The Irish Language.
<i>Gael Linn</i>	An entrepreneurial organisation which aims to foster and promote the Irish language.
<i>Gaelcholáiste</i>	Irish-medium post-primary school.

<i>Gaelcholáistí</i>	Irish-medium post-primary schools, plural form of <i>Gaelcholáiste</i> .
<i>Gaeloideachas</i>	A national Irish organisation supporting the development of Irish-medium immersion schools. The system of education through the Irish Language.
<i>Gaelscoil</i>	Irish-medium primary school.
<i>Gaelscoileanna</i>	Irish-medium primary schools, plural form of <i>Gaelscoil</i> .
<i>Gaeltacht</i>	The officially recognised districts of Ireland where the Irish language is the predominant spoken language.
<i>Radio na Life</i>	An Irish-medium radio station in the Dublin area.
<i>Siamsaíocht</i>	An Irish-medium variety talent show for young adults.
<i>Sruth Lán-Ghaeilge</i>	Irish-medium stream or class within an English-medium School.
<i>Teilifís na Gaeilge (TnaG)</i>	The public service television corporation in charge of operating the Irish language television channels TG4 and Cúla 4.

Abstract

Ciarán Kavanagh

The factors which influence completion and non-completion in Irish-medium post-primary education from the student perspective.

The provision of immersion education and the sustained growth of Irish-medium education (IME) is a key developmental strategy of the Department of Education (DOE), which commits to “extend Irish-medium provision” as a national strategic action (Department of Education, 2021, p. 19). While anecdotal evidence suggests that attrition is an area of concern in immersion education contexts internationally (Mac Cárthaigh, 2019), there remains a lack of research studies on attrition and retention models which investigate this issue in post-primary IME in the Republic of Ireland (ROI).

The researcher sought to address this dearth of information by collecting and analysing the perspectives of IME students on completion and non-completion in the Irish context. In particular, this research investigates why:

- (i) some students transfer out of IME to attend an English-medium alternative, and;
- (ii) some students consider transferring out IME, but ultimately choose to remain in IME, and;
- (iii) some students never consider leaving IME.

This mixed methods study was conducted over two phases. A quantitative survey was completed by a sample of IME students (n=132). This was followed by focus groups with students (n=15) currently enrolled in IME and interviews with students (n=5) who had moved from IME to English-medium schools. Participants shared their experiences of and attitudes towards IME, their perceptions of education and discussed the factors which influenced their decision to leave or remain in IME. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse the data generated (Mason, 2009).

The findings were used to construct a new completion and non-completion model, building on existing international attrition & retention models, but which is specific to immersion education. Additionally, recommendations are provided for the future enhancement of IME provision and to help maximise completion rates in immersion education, both nationally and internationally.

Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This chapter begins with an exploration of the research question. The aims and objectives of the study are presented along with the research question in order to provide a clear direction for the remainder of the dissertation. The rationale for the study is presented in order to give a deeper context to the research question before the background and motivations of the researcher are given. Following this, the history of the Irish language is examined, providing a background to the study. Irish-medium education (IME) is then discussed in terms of the *Gaeloideachas* (Irish-medium education) movement, student perceptions of learning through Irish and bilingual and immersion education. Finally, the schools which participated in the study are profiled and an outline of the dissertation is provided. The chapter then concludes with a brief summary.

1.2 Research Question

The focus of this research is on the factors which influence completion and non-completion in Irish-medium (IM) post-primary settings from the perspective of the students. While the original intention of this research was to examine the continuum of education in IM post-primary schools, with an emphasis on attrition, it became obvious as the research progressed that attrition could not be viewed as a stand-alone issue, rather, it is part of a much wider process; that of attrition, retention and transfer. In order to encompass the entirety of the phenomenon of leaving a school,

the decision was made to broaden the scope of the study to include both completion and non-completion.

The aim of the present study is to gain an understanding of the nature of completion and non-completion in post-primary immersion language settings and to ascertain what motivates students to remain in or to leave their IM post-primary school after they have begun their initial course of study there. The ultimate goal of the study is to identify the main influencing factors in completion and non-completion in the IM post-primary education sector. This understanding could help to empower teachers, schools and policymakers as they endeavour to facilitate students remaining in the education system and in the IM post-primary school, as well as to aid parents and students as they make decisions regarding IM post-primary education.

The key research question in this study is:

What are the factors which influence completion and non-completion in Irish-medium post-primary education from the student perspective?

1.3 Rationale for the Chosen Topic

The study is situated in IM post-primary education in the Republic of Ireland (ROI) outside of designated *Gaeltacht* (Irish speaking) areas. All instruction is delivered through the medium of Irish in these schools, with the exception of English lessons and some modern language lessons. This system of learning is commonly referred to as immersion education, and in the case of Ireland, is often termed as *Gaeloideachas*. While the Irish language is used as the medium of instruction, it is not necessarily the target or aim of any given lesson, apart from Irish language arts, rather, language

learning becomes a consequence of learning objectives in a given subject (Cummins, 2011).

In post-primary education in Ireland, each student completes 5-6 years of second level education culminating in the Leaving Certificate (LC) examination. The LC as a final assessment allows for the application of national and international standards from the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), which was established by the Government of Ireland in 2003 as a result of the Bologna Process in 1999. In this framework, qualifications are awarded on an NFQ level ranging from 1 to 10, with each level reflecting the standard of learning attributed to each level. Currently the Leaving Certificate is considered a Level 5 award (NFQ-QQI, 2019).

In terms of policy, Ireland has actively sought to increase education participation rates as successive Governments have introduced new programmes, curricula and institutions (McCoy & Smyth, 2011). During the past three decades the focus of educational development has not only been on *how much* education Irish citizens receive, but also on the *type* and *quality* of education they receive (Kelly, et al., 2010) in order to prepare them for the realities of the Irish and Global economies and labour markets (Byrne & McCoy, 2017). A number of the key methods that Irish Governments have used to try and improve economic prospects of young people have occurred through the education system, with school completion rates steadily increasing over time as a direct result of increased educational provision (Comerford, et al., 2015; O’Riain & O’Connell, 2000). This has resulted in Ireland having amongst the highest post-primary student retention rates in the world (OECD, 2015).

While Irish is the first official language in Ireland, English is the most commonly used, and is often viewed as the de facto primary language (L1) of Ireland. English is used daily by the majority of the population (Mac Giolla Chríost, 2012). In comparison, Irish is spoken daily (outside of the education system) by 73,803 people, or 1.7% of the population (Central Statistics Office, 2017). Additionally, a further 111,473 people indicated in the most recent census that they spoke Irish weekly outside of the education system, representing 3.7% of the population with the total number of people reporting that they could speak Irish numbering 1,761,420, representing 39.8% of the population (Central Statistics Office, 2017). Irish can therefore be referred to as the de facto secondary language (L2) of Ireland. As such, several strategies have been implemented since the foundation of the State to protect the Irish language (Uí Chollatáin, 2010). One such strategy was the introduction of Irish immersion education – schools which use Irish as the primary language of instruction.

The numbers attending primary level IME remain strong and continue to grow (Ní Thuairisg & Ó Duibhir, 2016), however, the number of students transitioning to an IM post-primary school has not established a similar strength in numbers (Department of Education, 2018). As of 2020, there were 10,283 students in IM post-primary schools from outside of the *Gaeltacht* region (Irish speaking areas), representing 4% of the total number of post-primary pupils in Ireland and these numbers are growing annually (Department of Education, 2021; Ó Caollaí, 2016).

With almost 4% of post-primary students currently attending an IM post-primary school, a number which is increasing annually, it is important that schools and educators understand the factors which influence a young person completing or not

completing their post-primary education in the IM setting where they began their post-primary schooling (OECD, 2015). While some factors have already been identified; advantages of bilingual education, attainment in the LC and a renewed interest in the Irish language (Ó Caollaí, 2016; Ní Thuairisg & Ó Duibhir, 2016), other contributory factors may still yield interesting results and contribute to the current discourse on the topic, especially from the perspective of those who live in the day-to-day reality of the IM post-primary experience – the students.

1.4 The Researcher

I have been a teacher and member of middle management in an Irish immersion post-primary school for over a decade, working with all year groupings from first years in Junior Cycle to sixth years in Senior Cycle (ages 12-18). While I began my teaching career with very little Irish, my school environment, which functions exclusively through Irish, enabled me to develop my competency in the Irish language relatively quickly. My love of learning facilitated my interest in developing my Irish language skills and I was encouraged and supported along the journey by students, parents, colleagues and management. To the best of my knowledge, thousands of Irish immersion students across Ireland continue to have similar experiences due to the shortage of teachers competent in Irish to teach in IME at post-primary level.

However, as I became more integrated into the immersion setting and moved into middle management, I began to notice certain trends and patterns. It became apparent to me that the Irish immersion experience that our school offered was not sufficient or satisfying for all of our students. Although our pupils were growing and developing as bilingual learners, each year a number of students would leave the

school to complete their post-primary education in English medium schools. One example that comes to mind is a language class I had with a First-Year class (age 12-13), where on the first day there were 30 students in the room. The study of a modern foreign language in addition to English and Irish is a mandatory subject up to the LC in our school, but by the end of sixth year, only 21 of the 30 students were still in the class. One student had left full time education altogether, meaning that 8 (27%) had transferred over the course of six years. Just over a quarter of the class had chosen to leave the immersion programme to complete their LC in an English medium school. As a school staff, we perceive school attrition to be a problem and we have tried to investigate it but we encountered a distinct lack of information and data which relates directly to our situation; an IM post-primary school in an urban area in the East of Ireland.

My interest in completion and non-completion, as well as my interest in Irish immersion generally stems from this background. I wanted to know why some post-primary students leave Irish immersion in favour of English medium instruction. I wanted to know whether my school was unique or whether this was an issue encountered in other IM post-primary schools. Were this the case, I wanted to know what these schools were doing to enhance completion and prevent non-completion, and what schools could learn from each other. Perhaps the completion and non-completion rates in the IME sector were in line with those of the English medium sector, but the added variable of L2 instruction could not be ignored as a possible factor, perceived or otherwise, in non-completion in the IM post-primary school.

1.5 Completion and Non-completion

While the ideas of completion and non-completion are discussed in greater depth in Chapter 2, it is important to introduce these notions here in Chapter 1 in order to fully establish the framework under which this research operates. In this study, the term completion is used to describe the process whereby students finish their post-primary education in the IM post-primary school where they began in first year. Non-completion is the term used to describe the process where students have left the IM post-primary school before completing their post-primary education. This study uses the sitting of the LC examination as the marker for completing post-primary education.

Completion and non-completion share a number of attributes with retention, attrition and transfer; however, completion and non-completion is also distinct. Some of this distinction stems from perspective. A student completes their education, while a school retains its student, introducing an important distinction. Non-completion encompasses both attrition and transfer in this study, meaning that non-completion accounts for students who do not sit their LC examination in the IM post-primary school where they began their secondary education, because they have either left full time education by that point or they have transferred to a different school.

1.6 Irish-medium Education

This first chapter aims to contextualise the research within Irish Language teaching and IME. It is however, beyond the scope of this study to explore the complex history which surrounds the Irish language and the teaching and learning of Irish as a subject (Ní Aogáin, 2018). The purpose of the following section on the Irish language

and the *Gaeloideachas* movement is to outline major events in the development of the Irish language in order to better understand where IME is currently situated. To begin this section, a brief timeline of major events which have shaped the current status of the language is presented, which is followed by a discussion around the *Gaelscoileanna* movement.

1.6.1 *The Decline and Revival of the Irish Language*

The Irish language remained the most common spoken language in Ireland until the beginning of the Plantation of Ireland by the British Government in the 17th Century (Goram, 2007). This action led to the decline of the language over time and to its replacement by English as the most commonly spoken language in Ireland. This was achieved using a variety of initiatives, not least the dispossession of the Irish, with their lands granted to English nobles, and the policy of primary education through English (Wolf, 2014). English also replaced Irish as the language of officialdom, with all branches of the Government and their representatives functioning exclusively through English by the mid-18th Century. The 1841 census reveals that of a population of 8,175,124 around 4 million were daily Irish speakers (O'Beirne-Ranelagh, 1994). However, the Great Famine of 1845-1852 had a devastating impact on the population of Ireland with over 2 million people dying or emigrating. While not the exclusive reason for the decline of the language, the Famine played a significant role as a large proportion of those who died or emigrated were Irish speakers from rural areas (Ó Madagáin, 1974). This trend continued throughout the latter half of the 19th Century, resulting in the continued decline of the Irish language (Wolf, 2014).

However, this decline was soon recognised as being more than linguistic, with recognition that language and culture are intrinsically combined and co-dependant. By 1893 *Conradh na Gaeilge* (the Gaelic League) had been founded and began to revive the Irish language under its first president Douglas Hyde. *Conradh na Gaeilge* started publishing newspapers, journals and pamphlets in Irish. It was also unique in that female participation was encouraged from the outset and women took active roles in the organisation. In 1906, seven of the forty-five-member executive council were women, something unprecedented at the time (Biletz, 2002). *Conradh na Gaeilge* was also successful in having Irish added to the primary school curriculum and by 1903 there were over 1,300 schools teaching the language (Tierney, 1980).

In 1922, with the foundation of the Irish Free State, official status was given to the Irish language and a number of initiatives to encourage its use were introduced. Irish was made a requirement for entry into the civil service and for public jobs such as teaching and the police force, *An Garda Síochána* (Ó Murchú, 1993). However, this support was mostly lacklustre and policies regarding the language were implemented inconsistently (Advisory Planning Committee, 1986). Despite the belief by many in *Conradh na Gaeilge* that the language should be encouraged in the home through cultural and folk activities, Government policy began to favour the formalisation of the language revival. As such, the development and revival of the Irish language continued to be pursued through the education system, with schools being given the primary burden of reviving Irish (Coolahan, 1981). In 1928 Irish was made compulsory for the Intermediate Certificate and in 1934 the language was made compulsory for the LC (FitzGerald, 2003).

The 1937 Constitution states that Irish is the first official language of the Republic of Ireland. However, despite this status, the reality of the language changed little. While *Dáil Éireann* (the Irish Parliament) proceedings were carried out in Irish, very few speeches or debates were delivered in the language, and English continued to dominate as the primary language of the Government and Civil Service (Mac Giolla Chríost, 2012).

In 1958 *An Caighdeán Oifigiúil* (the official standard) was introduced to standardise the language and to simplify spellings by using the standard Latin alphabet and characters. Despite this, the language continued to decline in subsequent decades. In 1966 the Language Freedom Movement was founded which opposed the methods being used by the state to forcibly revive the language through official channels such as the education system and the public service (Crowly, 2005). Pressure from lobby groups such as this resulted in the 1974 decision that proficiency in English *or* Irish would suffice for entry to the public service (Ó Murchú, 1993). As the Irish economy began to improve in the 1990s, there was a revival in interest in the Irish language. This period saw the rise of community-based groups with highly proficient administrative support infrastructure, which led to the development of urban Irish speakers, a new phenomenon within the language. These new speakers were initially made up of the urban professional classes who had strong respect for Irish tradition and culture and who lent support to the revival of the language in an urban setting (O'Connor, 2000; Mac Giolla Chríost, 2012; Ó Murchú, 1993).

The Good Friday Agreement 1998 led to the establishment of a North/South implementation body tasked with promoting the Irish language, resulting in *Foras na*

Gaeilge in 1999. More recently, the introduction of the Official Languages Act (2003) has had mainly positive effects on the condition and status of the language. The Act saw the introduction of the independent *Coimisinéir Teanga* (language commissioner), a statutory officer who is appointed by the President rather than the Government. The Act requires that Government agencies implement language schemes and make specific provision for the delivery of services through the medium of Irish, where requested or required. The *Coimisinéir* is empowered to investigate and prosecute public bodies who are in breach of their legal obligations regarding the Irish language (Mac Giolla Chríost, 2012). In 2007, Irish gained the status of an official and working language within the EU. Prior to this, Irish was recognised as a treaty language but not a working language.

Today there are seven officially recognised *Gaeltacht* areas on the island of Ireland where Irish is used as the primary mode of communication. Although the population of the *Gaeltacht* areas has significantly decreased in recent years, the use of the Irish language elsewhere has increased. This increase has mainly occurred in Leinster, in particular, the Dublin and Meath regions. Approximately 50% of Irish speakers now reside in Leinster (see Figure 1.1 below), compared with the mere five per cent that formerly resided in the region in 1851 (Fishman, 2001). The Irish Government currently aims to have 250,000 daily users of the language by 2030 (Comhdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge, 2010; Rialtas na hÉireann, 2010).

Figure 1.1

Towns with the highest number of daily Irish speakers, 2016

Town	Number of persons aged 3+	Number of daily Irish speakers	% Daily Irish speakers
Dublin city and suburbs	1,127,716	14,903	1.3
Cork city and suburbs	201,086	2,727	1.4
Galway city and suburbs	77,032	2,344	3
Limerick city and suburbs	90,379	963	1.1
An Bun Beag-Doirí Beaga	1,445	771	53.4
Letterkenny	18,317	525	2.9
Swords	37,403	487	1.3
Bray	31,353	484	1.5
An Cheathrú Rua	753	464	61.6
Drogheda	39,127	435	1.1

[https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp10esil/p10esil/ilg/#:~:text=Cork%2C%20Galway%20and%20Limerick%20combined,\)%20and%20Swords%20\(487\).](https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp10esil/p10esil/ilg/#:~:text=Cork%2C%20Galway%20and%20Limerick%20combined,)%20and%20Swords%20(487).) [Retrieved: 28/05/2020]

Other factors which have contributed to the recent resurgence in Irish are those ventures which have moved the language away from the sphere of education. TG4, an Irish language television channel and independent statutory entity, was launched in 1996 under the branding *TnaG* (*Teilifís na Gaeilge*, Irish [language Television]) with the express remit of providing an Irish language television service to the country. The station has increased its viewership steadily in the 20 years since its foundation, mainly through a combination of original content and sporting events (O'Connor, 2000).

The language revival has also benefited from proactive groups promoting the language. Newly competent Irish speakers have been key influences in securing the growth of Irish based cultural endeavours such as *Comhaltas Ceolteoirí Éireann*, the largest national group involved in the preservation and promotion of Irish traditional music, and *Radio na Life* (Liffey Radio) (Mac Giolla Chríost, 2012). *Gael Linn*, an entrepreneurial organisation which aims to foster and promote the Irish language as a

living language, provides multiple opportunities for Irish in the arts, including its annual *Scléip* talent competition and its popular *Siamsaíocht* evenings. *An Foras Teanga* has been instrumental in supporting workplace initiatives to encourage use of the Irish language (O'Connor, 2000). Regular supporters of the language themselves are using their initiative, as can be seen with the development of the “pop-up *Gaeltacht*”, an informal event organised monthly through social media throughout the country and indeed abroad, as far afield as New York and Toronto (Loftus, 2017).

1.6.2 *Gaeloideachas*

In recent years the language has seen a revival with renewed interest in the preservation and expansion of the language resulting in a rise in popularity of *Gaeloideachas*. With *Gaeloideachas*, students receive their education through the medium of Irish, in *Gaelscoileanna* (Irish-medium primary schools) or *Gaelcholáistí* (Irish-medium post-primary schools). These schools are financed by the Department of Education (DoE) and they follow the national curriculum as prescribed by the Minister for Education (Ní Mhaoláin, 2013).

In 1972, the State reported having 11 IM primary schools and 5 IM post-primary schools outside the *Gaeltacht*. In 2006 this had risen to 131 primary and 31 post-primary schools, which by 2015 had risen to 179 primary and 43 secondary schools, including schools with Irish streams or units (Department of Education and Skills, 2016; PEIG.ie, 2022). This growth since the 1970s is seen mainly as a result of pressure exercised by parents upon successive Governments (Ó hAiniféin, 2008) in a movement founded from the ground up (Ó Duibhir, 2018; McAdory & Germen Janmaat, 2015).

While the majority of people maintain a favourable disposition towards the idea of the Irish language (Darmody & Daly, 2015), the lack of any meaningful need to engage with the language on a day-to-day basis has had an impact on perceptions of Irish and the willingness to learn through Irish (Little, et al., 1986). As such, the *Gaeloideachas* movement is slowly increasingly in popularity as it allows students the opportunity to engage with the Irish language in a substantial and worthwhile way, allowing them to contextualise their language acquisition through their daily interactions with both their peers and their schooling. This interaction through the medium of Irish, as well as more modern and open teaching methods in the primary classroom, have resulted in positive attitude changes amongst learners, improving their motivation to develop their linguistic skills as well as their willingness to continue their education through Irish (Devitt, et al., 2018; Harris & Murtagh, 1999).

The rise in popularity of *Gaeloideachas* cannot be viewed just in terms of the Irish language. *Gaelcholáistí* statistically record higher achievements in all LC subjects, including English, than their English medium counterparts, with greater access to further education (O'Connor, 2000; Canny & Hamilton, 2018). The popularity of these schools has also been encouraged by a shift in attitude towards Irish education. Locating these *Gaelscoileanna* in mainly urban areas has had the effect of making the Irish language seem more accessible to urban populations (O'Connor, 2000).

1.6.3 Bilingual Education

In this study, bilingual or immersion education will be referred to as Irish-medium education when the Irish context is being discussed or described, therefore it is important to explore the ideas of bilingual and immersion education. Bilingual

education comprises many different interpretations and definitions. This form of education has been subject to many investigations in both an Irish and international context. One common strand which has become evident from these investigations is the importance of the type of bilingualism being encouraged in the educational environment. This can greatly impact the effectiveness of this educational movement. As such, a number of different forms of bilingual education are available (see Table 1.1) in addition to the forms who are dominant in IME in the ROI (Baker, 1993; Baker, 2001).

Table 1.1

Types of Bilingual Education

Submersion education

Submersion education is a strand of immersion education which requires great autonomy on behalf of the learner. In terms of language acquisition, submersion education occurs when a non-native speaker is submersed in an educational environment dominated by native speakers. In this instance, the child begins at a disadvantage and must endeavour to catch up with his/her classmates. While supports and structures may be instigated by the school to scaffold the child into greater linguistic competency, ultimately it is the interaction with their peers and with the target culture that proves the biggest driver in language learning in this instance (Rossell & Baker, 1996). It is up to the child to improve their linguistic competence through daily interactions with the school and their peers. However, this form of education is often detrimental to the child's native language and culture, which are often sacrificed in the process of submersion (Piper, 1985).

Segregational education

Segregational education has been historically used as a form of immersion education to political ends. With this form of language education, minority language speakers are educated exclusively through the medium of the minority language. As such they are segregated from the majority language. This is often done for political reasons to limit the potential or future opportunities of minority language speakers, promoting mono-linguism thereby limiting the ability to communicate in a non-native language (Valdes, 1995). Minority language speakers are educated exclusively through the minority language in order to limit their exposure and uptake of the majority language, thus limiting their future opportunities and prospects. This form of education became popular in many African states in the 1980s and 1990s as a tool to control and manage various local tribes and to limit their future political dissent and effectiveness.

Transitional bilingual education

Transitional bilingual education however is used to provide a structured transition for a learner in moving from their native minority language to the majority spoken language. With this form of language education, a learner is allowed to use their native language as they learn the target language. This often occurs in the initial stages of language acquisition, where the learner will be taught through their native language and gradually progress to using more of the target language until they are conducting themselves exclusively through the non-native medium, however these programmes often prioritise a language shift and give no long-term prioritisation to

the maintenance or development of the initial native minority language (Fishman & Lovas, 1970).

Two-way bilingual education

Two-way bilingual education, also known as *dual-language education*, places an equal emphasis on both languages, the majority and minority. This form of education is practiced where there are equal numbers of both majority and minority students. In classes, both languages are used inter-dependently with the aim of promoting bilingual competency in both languages. Students are driven to develop all of their skills in both languages with both languages used as the media of instruction (Fishman & Lovas, 1970).

(Baker, 1993; Fallon, 2008)

However, the predominant forms of bilingual education in the ROI are not included in Table 1.1., as they are discussed in greater detail within this section of the chapter. While the types of bilingual education described in Table 1.1 can and do appear in the ROI, they cannot be said to have any substantial influence or impact. Within an Irish context, the most important forms of bilingual education are:

1. Mainstream education where second and additional languages are taught as subjects.
2. One-way immersion education where content is taught through the target language.

Mainstream education with second language teaching is the predominant method of language teaching and acquisition in the world. Learners are taught through

the majority / native language (L1) and learn a second language (L2) through specialised language classes. This is the method used in English medium schools throughout Ireland for the teaching of Irish and Modern Foreign Languages (MFLs) (Baker, 1993; Fallon, 2008).

One-way immersion bilingual education aims for students to be fully bilingual with neither language suffering at the expense of the other. The majority of the learners are non-native speakers and conduct themselves mainly through the target language, L2. This stream of bilingual education emphasises the importance of adequate time being allocated to the learning of both languages, L1 and L2. This is the method of education used within the *Gaelscoileanna* and *Gaelcholáistí* (Baker, 1993; de Mejía, 2012; Ó Laoire, 2012).

Bilingual education can be said to be either subtractive or additive. Where L2 is an additional language, this is referred to as additive, whereby competency in the target language is developed at no cost to the L1. Where L2 displaces, or indeed replaces L1, this is referred to as subtractive (Fallon, 2008).

International evidence suggests that immersion education faces many challenges, the three most pertinent to this study are:

1. An inadequacy of funding,
2. A shortage of suitably trained and qualified personnel,
3. A lack of supports, for example, teaching resources, plans and methodologies in the target language (Fishman & Lovas, 1970; Dunmore, 2017; Hickey & de Mejía, 2014).

When applying the studies of Johnson and Swain (1997) to the *Gaelscoileanna* and *Gaelcholáistí*, the most common features of immersion education as practiced in an Irish context can be identified:

- (i) L2 is used as the primary language of instruction, where L2 is the minority language.
- (ii) The same curriculum is taught in the IM (L2) schools as in the English medium (L1) schools.
- (iii) L1 is supported and taught and may be used as a medium of instruction for some subjects and extra-curricular activities.
- (iv) The classroom culture is that of the L1 community, rather than of the L2 minority group, although cultural awareness of the L2 group is incorporated.

(Johnson & Swain, 1997; Williams Fortune, 2012)

Immersion education has undergone an upsurge in regions where a minority language could face the danger of extinction, such as Ireland. In these cases, teaching minority language students through the minority language has had the effect of safeguarding the language in question (Johnson & Swaine, 1997; Mukan, et al., 2017). However, the purposes are not always cultural and for the benefit of the language, just as often the immersion programmes are instigated as a result of political pressures in an effort towards maintaining an individual national identity (Safty, 1992).

One emerging problem with programmes such as these is that decision makers are removed from the system and the community of language speakers they wish to protect. They often make implicit assumptions about the current circumstances of the

language and yet make plans grounded in the ideology of what ought to exist rather than based on the needs of the language community. Evidence suggests that generalised information is often used when making decisions relating to language needs rather than specific targeted information (Fishman & Lovas, 1970).

Achievement in immersion schools has been well documented as a product of additive bilingualism. Available evidence suggests that children achieve a high level of L2 skills without a negative impact on their L1 abilities, in fact evidence suggests that L1 capacity is enhanced and develops more rapidly than students who study exclusively through L1 (Safty, 1992; Hermanto, et al., 2012), supporting the idea of additive bilingualism as a positive educational option. This is especially true in an Irish context, where the L1 is in no danger of replacement by the L2 (Cummins, 1978).

Research has been predominant in certain areas of student outcomes and educational achievement, focusing on the extent to which students are learning through L2 and in comparison, of educational development in relation to students learning through L1 (Genesee, 1985; Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2013; Cammarata & Ó Ceallaigh, 2018). One such study suggests that children from IM schools have improved short-term and working memories than their counterparts in English medium schools (Canny & Hamilton, 2018). This increased memory potential allows for a learner to work with greater amounts of information, therefore increasing the learner's capacity for understanding and expanding their knowledge base at a much greater / increased capacity (Mehisto & Marsh, 2011).

1.7 Research Process

The present research began as the researcher completed his Master's degree in Educational Leadership and Management where the idea of parental choice in post-primary IME was explored in the researcher's final dissertation. After completing this dissertation, the researcher wished to explore the topic of IME further, noting the possibility for the inclusion of the student voice and perspective. The opportunity to expand on the research was discussed with teaching colleagues and school management and then with various faculty members in Dublin City University (DCU). The two supervisors of this study agreed to work with the researcher and the researcher applied to the DCU Institute of Education for a study grant, which was awarded to the researcher, enabling them to begin with this course of study. Figure 1.2 below outlines the various stages undertaken by the researcher while completing this study:

Figure 1.2

Research Process

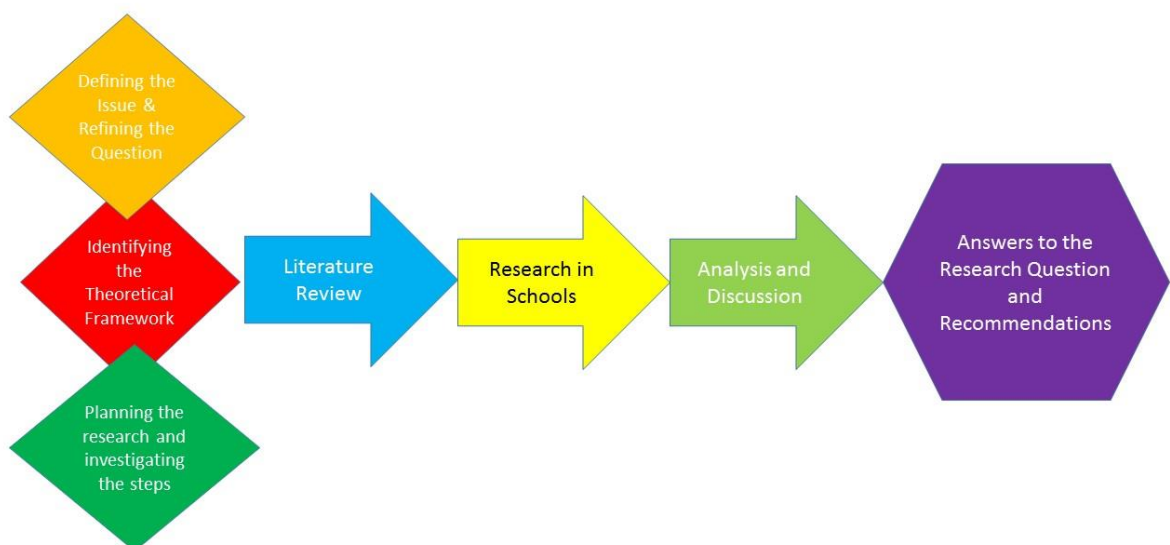


Figure 1.2 establishes the main steps which were undertaken within this study.

1. To undertake the following:
 - a. Define the issue to be researched and formulate a research question.
 - b. Identify the theoretical framework which is to be used in the study.
 - c. Plan the research in a logical step-by-step process in a way which suits the research question and the overall goals of the study.
2. To create a review of the literature which in turn could be used to inform the school-based research and, later, the analysis of the findings.
3. To conduct the research in the participant schools, including questionnaires of relevant participants, focus groups and semi-structured interviews to examine and gain deeper insights into student perceptions on completion and non-completion.
4. To analyse and discuss the findings of the research in order to draw conclusions.
5. To objectively establish whether the research has answered the research question and to furnish recommendations as to how students can be supported in order to maximise completion and minimise non-completion.

1.8 Outline of the Dissertation

Chapter One introduces the study and establishes the context for the study. In this chapter the research question is presented and defined while the overall objectives are introduced in order to keep the research focussed. The rationale for the topic being explored is then presented. An overview of the history of Irish language education and the *Gaeloideachas* movement is provided in order to provide a context

for future chapters. IME is explored and bilingual and immersion education are reviewed, again, providing a deeper context for the situation of this study. The schools which facilitated the research are profiled while the background and motivations of the researcher are then presented. Finally, a road-map of the research process is provided before an outline of the dissertation is provided.

Chapter Two presents an overview of the relevant literature which is pertinent to the research. The dominant themes are each discussed in turn and related back to the research question. The chapter begins with definitions of the terms completion and non-completion as they are understood in this study. Following this, retention models are explored before personal factors which affect completion and non-completion are examined. After the cognitive influences are discussed, social factors, including school engagement are analysed. This leads to a review of national and international environmental and economic factors before the various implications for completion and non-completion are presented.

Chapter Three outlines the methodology used to conduct this research. The paradigms which underpin this research are presented before the rationale for the mixed methods approach used in this study is discussed. An overview of the research methods is provided while the data collection and sampling methods are also discussed. Finally, the ethical considerations are explored before a conclusion is given.

Chapter Four presents the findings of this research. Both the quantitative and qualitative data are presented sequentially and are analysed and compared and contrasted before being considered and interpreted in relation to the literature review.

Chapter Five presents a further synthesis of the finding discussed in the previous chapter before the key themes which emerged throughout the research are concluded and the final recommendations of the researcher are presented.

1.9 Summary

This chapter established the basic premise and background of the research. The research question was presented, while the aims and objectives of the study were also given, establishing a clear sense of direction as the dissertation progresses. After the research question was introduced, the rationale for the question was discussed. The researcher was then profiled and their motivations for conducting this study were presented. The context of IME in Ireland was analysed in order that the question could be fully situated in its true context.

The position and history of the Irish language was then considered. This was done to establish the background to IME in order to show where the IME sector has grown from. This history also shows the circumstances from which attitudes towards the Irish language have developed. The history of the Irish language led to a brief discussion of the *Gaeloideachas* movement. This section was then completed with a review of bilingual and immersion education in an Irish context. All of this was done to provide an initial framework of understanding in order to scaffold the dissertation as it progresses.

The participant schools were then profiled in order to account for the scope of the research. A road map of the research was included, which outlines each of the major steps taken in this research project. Finally, an outline of the dissertation with

chapter summaries was provided before this chapter itself was concluded with a brief summary.

Chapter 2 – Review of Literature

2.1 Introduction

The focus of this chapter is the research literature which has informed the current investigation. The purpose of this study is to critically examine and analyse the student perspective on completion and non-completion in IM post-primary education in order to ascertain the factors which influence a student's decision to remain in or to transfer out of an IM post-primary school. In order to fully investigate these factors a deep understanding of the circumstances and considerations surrounding completion and non-completion is essential.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the concepts of completion and non-completion. Models of retention and attrition are discussed and analysed in order to develop a composite model which is applicable to this study. The similarities between retention, attrition and transfer, and completion and non-completion are identified to provide a basis for cross-comparison in later sections of the chapter.

This is then followed by an examination of the cognitive factors which may influence a student's decision to complete or not complete their post-primary education through the medium of Irish. The roles of identity formation, agency and motivation are all examined to provide an insight into the processes at work as a student decides whether or not to complete their post-primary education in an IM post-primary school. This creates a firm foundation from which any decision made by a student can be scrutinized by providing a cognitive understanding and context for such an analysis.

After cognitive factors have been examined, the social factors which influence completion and non-completion are introduced. The notion of the educational context of the student is explored in order to enrich the understanding previously developed while looking at cognitive factors. The school environment and school engagement are examined in order to place the student's decision in the reality of their daily educational experience and to connect cognitive factors with wider social issues. Within this section, teaching, learning and assessment and the student-teacher relationship are also discussed so that completion and non-completion in the IM post-primary school can be contextualised.

Expanding upon this, societal influences are subsequently investigated, with an analysis of both international and national policy trends with regards to the general idea of school completion. The key priorities are then identified and the implications for completion and non-completion in an IM setting are relativized. Once the connection between policy and completion is established, the manner in which economic considerations influence a student's decision to complete their post-primary education through Irish based on their perceived future success, development and progression are examined. This section then concludes with a brief summary of the chapter.

2.2 Completion and Non-Completion

In this section, the ideas of completion and non-completion in IM post-primary schools are defined. To begin with, attrition, retention and transfer are explored and defined as concepts, as elements of each can be identified when analysing completion and non-completion. However, as completion is distinct from attrition, retention and

transfer in its definition, commonalities are established in order to create a basis for understanding completion within the available literature.

This comparison is then expanded upon with models of attrition, retention and transfer in order to create a framework within which completion and non-completion can be understood and analysed. This section builds upon existing research in multiple education sectors in order to create a composite model with which the phenomenon of completion and non-completion in IM post-primary schools can be explored.

Once this framework is established, the importance of understanding completion and non-completion is probed, in terms of national policy, school development and individual benefits. This grounds the research in the established literature, as well as in the reality of the national context within which the study was conducted.

2.2.1 What is Completion and Non-completion?

While completion and non-completion are the specific foci of this study, they are issues which cannot be completely separated from retention, attrition and transfer, as all three of these notions are connected within completion and non-completion. If a student completes their course of study in the IM post-primary school, they have been retained. If a student leaves the school before completing their course of study, then one of two things has occurred:

1. they have either transferred to another school or;
2. they have attritted the education system completely and are no longer attending school in any capacity.

Therefore, all of these ideas are inter-connected. In order to understand the distinction between these ideas, the concepts of attrition, retention and transfer must first be defined in order to establish the difference with completion and non-completion. In the following sub-section, attrition, retention and transfer will be defined and discussed in relation to completion and non-completion. Subsequently, completion and non-completion will be defined as they are understood in this study and as they relate to the research question. Finally, some older studies into completion and non-completion will be highlighted in order to give the current study a baseline context.

2.2.1.1 Attrition

Attrition is defined as a student's withdrawal from a course of study, their failure to re-enrol for the next academic year or enrolling but failing to attend classes or sit final exams (Currie, et al., 2014). The Department of Education interpret this as leaving the education system before completing the final course of study and sitting the terminal examination (Department of Education and Skills, 2017). This definition has significant implications, as it has led to two distinct categories developing in the field of attrition research: (i) the process leading up to dropping out, and (ii) the implications for the later lives of those who drop out (Vogt, 2018).

Understanding the former of these two categories is essential, as similar processes are at play when a student decides not to complete their education in an IM school. While students in IM schools may not be leaving the education system entirely, the process leading up to the decision to leave their Irish immersion school is comparable, offering insight into the process of non-completion. Attrition research

also tends to examine the two main stakeholders in the attrition puzzle; (i) the institution, or school, and (ii) the individual who withdraws (De Witte, et al., 2013). This makes attrition research both relevant and essential, as non-completion can have profound implications for individual schools as well as for the students who decide to leave the IM environment. This also offers insight and access, by implication, into a third stakeholder: the student who considers leaving, but remains. This means that the procedures put in place by the education system to limit attrition must be examined, as they may offer significant insight into factors influencing completion and non-completion which can be extended to the IM post-primary sector.

As a distinct issue, attrition has been labelled a problem by the European Commission (EC), one which the EC has declared needs to be addressed. As such, the EC set Europe wide goals of reducing drop-out rates to below 10% by 2020, citing links between early school leaving and unemployment, social exclusion, poverty, involvement in crime and poor health (European Commission, 2008). This ambitious target was set after factoring in the generally accepted and researched factors which affect regular attrition. However, in the case of non-completion in an IM environment, there are a series of additional factors which may influence a student's decision to leave school permanently, meaning that students who are likely to become early leavers were they attending a regular English medium school are faced with additional influences when deciding upon completion or non-completion if they are attending an IM post-primary school (Campbell, 1992; Berube, 2015). If such students are inclined to drop out of school, regardless of the language of instruction and learning, then the factors which influence this non-completion need to be identified and understood in order that non-completion may be limited.

The importance of reducing attrition is noted as one of the EU's "key objectives in the Europe 2020 strategy", a strategy where the EU establishes its medium- and long-term planning objectives. Specifically, the reduction in attrition is seen as essential in the move towards "smart, sustainable and inclusive growth" over the next decade (European Commission, 2011). In Ireland, while 4% of post-primary students are educated through Irish, they represent 9.93% of post-primary schools (Department of Education and Skills, 2018). Identifying additional factors which influence attrition, and as a consequence, non-completion, could be viewed as a key strategic goal in contributing to the national and European medium- and long-term educational objectives. Any moves to reduce attrition at a national level to fulfil Ireland's European obligations must account for the 10% of the schools which do not teach exclusively through English, meaning that understanding the student perspective on completion and non-completion will serve local, national and European interests.

However, while attrition is a central aspect of the completion and non-completion puzzle, it does not fully explain completion and non-completion. Therefore, an additional aspect of this phenomenon is required. As such, retention will be defined and discussed as it related to the research question.

2.2.1.2 Retention

Retention refers to the process whereby students are retained in the education system to completion. Retention can be defined as the process through which people are encouraged to remain within a given system for a maximum period of time or until a particular project has come to completion (Hirsch & Emerick, 2006). In the DoE's interpretation, this is understood to mean students who complete Senior Cycle and sit

their LC Examination (Department of Education and Skills, 2017). In this instance, retention and completion are closely linked, and share many parallels.

While retention and attrition are often treated as a single phenomenon, they are in fact two distinct phenomenon (Borman & Dowling, 2008). Attrition occurs when the student leaves the system, having decided to do so. Retention can, for example, occur where a student wishes to leave, but decides not to, therefore suggesting that an intervention has occurred to prevent the decision to leave from being taken. To frame the difference in the context of the present research; the study will consider attrition as looking at why a student left, while viewing retention as looking at why the student stayed (Simpson, 2005). This subtle distinction has strong implications for completion and non-completion in IM post-primary schools, as retention focuses on keeping the student in the school, as opposed to attrition, which means early school leaving. Completion and non-completion, in this study, are focused on how and why a student remains within an IM school, as opposed to within the educational system itself, which means that methods of retention are particularly relevant in the context of this investigation.

The importance of retention can be seen on a macro level as retention statistics are often used by Governments as key performance indicators when measuring success in educational sectors (Crosling, et al., 2007). Retention levels are used as evidence of education quality and are usually linked with funding (Beer & Lawson, 2017).

In an Irish post-primary context, this occurs through the capitation grant, where schools are awarded funding and teacher numbers based on the number of registered

students (Department of Education and Skills, 2019). If a school loses students, it loses funding and teachers. This is particularly relevant to IM post-primary schools, which tend to be smaller than their English medium counterparts, and are therefore disproportionately affected (Department of Education and Skills, 2018).

The loss of a small number of students in a small- to medium- sized school can have profound implications for the future viability of that school, as resources and allocations are awarded based on the number of whole-time permanent teachers. This means that completion is often a key concern of school leaders in IM post-primary schools, as losing a single student can result in the loss of a permanent teacher the following academic year. This could result in fewer subject options, fewer middle management posts and possibly require the Deputy Principal to engage in teaching duties. This gives IM schools added incentive to understand the completion and non-completion conundrum.

While retention and attrition work well in tandem, they do not encompass or explain the full scope of the current study. Both retention and attrition appear in completion and non-completion, however they do not account for the issue of transfer, which is evident in IM contexts. As such, the following sub-section will discuss transfer in order to include the idea of transfer in the final definition of completion and non-completion.

2.2.1.3 Transfer

Transfer between schools is complex as transfer happens naturally in the education system all the time. Almost all students in Ireland will transfer from a primary to a post-primary school, some will also transfer from a pre-school to a

primary and some will make the move onward from post-primary to tertiary education (Demetriou, et al., 2000). While a substantial volume of literature exists on these natural transition points, there is substantially less available which looks exclusively at transfer within a single educational stage: that is the transfer from one post-primary school to another (Holme & Richards, 2009). As such, non-completion which manifests as transfer is difficult to research in the existing body of literature, as it does not necessarily happen at any of these natural transition points.

While movement between schools does happen and there are processes in place to administer such moves (Department of Education and Skills, 2018), research on the causes and consequences of such moves is sparse. Data of this type and analysis of such trends are an important part of the educational review process as such information allows for a greater understanding of the education system and contributes to the overall growth and development of education (Orellana & Nethi, 2019). While transfer can thus be viewed as attrition from the perspective of one school, it is not attrition in the true sense, as the student stays within the education system. However, non-completion encompasses both transfer and attrition, meaning that non-completion can be used to accurately describe the phenomenon of students opting not to complete their education in an IM post-primary school.

Thus, with the ideas of attrition, retention and transfer explored, a final definition of completion and non-completion can be drawn in order to create a baseline understanding of the concepts within this study.

2.2.1.4 Definition of Completion and Non-completion

With all of the subtleties of attrition, retention and transfer in mind, it is important to have a solid and accurate understanding of what exactly the terms completion and non-completion are understood to mean in the context of this investigation. While both terms share overlaps and similarities with attrition, retention and transfer, they are also unique descriptors for the phenomenon being researched in the current study.

In the present study, completion is understood to account for those students who are in the process of completing, or have already completed, their post-primary education by sitting their LC examinations. Non-completion is understood to account for those students who have either (i) failed to complete their post-primary education by not sitting their LC examinations, or (ii) those students who have moved from one educational programme/setting to another, at post-primary level, and who may, or may not, have completed their post-primary education in the second or subsequent school. Both of the terms completion and non-completion are understood to imply a process, with a movement towards a final objective – completing, or not completing, post-primary school by sitting the LC in an IM post-primary school.

With a solid definition of completion and non-completion, as it is understood in this study, it is helpfully to examine the phenomenon within the limited literature available on the subject. As such, the following two sub-sections provide a brief account and analysis of studies which have been completed in immersion contexts, accounting for attrition, retention and transfer, although not labelling these combined phenomena as completion and non-completion, as occurs in this study.

2.2.1.5 Studies on Completion and Non-completion at Primary Level

In 1985, Margaret Bruck conducted a *prospective* study into attrition and transfer in the French Immersion primary system in Canada to identify predictors for transfer out of immersion language programmes. In this study the participants were drawn from those learners who had transferred out of the immersion setting during the school year. Working with these participants gave Bruck a more accurate insight into the reasons for transfer, as previous data had been collected *retrospectively*, that is, after the transfer had happened, where participants were asked to recall their motivations for leaving the immersion programme. Using the prospective approach allowed Bruck to collect the most immediate responses of participants as they participated in the events being studied. Also, unlike the retrospective studies already available, it allowed her to create a control group with which she could make comparisons (Bruck, 1985a).

Bruck's study was extensive, encompassing the students, their parents and teachers. A range of tools were used to measure academic ability, cognitive skills, literacy levels, academic achievement, linguistic comprehension and production skills as well as attitudes and motivations. Comparisons were then drawn between the control group and the transfer group. What emerged was that no significant academic differences existed between the control and study groups. Rather, divergence occurred in relation to the attitudinal survey, which suggested that the children who transferred had a more negative disposition to the school, did not enjoy learning the French language and were not inclined to use the target language, either inside or outside of the school community. Furthermore, parents of the transfer group were

more likely to *perceive* that their child was having difficulties academically, despite this not actually being the case. Bruck therefore concluded that attitudinal and motivational variables were more stable and accurate predictors of transfer than academic and cognitive factors (Bruck, 1985a).

In another older study, Helen Hayden (1988) also provides an insight into predictors and factors affecting transfer from immersion programmes. In her 1988 study she found that parents cited difficulties with the target language, emotional stress and the parents' own inability to help at home as the three main influences in their decision to transfer their child to an English medium setting. In the same study, the teachers interviewed also identified difficulties with the target language and emotional stress as primary motivators in the decision to transfer students. Interestingly, this study showed that 67% of parents cited recommendations from the teacher as an influencing factor, while 71% of the teachers involved stated that it was the parents own wishes which were a major contributing factor, even where the teacher did not feel that the child was experiencing difficulties. (Hayden, 1988). This then reinforces Bruck's assertions that parent perception is a key challenge to retention in immersion settings (Bruck, 1985a). This is furthered by Noel (2003) who also noted that the concerns for the child's future education, perceptions of the quality of immersion education and emotional stress are all key factors in the decision to transfer. Additionally, Noel (2003) also noted the challenge that immersion poses to parental empowerment as parents are unable to help with homework as another key concern which was factored into the decision to transfer students out of immersion programmes (Beck, 2004).

While these studies are helpful, in that they provide a guideline for the type of data which can emerge from a study on completion and non-completion, they are not exclusive to post-primary settings. The insights, while interesting, exist in a different context to the current study. As such, completion and non-completion must also be analysed in post-primary education, as is the case in the current study. The following examples, while older, are useful in that they provide a guideline as to what can be learned in a study of completion and non-completion at post-primary level in an immersion education context.

2.2.1.6 Studies on Completion and Non-completion at Post-primary Level

In her studies into attrition and transfer in post-primary schools, Halsall (1994) found major inconsistencies in the number of French Immersion students graduating post-primary school with a *Certificate of French Immersion*, meaning that the students who had begun their education through immersion had not completed their education in the same programme, or had not taken enough subjects in the immersion programme to warrant the immersion certificate (Beck, 2004).

After a series of interviews, focus groups and surveys, Halsall came to a number of interesting conclusions. One of the main factors which led to student transfer out of the immersion programme and into an English medium school was stress, with the levels of stress encountered by students increasing as they progressed through the school system (Halsall, 1994).

Another factor, identified by school administrators was that of supports (or lack thereof) for students with additional needs in immersion education programmes (Halsall, 1994). Respondents to the questionnaires administered believed that fewer

students with additional needs would transfer out of immersion programmes if appropriate support structures were put in place to meet the specialised provisions these students might require. Additionally, a perception exists that tertiary education may prove more accessible if studies in upper post-primary school is completed through the language of the third level institution, usually English (Beck, 2004).

Some of these same ideas were borne out by Ellsworth (1997) where she noted that students were more likely to transfer out of late immersion programmes than earlier once they had begun post-primary school in an immersion programme. She also noted that, while not more likely to transfer out, boys showed more negative attitudes to late immersion than girls. The main reasons that students gave in this survey for dropout were their concerns about their academic achievements and their belief that the English programme would prove less challenging (Ellsworth, 1997). While these studies are relatively old, they do still wield significant insight into some of the basic and primary factors which influence completion and non-completion, laying a foundation for the current study, and contributing to the next section, an analysis of the importance of completion and non-completion.

2.2.2 The Importance of Completion and Non-completion

Completion and non-completion have serious benefits and consequences for a number of stakeholders: the individual, the school and the economy (Urwin, et al., 2010). However, as completion can be linked with retention, and non-completion can be linked with both attrition and transfer, the importance of these issues should be explored within the Irish education system, while consequently addressing the

implications that retention, attrition and transfer have for completion and non-completion in IM post-primary schooling.

Attrition is a serious problem, as early school leavers are “more likely to become unemployed, use drugs, request unemployment benefits and be involved in criminal acts” (Frostad, et al., 2015, p. 111). Failure to complete post-primary education can have long-term personal and financial implications for the individual involved (Crosling, et al., 2007). As non-completion encompasses both attrition and transfer, the attrition side of this issue must be understood and analysed to help understand non-completion which results in attrition.

Transfer, on the other hand, can be a symptom of a wider issue, and quite often the root cause may not be addressed. While transferring out of the IM post-primary school can offer short-term relief, the issues which led to this withdrawal often return in the medium- to long- term, impacting on later personal and professional development (Hinton, 2007). Some such problems include feelings of isolation, emotional stress, a fear of failure, a lack of knowledge on how to access support structures, poor past experiences, undiagnosed learning difficulties and home environments not supportive of educational achievement (Crosling, et al., 2007). While non-completion may give the individual the illusion of relief in the short term, as they begin in a new school environment, the root causes of their prior distress and disassociation are not dealt with by transferring schools, thus resulting in the same issues re-surfacing once the initial transition period is over (Hinton, 2007). Thus, the transfer side of non-completion must be explored to help limit non-completion which is associated with transfer.

With non-completion there is a danger that factors which result in either attrition or transfer may often mask systematic failures by placing the blame on the individual rather than on the shortcomings with the system of educational provision (Smith, 2003). Students self-identify quality issues, psychological pressures, economic factors and academic difficulties as reasons for non-completion, however, these do not fully explain why students choose not to complete a course of study that they have begun (Coates, 2014; Kahu & Nelson, 2017). This means that when looking at completion and non-completion, a wider view must be accommodated, one which looks at both the individual and the system of educational provision through Irish at post-primary level, as is highlighted in both the literature on the subject as well as in the models of attrition and retention that feature in the next section of this chapter.

It is therefore clear that completion and non-completion are serious issues which need to be understood in order to be managed correctly. Non-completion can potentially have serious negative consequences for individuals. Similarly, non-completion may mask deeper issues and problems for students which are only temporarily paused by engaging in non-completion. In order to boost completion rates and foster positive outcomes, both completion and non-completion must be contextualised and comprehended in terms of the personal, the social and the economic, as indicated by the composite model described in this study.

As such, the following sub-sections are used to describe both international and national priorities in order to highlight the importance of understanding completion and non-completion. Additionally, the benefits of understanding completion and non-completion on a local level are discussed in order to situate the current study in

context, as the study looks at international, national and local issues which relate to completion and non-completion.

2.2.2.1 International and National Priorities

Completion and non-completion exist within current international and national contexts, as issues facing education and educators which should be tackled. As one of the primary goals of governments and policy makers is to keep young people engaged in and with education, both international and national trends in completion and non-completion must be analysed in order to provide an adequate contextualisation from which completion and non-completion can be understood and investigated.

Between 2005 and 2015, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has noted that completion rates in OECD countries have risen from 80% to 85%, suggesting that national interventions to reduce non-completion have resulted in an improvement in completion rates. The OECD compiles this information based on data provided by national governments, therefore completion rates may not be like-for-like between participant countries (OECD, 2015). This improvement is in line with current research recommendations which advise that post-primary school completion is now a “minimum credential for successful entry into the labour market” (OECD, 2015, p. 50) as well as a key tool in breaking the cycle of socio-economic inequality (Byrne & McCoy, 2017). This drive to improve completion rates at both OECD and National levels highlight the key importance being placed on completion in order to facilitate the society and economy of the future.

Currently Ireland has comparatively high retention rates in the OECD table (OECD, 2017). Eurostat figures place Ireland second only to Croatia in the number of

20–24-year-olds who have completed post-primary education, with a retention rate of 94.2%. However, these numbers do not provide a detailed picture, as they fail to account for differences in the education system from country to country. Comparisons such as age, structure of public examinations and the ways in which data are collected, collated and published are not accounted for when compiling these lists (Morris & Parashar, 2012). This presents a problem when looking at completion, as international and national statistics are only concerned with the numbers who completed their post-primary education, not where they completed it, making it difficult to collect national data on completion rates in IM post-primary schools.

While this part of the sub-section was concerned with international and national issues and concerns, the following part discusses the benefits which understanding completion and non-completion can bring locally. As this study concerns students of IME in their own educational settings, understanding the potential local benefits of understanding completion and non-completion becomes relevant to the current study.

2.2.2.2 Local Benefits of Understanding Completion and Non-completion

DoE forecasts for short term growth indicate a predicted growth in post-primary numbers. In the DoE's most likely growth scenario, enrolments will rise to, and peak at, 401,754 students in September 2025, anticipating a growth of between 9.9% and 11.1% (Department of Education and Skills, 2018). With the growth in availability and choice, an Economic and Social Research Institute (ERSI) survey in 2015 reported that 23 per cent of parents would choose IME for their child, if the option was available (Ó hEaghra, 2018; Darmody & Daly, 2015). This suggests that a substantial

amount of the anticipated growth could happen in the IM sector. This is consistent with research conducted in Northern Ireland (NI) by *Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta*, which indicated that the number of pupils enrolled in IME would double between 2017 and 2032 (Doyle, 2017).

If student numbers follow the predictions of both the DoE and *Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta*, the education system is likely to be under pressure to accommodate student numbers, meaning that non-completion by transfer may become more and more difficult. In such a scenario, English medium schools would not have the capacity to accept students who wish to leave their IM post-primary school. This in turn could have an effect on non-completion by attrition, as the students may wish to leave the system entirely rather than continue where they are. So, while growth in student numbers may be positive for the growth of IME, the ideas of completion and non-completion need to be understood now in order to devise appropriate strategies and interventions to encourage completion in IM post-primary schools, should non-completion become an issue in this sector.

With the ideas of completion and non-completion discussed within the framework of international, national and local concerns and issues, it is important to develop a model within which these ideas can be fully explored and probed. As such, models of attrition, retention and transfer will be discussed in the following section. Each model will be broken down and their key elements analysed. The advantages and disadvantages of each model will be highlighted and compared. Finally, the models discussed in the following section will be used to create a composite model unique to

this study, which will be used to develop knowledge and understanding of completion and non-completion in IME.

2.2.3 Models of Attrition, Retention and Transfer

This study concerns completion and non-completion in IM post-primary schools, however, there are, as yet, no reliable models upon which a study of this kind could be based. As such, models with similar target groups and scope have been used and adapted in order to aid the development of this investigation and increase understanding of the research question. The closest, and consequently most relevant, models are those which relate to attrition and retention.

While attrition and retention models do provide insight, they must also be treated with caution. Although many of the observations noted in the models maintain relevance to the research question, they are not specifically designed to analyse completion and non-completion as they are understood in this study. As such, attrition and retention models offer insight, but not necessarily answers.

Therefore, in this section, the four most appropriate attrition and retention models have been analysed and the most relevant insights they provide into completion and non-completion have been characterised and used to create a composite model which is subsequently used to provide insight into the already established factors which are known to influence completion and non-completion rates in educational systems.

2.2.3.1 Tinto's Attrition Model

Tinto's model was developed and trialled in an attempt to rationalise retention and attrition within educational systems, based on the idea that retention and attrition cannot be side-lined as phenomena which occur randomly within an education system (Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 1987). This model has been tested and scrutinised, and while shortcomings have been noted, it is still seen as a reliable tool in creating insight into attrition rates (Metz, 2002).

Within this model, the main factors which are seen as influencing completion and non-completion are:

- The individual's motivation,
- The individual's academic ability,
- The school's academic and social characteristics (Tinto, 1993).

This model is based on the idea that a student's integration into the school's academic and social domains serves as the main variable between the student's background and their willingness to remain enrolled in a full-time course of study (Tinto, 1993). In terms of completion and non-completion in IM schools, this is insightful. Following this model suggests that if there is a disparity between the school's academic norms and values and those of the home, then non-completion is more likely than completion, implying that motivation, academic ability and the school's culture are all determining factors in the completion puzzle.

2.2.3.2 Bean's Model of Attrition

Bean's model of attrition (1980) is founded in organisational theory. In this model, the background variables are acknowledged, giving indicative information, which allows those most likely to leave education to be identified early so that additional supports and structures can be put in place (Bean & Eaton, 2001).

In this model, the main factors which are seen as influencing completion and non-completion are:

- Background variables,
- Organisational variables,
- Environmental variables,
- Attitudinal and outcome variables.

The most interesting idea here in terms of completion and non-completion is the introduction of background variables, which represent information about a student's prior experiences, including the student's previous experience with education (Bean & Eaton, 2001). In Bean's model, attrition therefore takes on a psychological perspective, where "the factors affecting retention are ultimately individual and that individual psychological processes form the foundation for retention decisions" (Bean & Eaton, 2001, p. 73). With these individual cognitive processes, factors such as identity and motivation become key variables in a student's decision to remain in or leave a school, expanding on Tinto's inclusion (Tinto, 1987), meaning that they need to be analysed and understood in order to fully investigate the factors which influence completion and non-completion.

2.2.3.3 Bean and Eaton's Self-Efficacy Theories and Student Attrition Model

Bean and Eaton (2001) expand on the cognitive factors at play with completion and non-completion, noting four predominant psychological elements which affect retention and attrition:

- Attitude Behaviour Theory: where behavioural intentions impact on resilience and persistence.
- Coping behaviour / avoidance theory: a student's ability to cope with new experiences and to adapt to new situations will impact on persistence.
- Locus of Control: students who feel that they have control over their lives and outcomes have a greater chance of completion. This feeling of empowerment drives motivation and tends to have more successful outcomes.
- Self-efficacy theory: Students' past experiences contribute to their belief that they can navigate and succeed in particular situations. Students with a strong sense of identity have the confidence to exercise agency appropriately in order to negotiate the academic and social demands of education. (Bean & Eaton, 2001)

In this model self-efficacy and motivation are linked. A central idea here is that a student's "[belief] in their capability to exercise some hint of control over their own functioning and over environmental events" is a critical factor in achieving successful outcomes (Bandura, 2001, p. 10). This conclusion is supported by Bowen, Chingos and McPherson (2009) who found that post-primary completion was linked with attributes such as motivation, agency, identity and perseverance more than mere mastery of

course content, which can be instrumental in influencing completion and non-completion (Hinton, 2007). This adds the idea of agency to the mix of determining factors which influence completion and non-completion.

2.2.3.4 Hirschy's Model of Student Success

Finally, Hirschy's (2011) model of student success introduces the notions of stability and malleability. In this model, the main factors which are seen as influencing completion and non-completion are:

- Stable characteristics: solid facts about an individual, including things such as race, gender, age, socio-economic status, family and community.
- Malleable characteristics: ideas such as agency, identity, motivation, skills, outlook, resilience and future goals and aspirations.
- Environmental variables: these variables include family circumstances, socio-economic restrictions, and employment prospects. These variables remain in place outside of a school's interventions.
- Attitudinal and outcome variables: subjective evaluations formed by the student about the relationship which they develop with the school, including the perceived quality of education, the value this education brings them, their own self-development, and the benefit to their future outcomes (Kenny, 2018).

This idea of attitudinal and outcome variables, which also feature in Bean's (1980) model, is highly significant in terms of completion and non-completion in IM post-primary schools, offering an insight into why students might opt for non-completion. Students may evaluate their education through Irish as not being of

essential benefit to their future opportunities and may value learning through English as a key tenant in their own self-development and future outcomes.

2.2.3.5 Creating a Composite Model

While these models specifically focus on retention and attrition, they offer insight into completion and non-completion, especially when considering completion and non-completion as processes. However, any factors identified within individual models must be treated with caution as they can offer insight, but cannot be applied in a like-for-like manner.

The factors identified by Tinto (1987), Bean (1980), Bean and Eaton (2001) and Hirschy (2011) can all offer a starting point in understanding completion and non-completion in IM post-primary schools. Each model views attrition as the final result of a complex inter-weave of factors which interact with one another to varying degrees. While each model shares commonalities, they also each diverge at a number of key points (Kenny, 2018). Bean's (1980) theories take account of external factors, while Tinto's model (1987) relies on previous academic performance as a key indicator of academic integration. However, academic performance could be considered as an outcome rather than an indicator. Bean and Eaton (2001), and Bandura (2001) expand on this, using agency and self-efficacy to explain completion and non-completion. However, as Kenny notes;

Despite the intense scholarship that has been directed at the issue of student attrition, there is no one unifying theory that is sufficiently comprehensive to account for the complicated set of factors that interact to influence...the student departure puzzle. (Kenny, 2018, p. 33)

While the merging of these theories creates a complex structure from which completion and non-completion can be explored, the merging of various elements of each theory should provide a robust and vigorous framework through which completion and non-completion can be analysed and understood to give a solid grounding to this study as the strengths of each theory will offer possible explanations later on in this research (Mingers, 2001). The various factors mentioned also highlight the importance of analysing completion and non-completion in terms of cognitive, social and societal factors, as each of these ideas have appeared in one or more of the models looked at.

Table 2.1 highlights the key factors identified in two or more of the models analysed. As such, each of these factors must be incorporated into any composite model developed in order to understand and explain completion and non-completion in IM post-primary schools.

Table 2.1

Common factors identified across retention and attrition models

	Tinto (1987)	Bean (1980)	Bean and Eaton (2001)	Hirschy (2011)
School variables	Teaching and Learning. Learning support. Facilities.	Quality of Education Academic expectations/ requirements. School rules. Relationships with staff. Future opportunities.		Effective supports. Characteristics of the institution. Staff.
Background variables	Prior educational achievement. Family attributes. Personal attributes.	Age. Educational Goals. Previous performance. Ethnicity. Gender.	Prior academic performance. Family background. Previous interactions with institutions.	Life experiences. Family influences.
Environmental variables		Finances. Economic Status. Outside Encouragement. Family responsibilities.	Finances. Opportunity to transfer. Outside friends.	Future prospects. Socio-economic restrictions.
Identity		Peer group interactions. Social integration.	Locus of Control. Normative beliefs. Skills and abilities.	Malleable characteristics.
Agency			Locus of Control. Past behaviour.	Malleable characteristics.
Motivation	Performance. Development. Interactions.	Satisfaction. Goal commitment. Stress.	Self-efficacy. Alienation. Social life.	Academic adjustment. Social and community integration.
Resilience		Goal commitment. Study habits. Academic integration. Social integration.	Coping behaviour. Academic integration.	Expectations.

By amalgamating the retention and attrition models and highlighting the commonalities, a clearer picture emerges in the completion / non-completion puzzle. Table 2.1 shows the ideas which span multiple models, offering established and proven factors upon which an analysis into completion and non-completion can be led. As each factor appears in more than one model, each factor has been trialled and proven in more than one investigation and context, meaning that the factors in Table 2.1 have already previously proven robust when analysing school retention and attrition. These factors can be used in a composite model to investigate completion and non-completion, as they directly link in with the definitions of completion and non-completion already established in this chapter.

Further analysis of Table 2.1 allows for the grouping of factors into three distinct headings: Cognitive, Social and Societal. The cognitive factors deal with individualised issues relating to the individual student themselves. The social factors deal with the various communities which exist around the student and to which they belong. The societal factors concern economic and financial issues, as well as national and international policy and priorities. Therefore, these headings were used to create the basis for a composite model to help understand completion and non-completion.

2.2.3.6 Composite Model of Completion and Non-completion in the Current Study

As part of this research study, a model of Completion and Non-completion (Figure 2.1) was created using a composite of relevant factors which influence completion and non-completion as identified by Tinto (1987), Bean (1980), Bean and Eaton (2001) and Hirschy (2011). In this model, completion or non-completion are

viewed as a final outcome after a complex inter-weave of factors which influence an individual student's decision to remain within or leave their school or the education system entirely.

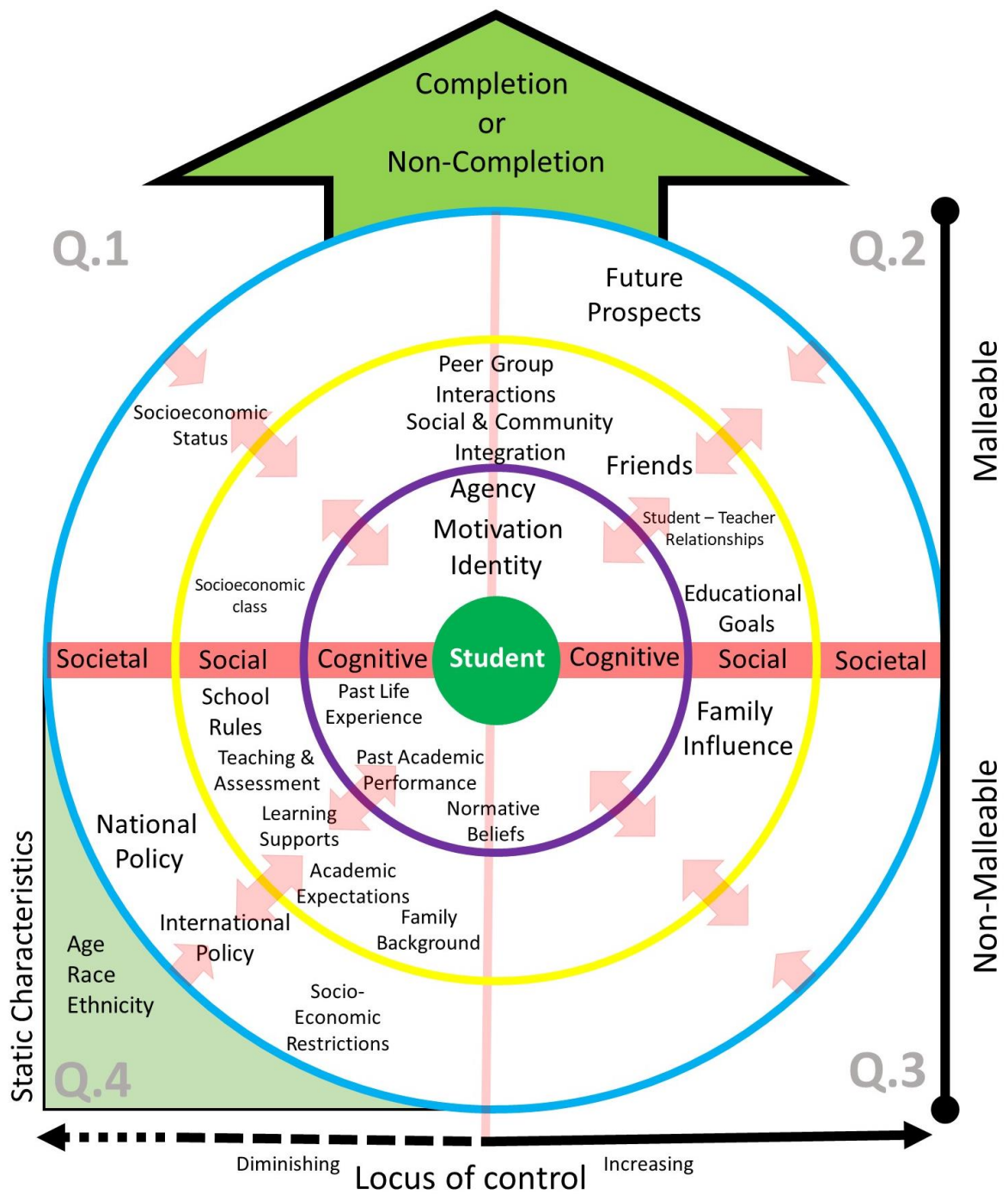
While this model was developed using existing general attrition and retention models, the model in this study is unique to IME. This was achieved by incorporating additional elements which relate to attrition and retention, but which are also particular to language based educational settings, such as language identity, relational agency in language immersion settings and identity-based motivation, all of which are discussed in more detail in section 2.3, as well as incorporating unique social and societal factors, such as the perception of *Gaeloideachas*, the IME school and its context, language supports available and future prospects based on National and International priorities, discussed in sections 2.4 and 2.5 respectively.

The use of attrition and retention models as a basis upon which to create a composite model which also incorporates transfer is valid, as many of the factors which influence transfer also influence attrition and retention. However, the factors at play which are unique to transfer are *additional* to the existing and established factors within attrition and retention models. In practical terms, the incorporation of factors relating to transfer fills an information gap which currently exists within existing models. While existing models might not specifically highlight or recognise transfer, the phenomenon does exist within many of the identified factors. By integrating transfer into this composite model, this research aims to bridge such an information gap and ensure a more accurate representation of the factors influencing school completion and non-completion. The inclusion of transfer as additional to existing

established factors also leverages the strengths of existing models while expanding their scope to include transfer-related dynamics. This means that the composite model provides a more comprehensive framework that captures the complex dynamics of school completion and non-completion and provides insights for improving educational outcomes.

Figure 2.1

A composite model for completion and non-completion



This model presents three primary spheres of influence which impact upon a student as they engage with and progress through their post-primary education:

1. Cognitive factors,
2. Social factors,
3. Societal factors.

The student features at the core of the model, with each of the spheres radiating outwards, emphasising the importance of the student and their perspective in the completion / non-completion puzzle and placing the student at the heart of the process. The three spheres are located along an *x-axis* which is concerned with the diminishing and increasing of the student's locus of control. This axis exists as a scale; within each sphere, the further from the central dividing line that a factor is placed, the greater or lesser the locus of control which the student has over the factor.

The *y-axis* divides the spheres into malleable and non-malleable characteristics which exercise influence over the student. This axis is not scaled, rather, it divides the spheres and allows for the factors to be placed in comparison to one another based on how changeable each is from the student perspective, i.e., how much influence an individual student has to change each of these factors.

This *x- / y-axis* division facilitates the grouping of the spheres into four quadrants (Q1-4):

1. Q1: this quadrant contains factors which are malleable, but which exist outside of the student's locus of control,
2. Q2: this quadrant contains factors which are malleable and upon which the student may exercise an increasing amount of control,
3. Q3: this quadrant contains factors which are non-malleable but upon which the student maintains a degree of control,

4. Q4: this quadrant contains factors which are non-malleable and over which the student has diminished control. This quadrant also contains static characteristics which are located external to the three spheres of influence. These factors also influence a student but are fixed and exist outside of, but in relation to cognitive, social and societal factors which have an effect on an individual.

The model also takes account of the influence which exists between spheres, where learning from new experiences in one sphere feeds back into previous spheres, in turn influencing development and future responses (see Figure 2.2). In essence, while each preceding sphere influences how a student interacts with a factor in a subsequent sphere, they learn from this experience and it feeds back into previous spheres to inform their future reactions.

Within these spheres of influence, a student's actions and/or experiences feed into a cognitive feedback loop through a continuous cycle of perception, interpretation, evaluation, and response which ultimately leads to completion or non-completion. This feedback loop follows a specific and sequential order:

1. Perception: The student's cognitive processes perceive and gather information from the external world and their immediate context. Their perception is influenced by their static characteristics, as well as by malleable and non-malleable characteristics, such as previous experiences, normative beliefs, and personal cognitive characteristics, which exist in the Cognitive Sphere.

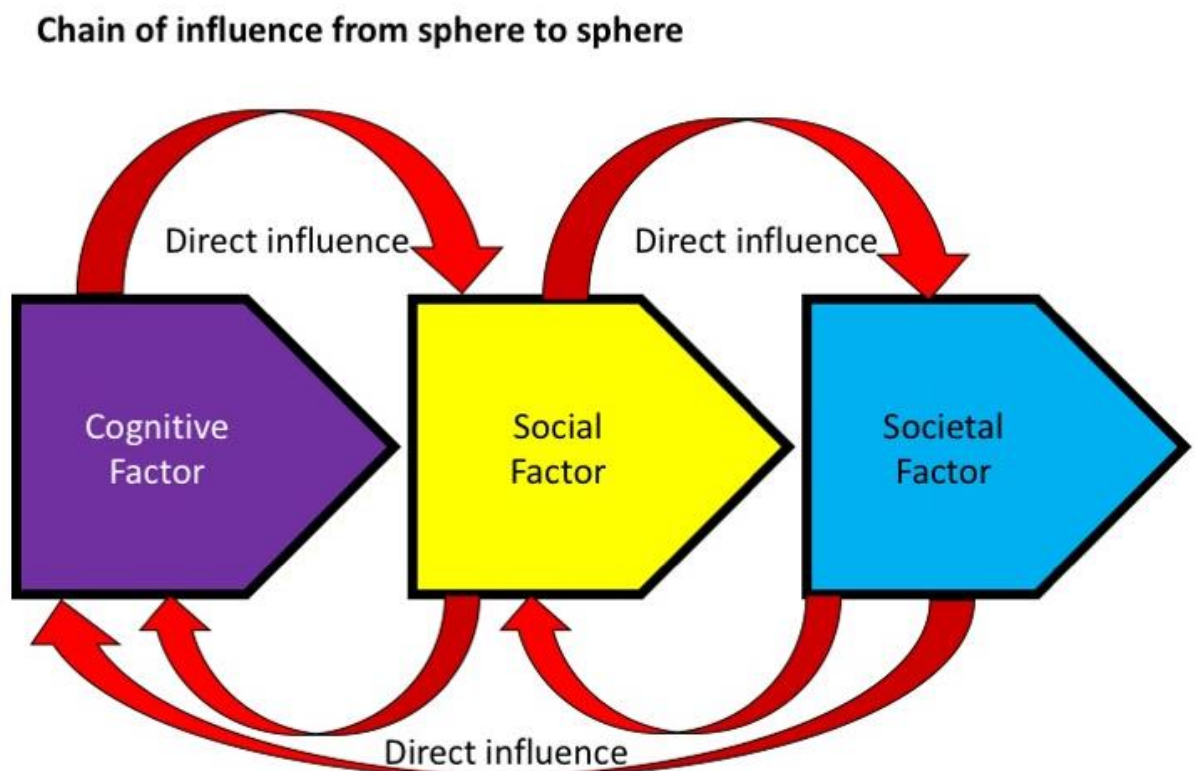
2. Interpretation: Once students perceive information, their cognitive processes interpret and make sense of it. They assign meaning whilst they categorise and organise the incoming information based on their existing cognitive structures. Their interpretations are subjective and influenced by their personal experiences, cultural background, and individual perspectives which exist in the Social Sphere.
3. Evaluation: After interpreting the experience, they evaluate the significance and relevance of the information within the wider context, introducing the Societal Sphere. They assess whether their new experience aligns with their goals, values, and beliefs. They may make judgments, compare new meanings to previous experiences or knowledge, and determine the impacts, if any.
4. Response: Based on this evaluation, students formulate a response or take action. This response can be behavioural, cognitive, or emotional. It can range from consciously making a decision or expressing an opinion to experiencing emotions or forming new beliefs. Their response may also feed back into the environment, influencing subsequent perceptions and experiences, creating a feedback loop.
5. Feedback loop: The actions and experiences resulting from these responses then become new inputs into the feedback loop. They shape future perceptions, interpretations, evaluations, and responses, leading to a continuous cycle of cognitive processing and learning. These ongoing experiences modify and refine each student's cognitive frameworks, influencing how they perceive and interpret new

information in the future, leading to the decision of completion or non-completion.

This feedback loop creates a chain of influence between each sphere of influence (Figure 2.2) which highlights the dynamic and interactive nature of the completion and non-completion puzzle. Individual actions and experiences continuously shape and are shaped by cognitive processes and their interaction with the social and societal environments, forming a feedback loop that influences thoughts, beliefs, behaviours, and experiences over time. It is through this loop that students adapt to, learn from and react to the world around them, ultimately leading them along the path to completion or non-completion.

Figure 2.2

Influences between loops created within the composite model



This section was used to develop a model of completion and non-completion which will be used in the current study to help explain and understand these concepts. Four developed and proven models were investigated and discussed, and the subsequent analysis led to the creation of a model which is directed towards completion and non-completion in language immersion post-primary education. This model will be examined in Chapter 4 as the data collected in the current study is analysed and discussed, in order to test the robustness and usefulness of the model in a study examining completion and non-completion in IME.

With completion and non-completion fully discussed, the next section will address the cognitive factors which influence a student's decision to remain in or leave IME. As the research question looks at the student perspective, it is important to account for the cognitive factors which account for perspective and for decision making. Therefore, in the following section, cognitive influences, as referenced in the inner circle of Figure 2.1, are broken down and discussed in relation to the research question and IME.

2.3 Cognitive Factors Affecting Completion and Non-completion

In this section the cognitive factors which affect completion and non-completion are discussed and analysed. As cognitive factors are repeatedly identified in the attrition models previously examined, and in the model developed for this study (Figure 2.1), these must be understood in order to better comprehend the influences at work on students as they engage with their education and their IM post-primary school. The role that these factors play is then identified in the context of the study,

examining how they impact on completion and non-completion in IM post-primary schools.

Initially, a general overview of cognitive influences is given in order to rationalise and contextualise this section. This leads to discussions of identity, agency and motivation in order to ascertain what impact these factors might have on completion and non-completion, providing a theoretical framework with which completion and non-completion in IM post-primary schools can be investigated. Subsequently the idea of cognitive benefits and the impact of student voice are discussed.

2.3.1 Cognitive Influences

Academic and social factors cannot fully explain student completion and non-completion in the context of immersion education (Makropoulos, 2007; Beck, 2004; Quiring, 2008; Boudreaux, 2011). In an immersion language setting, there is a strong cognitive element to the decision to leave a minority language immersion programme and to transfer to a majority language school (Makropoulos, 2007). In the current study, cognition is understood to encompass domains such as judgement, intelligence, executive function, social cognition, attention and memory (Sujita & Meha, 2016). With this in mind, ideas such as identity, agency and motivation must be adequately understood in order that their influence on completion and non-completion be understood, as each of these is a cognitive function. These factors are mentioned in one or more of the attrition models used, and they are each subsequently highlighted in the studies conducted on academic and social factors influencing transfer. Therefore, they must be defined in order that their influence can be scrutinized.

As such, cognitive influences are analysed in order to understand what specific implications each has for students as they make a decision on completion or non-completion in their IM post-primary school. Each of the factors is explored both in isolation and in connection with one another, whilst also being linked with the composite model being used in this study. The significance of each factor is then discussed in order to draw direct links between these cognitive influences and the processes of completion and non-completion.

2.3.2 Identity

As this study is investigating completion and non-completion in IM post-primary schools, the idea of identity formation is addressed as it is highlighted as a key factor influencing completion by both Bean and Eaton (2001) and Hirschy (2011).

The idea of identity can be loosely sorted into two primary categories; personal and social. While personal identities tend to encompass characteristics and traits, social identities revolve around relationships with others, perceived or expected social roles and membership of specific social communities. Thus, it can be argued that identity is a form of self-concept, one which is accessible and malleable (Oyserman, et al., 2017). Such a view of identity fits well with Hirschy's (2011) view of variables being either stable or malleable, as both understandings acknowledge that there are variables within and outside of the individual's control.

As self-concepts, identities have the ability to affect a student's capacity to think, as well as the capability to make them aware of their own thinking. Identity as a self-concept also explains a student's ability to think of themselves as the object of their own thinking (Oyserman, et al., 2014). This idea of the self-concept links with

Meensa, et al.'s (2018) *dimensions of exploration*. Therefore, self-concepts, along with *commitment*, provide two of the three defining dimensions of identity, with the third dimension being *intrinsic motivation* (Meensa, et al., 2018).

While the purpose and implications of identities are the subject of much debate and research, it can be agreed that one function which they serve is that of a filter. Identities help us to deal with the immediate context by allowing us to focus our attention and separate irrelevant or meaningless information/content in order to orient our response in an adequate manner (Oyserman, et al., 2014). This is important in the light of completion and non-completion, as it situates identity as a malleable influence, along with agency and motivation. This is apparent in an Irish context, where Irish students manifest fewer socio-emotional difficulties where they have developed positive self-perceptions and constructive relationships with parents and teachers (Smyth, 2018).

The immediate context of a situation influences the identity which takes precedent, meaning that other identities become subject to the dominant identity at that time, something which has significant implications for meaning-making, objectives, ambitions, attitudes and aspirations (Oyserman, et al., 2017). This is the result of self-concepts functioning as cognitive structures which help in the organisation of identities and assist in the selection of an appropriate dominant identity in order to interpret experience and to create new meaning (Kanagawa, et al., 2001). This can happen on a personal or social conceptual plain, or it can be more structured, whereby an individual employs highly practiced agency in order to assess a situation and take an independent view of the self, or else a connected interdependent

perspective, also of the self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This self-efficacy combined with attitudinal behaviour has an influence on the student's self-perception and subsequent integration into the school community (Bean, 1980; Bean & Eaton, 2001), meaning that identity must play a significant role in completion and non-completion. However, as the current study is concerned with IME, there is the issue of language to be considered. Therefore, the following sub-section will present the idea of language identity, supported by the analysis of identity presented in the current section.

2.3.2.1 Language Identity

In addition to basic identity factors, the idea of language identity is important in this study as the investigation aims to analyse completion and non-completion in IM post-primary schools, therefore introducing a language element. Language can be considered as asserting a key influence on the advancement of human cognition, self-development and identity construction (Edwards, 2009; Tamimi, 2017). Language, as a form of communication, suggests an interdependence, highlighting the close links that exists between language, identity and society, as language serves as a facilitator of belonging in a community (Simona, 2016). Any such sense of belonging in terms of completion and non-completion is critical, as a sense of belonging has a profound impact on resilience, persistence and motivation (Bean & Eaton, 2001) as it is a malleable characteristic as opposed to a stable one (Hirschy, et al., 2011). Therefore, timely and unique interventions and supports are required in order to encourage completion and avoid non-completion.

The combination of *Investment*, a sociological concept, with *Motivation*, primarily a psychological construct, was pioneered by Norton, who was keen to

understand the full complexity of language learner identity (Norton & Toohey, 2011; Norton, 2010; Dornyei & Ushioda, 2009), which links to Bean and Eaton's (2001) four psychological elements affecting completion and non-completion, in particular *Locus of Control* and *Self-efficacy*, where a student may feel powerless or out of control based on a language barrier or a feeling of inferiority because of perceived language ability or deficit.

The theoretical construct of *imagined identities* also aids in understanding the elaborate intricacy of language learner identity (Norton & Toohey, 2011; Dornyei, 2001). The imagined identity is interesting with regards to language learners in an IM post-primary school, as the relationship between the school community and imagined identity provides a motivational situation for the language learner as they seek to reconcile their individual sense of belonging with their perceptual aspirations, which may be based on intrinsic or extrinsic motivations.

Learners therefore move in the direction of their imagined future selves in their language community, working towards this goal (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). This has the effect of solidifying some of these elements so that they become stable as opposed to malleable, creating a sense of belonging which is critical to developing resilience and persistence which stems from a positive relationship with and a loyalty to the post-primary school, and its community. This has significant implications for completion and non-completion, as students who feel a sense of belonging in an IM post-primary school are more likely to remain in that school to completion than students who do not feel a sense of belonging, or who perceive themselves as inadequate in the IM environment.

While it is clear that identity and language identity are influencing factors in completion and non-completion in IME, the question of identity cannot fully explain the decision-making process alone. Therefore, the following section will look into the idea of agency and its relevance to the current study. The research question seeks to explore the factors which influence to remain in or leave IME, meaning that the process by which such a decision is made must be understood in order to fully explore the ideas of completion and non-completion.

2.3.3 Agency

Agency is noted as a key factor in completion and non-completion by Bean and Eaton (2001) and Hirschy (2011). Additionally, numerous investigations have concluded that agency lies at the heart of completion and non-completion as a malleable variable (Trent, 2017; Hirschy, et al., 2011). Agency is a concept with many meanings, each of which is dependent on interpretation, situation and context (Eteläpelto, et al., 2013). On a basic level, agency can be seen as the act of being in control of our actions, and taking a sense of responsibility from this power (Frith, 2014), this can include decisions such as remaining in or leaving post-primary education.

However, agency can also be viewed as the “state of being in action, or of exerting power” (Chandler-Olcott & Hinchmann, 2019, p. 361), meaning that those who exercise agency take an idea or procedure and “run with [it]” (p. 361) in order to create new insight and improve. This means that individuals have the capacity to act in a given situation based on past experience and identity. Agency is employed by a student as they choose to engage or to disengage with the education system, resulting

in completion or non-completion of an immersion programme or post-primary education in general.

Agency is also subject to external influences, or structures, which may limit or hinder the exercise of agency (Chandler-Olcott & Hinchmann, 2019), an idea labelled by Bean (1980) as *background variables*. This idea is supported by Frank (2006), who notes that “agency may vary in different social and cultural contexts” (p. 282), meaning that, in this study, students may have similar educational experiences or opportunities, but contrasting social and environmental backgrounds, resulting in different interpretations of the same experience, an idea which is also borne out in the models of Bean (1980), Bean and Eaton (2001) and Hirschy (2011). Understanding that these differences exist, however subtle, allows for a much more nuanced interpretation and analysis of any data collected during the current study.

However, Frank (2006) diverges from Chandler-Olcott and Hinchmann (2019) in her understanding of agency itself. Rather than agency being facilitative whereby an individual uses past experience to move to the next cognitive step, as seen in Tinto’s Attrition Model (1987), Frank sees agency as a “resistance to power” (Frank, 2006, p. 283), something not explicitly explored in any of the retention and attrition models discussed. She argues that conformity, or following the rules, shows a lack of agency, and that it is only through actions that resist subjectification that the individual exerts true agency (Frank, 2006). This understanding of agency could help to rationalise non-completion which does not fit with any of the attrition model criteria, providing a deeper insight into the cognitive rationalization inherent in non-completion.

Frank's argument, while not without merit, becomes problematic, as agency encompasses the ability to consciously choose to act in a certain way when we could have acted otherwise (Archer, 2003). This means that by choosing to comply with existing structures and rules, one is, in fact, exercising agency, as the option to rebel always exists (Burkitt, 2016), as can be seen in the cases of those who do not like or agree with post-primary schooling, yet choose to remain in the system in order to complete their studies. Therefore, agency is the property of the individual, a cognitive power with relational connections, being interdependent, interpersonal and individual, all at the same time (Burkitt, 2016; Dépelteau, 2015), further complicating the "departure puzzle" (Kenny, 2018). In essence, this means that agency, where completion and non-completion are concerned, encompasses both the capacity to act within a given environment, as well the ability to engage with social structures, through resistance or acceptance in order to reap the maximum benefit from such an interaction (Burkitt, 2016).

Despite individual control being internal, it does not necessarily exist autonomously, but rather the source of control manifests as a stress or tension depending on the context. Therefore, a degree of external regulation often becomes necessary as quite often the source of control can exist outside of an individual's sphere of influence, and thus outside of autonomous interjection. This is the case in Ireland where students report a desire for agency, as they acknowledge that their options and behaviours are often limited and regulated by external agents such as parents, teachers and choices made available to them (McCoy, et al., 2019). In this instance the behaviours which are employed, and indeed regulated, are purposely initiated and carefully controlled in order to attain a specific desired consequence, or

else to avoid a negative reaction, such as a punishment (Ryan & Deci, 2000), an idea supported by the notion of relational agency, which will be discussed in the following sub-section.

2.3.3.1 Relational Agency

While looking at agency, it is important to note elements of relational agency, especially in light of Bean's (1980) focus on attitudinal and outcome variables, as well as attitude behavioural theory described by Bean and Eaton (2001) both of which place an emphasis on relationships that the individual experiences and the impact that these relationships can have on completion and non-completion. The Relational Agency Theory (RAT) provides a framework from which the complex interplay between agency and structure can be examined (Sugarman, 2011). RAT proposes that while we exist as individuals and can make decisions on an individual-needs-basis, we are also always situated in some aspect of social relations, personal or formal, which influences our actions and decisions (Burkitt, 2016). We exist in a state of interdependence between the individual and external structures, which results in an interactive relationship (Dépelteau, 2013) as we explore voluntary and involuntary separation factors.

Relational agency therefore stems from the ongoing debate about this relationship between agency and structure (Burkitt, 2016). In her arguments to rationalise relational agency, Archer (2013) maintains that in any consideration of the agency-structure debate, that structure (rules, regulations and social expectations) holds primacy, and the individual exercises *reflexive* agency as they act and make choices within the confines of the given structure according, with due regard to their own identity, values and beliefs (Archer, 2013). This would certainly support Tinto's

Attrition Model (1987), where a student's previous experience, previous academic performance and background are the primary influencers when it comes to completion and non-completion. Therefore, *reflective agency* would draw upon previous experience, and decisions relating to completion and non-completion would be made within the structures of previous success or failure. This would also be true of the relationship the individual has with the immersion language of the school, as the language itself becomes a structure and social expectation.

However, as we have an individual identity before a social one, this restrictive view can create tension. True agency has layers of moral and political consideration which connects with the self and the very notion of identity: "when I am an agent, I am, I count. But when I am passive, incapable, constrained, dependent, I am less a person, I count less" (Reader, 2007, p. 580). Therefore, students are driven to act in order to drive their need to assert and maintain their identities (Van Zoonen & Turner, 2014). As the notion of agency itself implies action, the relationship between agency and structure suggests that individual agents are both willing and able to make reasoned and deliberate choices in their lives (Burkitt, 2016) in order to exercise control over their own functioning and to directly influence their own self-development and future outcomes (Kenny, 2018). This is an important view, as non-completion may possibly occur as a learner develops this agency. As it was their parents who made the initial choice of an IM post-primary school, the need to influence their own development and outcomes may drive an individual student to consider transfer in order to assert themselves (Gasper, et al., 2012).

However, in a post-primary setting, this translates to an interpersonal example, where agency and structure happen on an interpersonal level. Students exercise agency as they support collective learning by sitting quietly when asked, participating when prompted, engaging and discussing when necessary - work which is supported at a structural level by other agents; cleaners, secretarial staff, workers who work offsite to create electricity to run the school etc. and by cultural and social etiquette and established rules and boundaries (Burkitt, 2016). An inability, or indeed unwillingness, to participate in such an exercise of agency could be a factor influencing non-completion, especially in terms of involuntary separation, where a student unable to participate in such a way can feel the need to withdraw to protect their self-efficacy and identity.

Agency can therefore be understood as meaning the capacity and/or ability to act, or to take action in order to assert individual power within the interdependent relationship with structure. This action is situated in contextual and environmental circumstances and is informed by multiple variables, including identity, motivation, language and past experience (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). This suggests that agency is not static, but is something which is achieved within the context of the time (Yayli, 2017), i.e., it is the power and ability to decide upon and determine our actions in a given situation, as “the achievement of agency will always result from the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors as they come together in particular and, in a sense, always unique situation” (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 137).

This understanding of agency makes it possible to view agency as being rooted in each student's individual context and past experience, and to examine their awareness of, and capacity to examine and engage with a variety of possible actions and choices based on the situation and context of the action being considered (Kauppinen, 2018), supporting arguments made in many of the retention and attrition models available, where theories such as *Attitude Behaviour Theory* and *Self-efficacy theory* are mentioned, for example. As Chandler-Olcott and Hinchmann (2019) put it, "Learners demonstrate agency when they have access to the tools they need and can recognize how and when to use them" (p. 361). This view of agency also enables us to make sense of a student's distinct experiences in what could be considered similar educational situations, as they relate to completion and non-completion in an IM post-primary school.

With the idea of agency and relational agency fully explored, the next section is concerned with motivation. During the analysis of identity and of agency, motivation was referenced numerous times. Therefore, in order to develop a full and rounded understanding of the cognitive influences impacting completion and non-completion, motivation will be defined, analysed and discussed.

2.3.4 Motivation

The cognitive role of motivation in making a decision regarding completion or non-completion is of primary significance (Obadia, 1996). Motivation exercises a strong influence on the entire process of educational engagement. Therefore, it must be noted that some decisions are made autonomously, based on an individual's passions, curiosities and preconceptions, while other decisions and choices are the

result of more controlled situations, such as parental pressure, familial or social expectations as well as self-esteem issues (Meensa, et al., 2018). On the intrinsic – extrinsic motivational scale, intrinsic motivation can be seen as the more autonomous derivation as it is experienced as something which is, by its very nature, positive and enjoyable (Deci & Ryan, 1987). However, delving deeper, identified motivation, while existing within intrinsic structures, is not necessarily positive or enjoyable, but functional in the way this type of well-internalised motivation serves to aid us in our achievement of personal goals and challenges (Meensa, et al., 2018) meaning that motivation can often reconcile with *avoidance theory* and the student's *locus of control* (Bean & Eaton, 2001).

The means of controlling such motivation has been articulated and argued, with the idea of introjection raising some interesting possibilities. According to Ryan & Deci (2000), introjection “describes a type of regulation that is controlling because people perform such actions with the feeling of pressure in order to avoid guilt or anxiety, or to attain ego-enhancements or pride” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 62). This type of motivation can be seen throughout the Irish educational system, which still relies heavily on terminal examinations to gauge educational achievement (Byrne & McCoy, 2017), linking in strongly with the idea of completion.

While extrinsic motivational factors have been added to begin a shift in student engagement and perception of this system (bonus marks at higher level, simplified grading structure etc.), the strong influences that this type of system has on completion have not been fully analysed or debated. The exercise of agency and its parallels with motivation in this realm are still mainly based on introjection, with

students being largely focused on marking schemes, as they are “forced into ‘gaming’ behaviours to maximise points” (McCoy, et al., 2019, p. 45), resulting in a lack of true engagement with the educational material, which can have negative and detrimental effects on completion (Tinto, 1993; Poisard, et al., 2015) in IM post-primary schools.

In the Irish system, some of these negative perceptions have been negated within the education system itself, as moves have been taken to remove the *fear of failure* (McCoy, et al., 2019), yet the fact remains that the system as it stands is actively reproducing educational inequality (Byrne & McCoy, 2017). As the behaviours are situated outside of the activities themselves, this mode of regulation can be considered as extrinsic (Meensa, et al., 2018), and therefore within the capacity of the school to change as a stable variable in the organisational and environmental variables (Bean, 1980).

As a result, motivation is considered a key factor in the process of completion or non-completion. Motivation, like agency, is regulated by internal and external structures. However, unlike agency, motivation is seen as a key attitudinal and outcome variable, with Tinto (1987) using motivation as the key cognitive factor in his model. Therefore, motivation, as a malleable characteristic (Hirschy, et al., 2011) can offer an opportunity for targeted and specific interventions as IM post-primary schools work to maximise completion and minimise non-completion.

However, as motivation exists as a factor in completion and non-completion in IME, it is also one of a number of factors at play, including that of identity, as discussed in Section 2.3.2. Therefore, the combining of motivation, agency and identity is discussed in the next section in order to combine the two factors and examine the

impact that this combined role can play on students in IME as they consider completion and non-completion.

2.3.5 Identity-based Motivation

In order to reconcile identity, agency and motivation, a framework now known as *identity-based motivation* (IBM) was developed (Oyserman, et al., 2014). IBM takes a situational approach to the harmonisation of identity and motivation, one which is based on the supposition that the internalised-self is not steady or stable, but is instead malleable, being created from moment to moment as the individual situation demands. Therefore, individuals are driven to act based on dynamically constructed identities; self-concepts which help them to compartmentalise and make sense of the world around them. Some basic self-concepts remain constant (child/parent, employer/employee, student/teacher etc.) as they conform to the constraints and expectations of many daily situations, while others are highly situational. IBM advances this notion, proposing that these identities have value as individuals prefer to discern and understand situations in *identity-congruent ways* (Oyserman, et al., 2017).

According to IBM theory, individuals tend to act and react in manners which conform to their social identities (racial-ethnic, gender, social class etc.) as these feel constant and fixed despite the reality being that such identities are in fact highly sensitive to circumstance. Self-concepts are dynamic constructs, meaning that while salient identities respond to provoked situations and help in the creation of meaning, the actual strategies, scripts and responses are malleable to the point where genuine understanding is developed in identity-congruent ways (Oyserman, et al., 2014).

IBM therefore makes use of the notion of identity stability as it is a useful sentiment, however, IBM acknowledges that identity accessibility is flexible and constrained by context. According to IBM this flexibility is a design feature as opposed to a defect. What is in fact stable is the individual's motivation to use the self to make meaning (Oyserman, et al., 2017). Within the context of identity-based motivation the thing of interest is the small contextual shift which occurs, mutating how individuals regard themselves and how they interpret and reflect on an experience, as opposed to the change itself that they undergo in the process. Oftentimes they are unaware that they have even undergone a conceptual shift (Oyserman, et al., 2017), even though this shift, positive or negative, has a major influence on their educational experience and on shaping their future perspectives and outcomes (Smyth, 2017), including their decision to complete or not complete their education in an IM post-primary school.

This links in with the ideas proposed and developed by Germeijs and Verschueren (2007), who found that commitment and academic adjustment are positively disposed to one another, resulting in greater completion levels amongst students who were identified as committed and well adjusted (Lee & Burkam, 2003). Internalised motivation therefore can be connected with greater positive academic achievement (Taylor, et al., 2014) within perceptual identity frameworks. However, extrinsic-motivation, while often a positive influence, is also associated with a number of undesirable educational outcomes, including a greater level of disassociation, lower levels of academic confidence as well as lower academic achievement (Vansteenkiste, et al., 2009), as extrinsic motivation is linked with negative academic outcomes across Irish socio-economic groupings (Dempsey, 2019). This can then result in a greater disposition to non-completion in an IM post-primary school (Lee & Burkam, 2003) as

neither the malleable characteristics nor the attitudinal and outcome variables (Hirschy, et al., 2011) are developed or enhanced. In this case, extrinsic motivation does not nurture self-development and self-belief is not enhanced as a result of such extrinsic motivators, since such motivation exists beyond the locus of control (Bean & Eaton, 2001; Kenny, 2018).

In this section, each major cognitive factor which influences completion and non-completion which was identified in the attrition and retention models was analysed. The significance of each was discussed as they relate to completion and non-completion. To begin with, identity was examined, along with the role it plays in completion and non-completion. Language identity was included to take account of perceived abilities and deficiencies as a student engages with IME. Agency was then discussed as a key factor in decision making exercises and contrasting impacts on agency were noted. Relational agency was included to account for factors such as previous experiences and social expectations. Motivation was then reviewed and reconciled with locus of control. The connection between motivation and completion and non-completion was established. Identity based motivation was introduced to connect motivation with identity, showing the complex inter-dependence that exists between each of the cognitive factors identified in the attrition and retention models.

Understanding these factors is essential in order to explore and explain completion and non-completion, however, it is also important to understand the cognitive benefits which may influence identity, agency and motivation. Therefore, the following section outlines the cognitive benefits of immersion education and of IME.

2.3.6 Cognitive and Communicative Benefits

While no conclusive study has been carried out on health differences between monolingual and bilingual individuals, certain deductions can be made based on the body of neurological and psychological data available (Mehisto & Marsh, 2011). Certainly, studies have found that age related mental decline is slower in individuals who have a detailed knowledge of more than one language. Mehisto and Marsh (2011) make the argument that the brain is like a complex electrical grid; a more complicated network with a greater variety of connections has more opportunity to bypass failing circuitry and maintain the system as a whole (Mehisto & Marsh, 2011).

A study in Canada found that, when other factors were accounted for, the onset of dementia amongst bilingual speakers was offset by an average of 3.9 years. The study goes on to explain that it is not that the brain of a bilingual speaker is better able to resist deterioration or disease, but rather, it is more adept at compensating and tolerating accumulated pathologies (Bialystok, et al., 2007). It has also recently been suggested that bilinguals have a better outcome after a stroke (Alladi, et al., 2016). Subsequent research indicates that while bilingualism increases resistance to dementia in comparison to monolingualism, individuals who are multilingual show better outcomes with regards to Alzheimer's disease than mono- or bilingual speakers (Kavé, et al., 2008). Since most students in Irish post-primary schools study a modern European language in addition to English and Irish, attaining a level of fluency in this third language can be said to have a distinct health advantage as well as an academic one.

Additional cognitive benefits are also noteworthy, as they may have an influence on an individual's motivation to complete their education in IME. The number of

immersion language schools has increased exponentially around the world, and Ireland is no exception (Walker & Tedick, 2000). Immersion programmes and the quality of immersion delivery have increased over the past number of decades. The programmes have evolved from language learning tools to models which encompass social, political and cultural values and contexts (Johnson & Swaine, 1997).

Immersion education is shown to have cognitive and communicative benefits, particularly in the field of language acquisition and mastery (Ianco-Worrall, 1972). Statistically, students in Irish medium schools gain higher achievements in Maths and English than their counterparts in English medium schools (Gaelscoileanna.ie, 2017; Inspectorate, 2015). This fits with the body of international evidence which focuses on the cognitive benefits of bilingualism. Evidence shows that bilingual learners solve tasks differently to their monolingual counterparts. They consistently outperform monolingual students in tasks which include perceptual information but are comparable in solving problems which do not include these perceptual distractions (Bialystok, et al., 2012).

This difference in task solving comes from the demand of two languages. The skill of mentally keeping two languages separate leads to an improvement in selecting goal-relevant information from irrelevant information. This in turn leads to bilingual individuals having a greater capacity to multi-task as they are able to compartmentalise blocks of relevant information within their working memory to the exclusion of irrelevant stimuli (Bialystok, et al., 2012). This combines to create a pattern of cognitive benefit for a bilingual learner.

The need to perform a multitude of tasks in a given situation strengthens and improves the cognitive abilities of a bilingual learner. In a typical L2 conversation, a bilingual speaker is faced not only with the task of monitoring two languages, but also following the context of the conversation, the speaker, as well as the relevant cultural, social and political cues that a conversation demands, and all of this must be achieved while inhibiting attention to the unused but active L1 which the brain automatically engages (Bialystok, et al., 2012). This then can be said to have the benefit of enhancing cognitive control processes (Diamond, 2010).

A fear that students often have when considering their place immersion education is that their child will have communication difficulties and become confused and begin to mix up languages (Ní Thuairisg & Ó Duibhir, 2021). However, research into this matter has produced results to the contrary. Children communicating in a bilingual setting don't actually confuse languages, rather, they may borrow from one when speaking the other (Genesee, 1989).

While these factors might not be explicitly known to students as they engage with IME, the benefits still exist, and may contribute as a motivating factor to those who consider completion and non-completion as they progress through their education in an immersion setting. An additional consideration, discussed in the following section, is that of student voice and the notion of locus of control, ideas referred to in the model of completion and non-completion developed in the current study (Figure 2.1).

2.3.7 Student Voice

Student voice centres on the various ways which young people can actively participate in decisions which affect their lives and those of their peers (Mitra, 2006).

Young people have a right to ‘have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.’ (Article 12 UNCRC). In Ireland, this is recognised as a key pillar in education, with the NCCA acknowledging that students should be offered opportunities to actively influence their education. (Cook-Sather, 2006). Effective engagement of student voice is essential in the endeavour to limit non-completion by encouraging feelings of ownership and value (Leren, 2006).

The opportunity to engage in meaningful discussion is a cornerstone of authentic engagement. Students’ willingness to engage with education and their continued participation in the Irish-medium post-primary school can be directly influenced by their freedom to meaningfully collaborate in improving their own educational outcomes and experiences (Flynn, 2014; Smyth 2018). A student’s self-image, academic or otherwise, therefore derives, to a certain extent, from their interactions in school (Smyth, 2015). Students who experience positive interactions with their teachers and schools have improved educational outcomes, more positive self-images and better attendance and participation rates (Smyth, 2015; NEWB, 2007), meaning they are less likely to transfer.

Effective use of student voice is directly linked with language competency and perception of ability. As competency in a language often depends on our own perceptions, our perceived ability in a language can often embolden or limit our participation in that language (Pillar, 2002). Thus, the self-perception of language ability is grounded in the meaningful and sustentative *interaction* that a student participates in during the course of their education. If a student’s self-image is created

on their perceptions, then their ability to communicate within the school environment has a direct connection to their construction of their own self-image. Furthermore, as linguistic development and actualisation involve both explicit and implicit socialisation through social interaction and communication (Duff, 2007), a direct link can be drawn between students' construction of identity through authentic engagement and their overall levels of satisfaction derived through participation within a formal school environment (Smyth, 2018).

If a student feels that they are denied the opportunity to meaningfully interact with decisions which affect them, then the student may begin to engage in resistance (MacFarland, 2001); active or passive. This same feeling may also stem to other aspects of academic and school life, curricular and extra-curricular (Lanas & Corbett, 2011). Within the Irish-medium post-primary school environment, a basic level of proficiency in the Irish language is expected by both the student and the teacher. However, students can often marginalise their own abilities to communicate effectively and exercise their voice. They shame and embarrass themselves into thinking that they should not/cannot adequately communicate with the teacher or school, and therefore disengage (MacFarland, 2001). In reality, while teachers expect competency in Irish, they are also experienced in English and are trained to work through whichever medium is necessary to benefit the student in question (Pillar, 2002).

Therefore, the idea of genuine student voice engagement is complex in its implications and intricacies. True student empowerment should go beyond ascertaining perceptions and should move toward collaborative practice in co-

constructing development. When students' insights lead the educational discourse rather than merely inform it, then sustainable cultures of learning, progression and cooperation can be fostered. Such environments keep resistance to a minimum (Flynn, 2015) and foster educational relationships which increase engagement and minimise disengagement and absenteeism (NEWB, 2007) and ultimately, transfer. As relationships are fundamental and intrinsic to educational development, they may also be said to maintain a considerable influence on the students' perceptions and use of voice (McLaughlin, 2015).

To overcome issues involving voice, the Irish language itself must be considered as both an aid to and hindrance of effective communication. The medium of instruction needs to be accounted for in the pursuit of democratic socialisation within Irish-medium post-primary schools. Once the language barrier, whether existent or perceived, has been lifted, then resistance can be minimised by maximising engagement on multiple levels. These patterns of engagement, as outlined by McLaughlin (2015) can be grouped into six distinct interactions:

1. Students as data-sources,
2. Students as active respondents,
3. Students as co-enquirers,
4. Students as knowledge creators,
5. Students as joint authors,
6. Intergenerational learning as lived democracy (McLaughlin, 2015)

Each of these interactions place student voice at the heart of the process, encouraging engagement by providing them with a sense of ownership and allowing

them to set the tone and establish the complexity of the educational engagement (Busher, 2012). By facilitating student voice, a more inclusive school environment is created (Demetriou & Wilson, 2010). Students appreciate such consideration of their voice and use genuine opportunities for interaction to raise real, substantive questions to challenge school cultures and practices for the benefit of schools and students (Busher, 2012). This has the added benefit of developing their engagement as they have communicated and effected change through the effective use of their voice. Such school interactions provide for compelling opportunities to grow positive self-images as meaningful contributors to their own development and to that of the school community. This connects the student voice with the cognitive factors of identity, agency and motivation, as well as creates a direct link with the cognitive benefits associated with bilingualism.

However, while the cognitive factors influencing completion and non-completion are important, they cannot exist out of context. As shown in Figure 2.1, cognitive factors are just one level of influence at work in the phenomenon of completion and non-completion. The following section, thus, describes the social factors which affect completion and non-completion, as social factors feature in the second sphere of influence in Figure 2.1. As such, the factors relating to social influences will be discussed in the following section.

2.4 Social Factors Affecting Completion and Non-completion

In this section, the social factors which affect completion and non-completion are explored. An initial overview of the role that the parent's perception plays is presented followed by the link between cognitive and social factors is explored.

Subsequently, the specific social issues relating to completion and non-completion are examined. These social issues range from contexts to engagement to relationships, and were identified using the various models of attrition and retention previously discussed in Section 2.2.

As each social aspect is considered, links with cognitive factors are drawn, building upon the understanding developed in the previous section. While cognitive factors play a substantial role in completion and non-completion, many studies have also noted the social influences at play in the same decision. Factors such as family, friends, school culture and even personal interests have all been found to have an impact on the decision to stay or go (Berube, 2015). A student's own apathy towards learning the target language as well as frustrations with school personnel, in particular with teachers, has a significant effect on an individual's willingness to complete their education in both regular and immersion settings (Halsall, 1994).

These ideas were later supported by Wesley (2010) who expanded on Halsall's work by linking the factors she identified with motivation, and ultimately with the negative consequences of unhappiness, increased stress and dissatisfaction. The idea of stressors and of satisfaction was also explored by Boudreaux (2011) where she argued that the learner's satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with the school environment, culture, community and/or personnel plays a significant contributory role in influencing a learner's decision to leave an immersion programme (Boudreaux, 2011).

A significant amount of the research into social factors influencing completion and non-completion identify the emotional challenges and social stresses that students label as being powerful influencers in their decision to leave an immersion programme

(Berube, 2015). Quiring (2008) found that students who felt marginalized, or that they didn't fit in, were more likely to not complete their post-primary education similar to Beck's (2004) findings that learners chose to leave the immersion programme to relocate to a school with their friends, more often than not resulting in the transfer to an English medium environment in order to meet their social needs rather than their academic ones.

This is further supported by Makropoulos (2007) who found that social identity was a key influence on the decision to transfer, drawing a link between student agency and non-completion, noting that the longer students stayed in the immersion programme, the less likely they were to leave as their levels of agency grew. As the students in Makropoulos' study developed in maturity, they discovered the benefits of bilingualism and were more likely to complete the immersion programme than their peers who had left at an earlier stage in their educational journey (Makropoulos, 2007).

However, social factors are not set, but rather are in a constant state of flux as conditions and circumstances are in states of production themselves (Norton & Toohey, 2011), supporting the idea that completion and non-completion must therefore also be continuous and progressive processes (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2007), meaning that the propensity to leave the school can often be in a state of flux as each student navigates their own educational journey. As social contexts change, so too does the opportunity, and/or desire to complete or not complete their course of study in an IM post-primary school.

2.4.1 Parents' Perceptions of Gaeloideachas and School Choice

In this section the role of parents and their perceptions of IME is explored. A recent study by Ní Thuairisg and Ó Duibhir (2016) explores Irish immersion education by looking at the transition rates between *Gaelscoileanna* and *Gaelcholáistí*. This report makes a number of interesting points regarding parents' choice of post-primary school for their child in an Irish context, highlighting the role which parents play in completion and non-completion.

According to this research, almost half of parents whose children were continuing on to a *Gaelcholáiste* had already made the decision of post-primary schooling when they chose a *Gaelscoil*. Parents who were unsure about a post-primary school typically made their final decision in 5th or 6th class, although the report found that the optimal time for making this decision was 4th class. The majority of parents who were sending their child on to an Irish medium post-primary school expressed an interest in bilingualism and wanted their child to be able to speak Irish (Ní Thuairisg & Ó Duibhir, 2016), highlighting some motivating factors which influence parents as they make educational decisions on behalf of their children.

While over a quarter of parents reported being competent in the Irish language, many were worried they would not be in a position to help their child if they continued studying through Irish, as they often did not have the language ability to help their child with schoolwork at primary level. This is grounded in the fact that the majority of households with children attending a *Gaelscoil* operate through English, with occasional Irish usage (Ní Thuairisg & Ó Duibhir, 2016).

Most parents in this study took the academic reputation of the school into account when choosing a school. 80 per cent of parents mentioned the academic reputation as the greatest motivator in choosing a *Gaelcholáiste*, with 46 per cent acknowledging the advantages afforded at the Leaving Certificate examinations as important. This compares to 63 per cent of parents who chose an English school because of the academic reputation (Ní Thuairisg & Ó Duibhir, 2016).

Parents who chose to send their child to an English medium school raised a number of concerns with *Gaeloideachas*. Some worried that their child's level of English was not up to standard and feared that this would be exacerbated by continuing on to a *Gaelcholáiste*. Others were concerned about third level education, in particular, the lack of university courses in Irish. Some also mentioned the subject choice in *Gaelcholáistí*, while others were worried that the *Gaelcholáiste* would not be able to adequately provide for their child's special educational needs (Ní Thuairisg & Ó Duibhir, 2016).

A number of parents in this study also highlighted the lack of information available to them. Parents felt that they were not given enough information on immersion and bilingual education. For most, the only opportunity to gain information was the post-primary school's open evening. A lot of the important information is sent out after the child has registered with the school rather than before. Therefore, parents without experience of immersion education are depending on the system itself to show the benefits. This constitutes an information gap that must be filled (Ní Thuairisg & Ó Duibhir, 2016).

This highlights the direct influence that parents play in completion and non-completion in IME as a social factor. Parents are increasingly informed and the choice of IME at post-primary level cannot be said to be coincidental. In fact, the opposite is true, parents make a conscious and informed decision to send their child to an IM post-primary school, based on a number of factors. This establishes parents as a key social factor in completion and non-completion, as they make the initial choice of post-primary school for their child.

However, this research also shows that the academic reputation of the IM school is an important aspect to parental school choice. This establishes academics as an influencing factor in completion and non-completion. Therefore, the next section is concerned with the academic factors which influence a completion and non-completion, however this section is situated within the student's perspective, as this is a key concern of the research question.

2.4.2 Academic Factors Influencing Completion and Non-completion

While Halsall (1994) identified academic factors which were linked to attrition and transfer from immersion programmes, these generally built upon influences already identified by previous researchers, such as Hayden (1988) and Keep (1993) who mentioned academic difficulty with languages. This also supports the findings noted by Campbell (1992), who reported that even after students had transferred out of immersion programmes, they still responded positively to the idea of immersion. Their transfer mostly resulted from the desire to pursue a different linguistic programme, rather than out of an opposition to immersion education (Berube, 2015).

Along with the results from Ellsworth (1997), who found that students linked their own academic weakness with their perceived weakness in the immersion target language, Noel (2003) noted the lack of academic progression as well as feelings of marginalization as academic factors influencing transfer. Beck (2004), while identifying much of the same as previously found, also remarked that some transfer students were influenced by their own preference to spend time with their non-immersion friends rather than commit to the extra time required to advance academically through the immersion programme. These students were resistant to completing homework, with the perception that homework was easier and took less time when completed through English as opposed to French, the immersion language of the study (Berube, 2015). This all serves to highlight the idea that academic factors play a substantial role in influencing the completion and non-completion of students in immersion programmes in post-primary education, whilst also establishing the idea of social factors influencing their perceptions and decisions. The following section explores the social influences highlighted in research which have additional influences on completion and non-completion as they affect the perceptions of each individual student.

2.4.3 Social Influences on Completion and Non-completion

While academics play a substantial role in the decision to leave an immersion programme, many studies have also noted the social influences at play in the same decision. Factors such as family, friends, school culture and even personal interests have all been found to have an impact on the decision to stay or go (Berube, 2015). Halsall (1994) noted that the learner's own apathy towards learning the target language as well as frustrations with school personnel, in particular with teachers, has

a significant effect on an individual's willingness to complete their education in an immersion setting. These ideas were later supported by Wesley (2010) who expanded on Halsall's work by linking the factors she identified with motivation, and ultimately with the negative consequences of unhappiness, increased stress and dissatisfaction. The idea of stressors and of satisfaction was also explored by Boudreaux (2011) where she argued that the learner's satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with the school environment, culture, community and/or personnel plays a significant contributory role in influencing a learner's decision to leave an immersion programme (Boudreaux, 2011).

A significant amount of the research into social factors influencing completion and non-completion in non-immersion environments identifies the emotional challenges and social stresses that learners label as being powerful influencers in their decision to leave an immersion programme (Berube, 2015). Quiring (2008) found that students who felt marginalized, or that they didn't fit in, were more likely to transfer out of the immersion programme, similar to Beck's (2004) findings that learners chose to leave the immersion programme to relocate to a school with their friends, more often than not resulting in the transfer to an English medium environment in order to meet their social needs rather than their academic ones. This is further supported by Makropoulos (2007) who found that social identity was a key influence on the decision to transfer. Makropoulos (2007) also made a link between student agency and transfer, noting that the longer that a student stayed in the immersion programme, the less likely they were to leave as their levels of agency grew. As the students in the study developed in maturity, they discovered the benefits of bilingualism and were more likely to remain in the immersion programme than their peers who had left at an earlier stage in their

educational journey (Makropoulos, 2007). Therefore, the educational context will be explored in the next section as a key social influence.

2.4.4 Educational Context

Students attempt to appropriate more advantageous identities with regard to the target language community, in the case of this study, their school (Norton & Toohey, 2011). Their identity is not fixed, but rather is shaped and re-shaped through their daily interactions with others (Tamimi, 2017). Language identity is not at odds with identity, nor does it require a choice between one identity or another, rather, it supplements and influences the student's own native identity, informing their development as an individual and as a member of the school community (Hahn, 2001; Tamimi, 2017). In the case of IME, this identity has a language aspect as many of the students are required to use their L2 during their day-to-day education. This means that feelings of belonging, or integration as described by Tinto (1987; 1993) can be linguistic as well as social and academic.

Opportunities to develop in the target language for students in an IM post-primary school are often affected by the student's relationship with their school, which in turn is frequently influenced by power in the social world (Norton & Toohey, 2011). This power division does not necessarily have to be real, but rather perceived as existing by the student. In the case of power relationships, the student who perceives a disadvantageous interconnection with the school can often engage in active resistance to learning which is often misinterpreted as disengagement and as a lack of motivation (Duff, 2002). As learners become more successful in altering (to their advantage) their power position, their ability and opportunity to acquire the target

language is also enhanced (Norton & Toohey, 2011), emphasising the importance of having a positive school environment and highlighting the influence that the educational context can have on completion and non-completion (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2004).

However, the school context does not exist within a vacuum. Schools are social settings with multiple social levels and avenues. As such, the following section looks into social engagement, as social engagement stems directly from the educational setting. This could therefore be said to exist as another social influence on student perspective and on completion and non-completion.

2.4.5 Social Engagement

In order to maximise completion and limit non-completion, schools are required to intervene in social engagement, where possible, to positively influence the growth of social learning communities where students are engaged and active with their peers (Kuh, 2003). Schools also need to harness the energy of students and focus them on activities which are educationally valuable but which also encourage social empathy and cohesion (Kenny, 2018). Such support structures serve students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are most vulnerable to non-completion due to those malleable features identified by Hirschy et al. (2011) (Kuh, 2003). Targeted interventions also foster the notion of respect, between students, teachers and the school itself (Cross, et al., 2009) whilst simultaneously challenging the asymmetrical relationships which currently exist within the majority of our schools today (Roffey, 2006).

When supportive and planned engagements are driven and facilitated by the school a “reciprocal engagement” is developed (Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002) where the school and students mutually shape each other’s development. Harper (2006) notes that this is highly supportive of new students who are unfamiliar with the culture of the new school as they can engage with their new lives through involvement with school sport, clubs and organisations. Such active participation leads to higher feelings of empowerment and results in improved student-teacher relationships (Mannion, 2007). A school model which incorporates social engagement has the potential to develop students both academically and holistically while providing for greater student engagement, as well as developing higher resilience levels leading to greater completion and lower non-completion rates (Kenny, 2018). However, such a model is highly dependent on the school environment. Therefore, the next section explores the school environment and the role which this environment plays on completion and non-completion.

2.4.6 School Environment

While malleable factors in completion and non-completion are often outside of the school’s sphere of control, the same cannot be said of the stable variables, which schools can influence to varying extents. Schools which have maximised completion and minimised non-completion usually have dedicated policies and interventions to limit and negate non-completion amongst its student body. Proven strategies currently used by post-primary schools to limit non-completion include:

- Improved provision of pre-entry information,
- Induction and transition support,

- Improvement of teaching and learning environments,
- Inclusion of formative assessment models,
- Enhancing student-teacher contact provision,
- Developing social engagement programmes,
- Devising data collection and monitoring systems (Kenny, 2018).

These strategies offer an insight into successful avenues which have been explored and implemented in educational environments which have actively engaged with completion and non-completion to the benefit of their institutions. As such, these ideas represent a framework upon which future intervention strategies to improve completion and limit non-completion, could be based.

It is therefore clear that the educational context, the social engagement within the school and school environment all combine to create a complex set of conditions which impact on a student's perception of their education and of IME. This can have a knock-on effect, whereby a student's engagement with their school, their education and with IME can be affected. As such, the following section explores school engagement, looking at the interactions which the individual student has and the possible impact that these interactions could have on identity, agency and motivation, and subsequently on completion and non-completion.

2.4.7 School Engagement

This section focuses on the student's engagement with the school, in particular on their interactions with the school and its agents. As such, the section will first address teaching, learning and assessment and the implications that the day-to-day business of the school has on individuals, before student-teacher engagements are

addressed. As both cognitive and social factors are at play (Figure 2.1), both of these sub-sections explore their relevance in terms of student completion and non-completion.

2.4.7.1 Teaching, Learning and Assessment

While nationally mandated assessment methods are beyond the control of the school, whole school policies and implementation of assessment can have an effect on completion and non-completion. The quality of teaching and learning has a significant impact on completion (Crosling & Heagney, 2008), however, the frequency, quality and type of assessment experienced by students also has a profound impact on their commitment to and engagement with the school itself (Kuh, 2003).

As academic success can be viewed as a central factor in completion (Chen, et al., 2008), teaching and learning, as well as assessment of learning must be engaging and of high quality (Meyer & Land, 2005) in order to reward the students' investment in study and learning (Chen, et al., 2008) to fulfil their cognitive requirement, specifically those of self-development and self-belief (Hirschy, 2011). Therefore, the onus is on individual schools to deliver and assess the curriculum in ways that encourage participation and engagement in order to maintain high completion rates. This idea is reinforced by Tinto, where he states:

... to be serious about student retention, institutions would recognise that the roots of student attrition lie not only in their students and the situations they face, but also in the very character of the educational settings in which they ask students to learn, namely the classrooms, laboratories...They would recognize that student learning is the key to student retention and by

extension realize that the involvement of faculty...is critical to institutional efforts to increase student retention. (Tinto, 2000, p. 81)

This emphasises the need for schools to play an active and pre-emptive part in completion if they are to preserve the low national attrition levels that the DoE wants to maintain. It is also interesting for IM post-primary schools which may have noticed that non-completion is occurring, as non-completion has such a large impact on wider school issues, such as budget, teacher allocation and subject availability. To facilitate this high level of completion, schools need to hold high expectations of their students regarding learning, and must recognise that not all students are academically prepared. Schools must therefore make appropriate academic supports available, provide feedback concerning performance and promote involvement with fellow students and appropriate learning activities (Tinto, 2000).

The inclusion of formative feedback thus provides students with a roadmap upon which they can check their progress and signpost their immediate priorities in terms of advancement, facilitating a sense of empowerment and cognitive ownership of their own outcomes within their locus of control (Bean & Eaton, 2001). This check-in also has the benefit of encouraging academic integration (Crosling & Heagney, 2008), which would subsequently benefit completion as cognitive needs such as motivation and agency have been serviced.

However, all of this is based around interactions between the student and their teacher(s). Therefore, these interactions must be examined to establish whether or not student-teacher relationships are a key influencing factor in completion and non-completion. As such, the following section investigates student-teacher engagement

and looks at the interactions which exist in post-primary schools and the influence that these interactions can have on students.

2.4.7.2 Student-Teacher Engagement

As noted by Bean and Eaton (2001) and Hirschy (2011), relationships developed between students and teachers can have a strong influence on their resilience and on completion and non-completion rates. Kenny (2018) suggests that “the quality, frequency and nature of contact between student and faculty has been established as a practice that has the potential to impact positively on persistence” (p. 62). As such, contact between students and teachers should be viewed as a key strategy in reducing non-completion rates (Thomas, 2007). Open contact between students and teachers can be highly affirmative, leading to both personal and academic development and a stronger feeling of integration on behalf of the student (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2004). This idea of integration is essential in contexts where non-completion has or may become an issue (Obadia, 1996).

Additionally, informal contact outside of the direct classroom influence has also been shown to improve academic integration, as such interactions can influence attitude, behaviour and values (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2004). Therefore, a combination of formal and informal interactions is required by schools in order to facilitate relationship building. Such relationships encourage greater integration of student support and in effect lead to more positive perceptions from students, resulting in higher completion rates (Warren, 2002; Thomas, 2002).

However, in the case of IM post-primary schools, language is also a key influence in the student-teacher relationship, in particular on students’ self-efficacy

and attitudes (Norton, 2010; Bean & Eaton, 2001). As some of the key interventions in completion and non-completion are based on effective communication and the building of relationships, the role of the teacher in preventing non-completion is noteworthy (Lee & Burkam, 2003; Berube, 2015).

One method to improve completion rates that was identified is that of mentoring, a strategy which is often overlooked, undervalued or simply ignored (Simpson, 2004). Often seen as demanding of resources, mentoring is in fact one of the most effective methods in minimising non-completion (Hurte, 2002). Hurte (2002) notes that mentoring has proven an effective strategy in fighting transfer as it provides a support base for students based on understanding, positive role modelling and offers personalised instruction based on where students are in their own lives.

In an IM post-primary school, the teacher's views on the imagined identities of the students can have the effect of maintaining existing inequalities evident amongst students, rather than providing for equal access and opportunity (Kanno, 2008). Therefore, understanding a learner's perception of their own language ability and their identity as a language learner has important implications for effective teaching and learning through languages (Dagenais, et al., 2008). A teacher who functions through the L2 must identify and address classroom practices which silence and marginalise students (Norton & Gao, 2008), as pedagogic decisions can have the effect of reinforcing the development of a subordinate identity which can limit the scope and range of their imagined identity, in turn restricting their opportunities as learners (Lee, 2008). This is important as marginalised students are often the most at risk of non-completion when engaged in immersion programmes (Lee & Burkam, 2003).

Pedagogical practices must therefore endeavour to acknowledge the imagined identity created by each student whilst also acknowledging that language acquisition requires students to contend with multiple identities at any given time. However, rather than prioritise one identity over the other, an autonomy amongst them must be promoted (Ushioda, 2009). These identities are shifting and wide-ranging, as opposed to static, concrete constructs (Tamimi, 2017). Teachers must recognise that the other identities present may assist in learning as opposed to hinder the same. Similarly, addressing these identities may also help to limit resistance (Norton, 2010) as students also experience their other identities in the classroom, as workers, sons and daughters, friends etc. (Tamimi, 2017). Encouraging this interchange could wield positive benefits in terms of completion, as one identity may be more resilient than another, which could encourage increased persistence. This in turn positively influences the locus of control and self-efficacy dynamics described and supported by Bean and Eaton (2001).

All of this establishes the student-teacher relationship and the interactions between students and their teachers as a key influence on completion and non-completion. These interactions have a direct influence on both cognitive and on social behaviours and perceptions, in line with previous models of retention and attrition, as well as with the model created in this study (Figure 2.1). The following section builds upon what has been established in this section in order to examine the implications which all of this has for the IME sector, for IME schools and for those involved in IME.

2.4.8 Implications for the IME Sector

Relationships between stakeholders are a key variable in the completion and non-completion puzzle. Positive relationships help students to flourish while negative

relationships can drive students away. These relationships are both stable and malleable factors, some are within the sphere of influence of schools, and some are not. However, one foundational relationship in terms of attrition and retention in IMEs is that of the student-teacher relationship. The difficulty that most IMEs are experiencing in hiring qualified teachers with the ability to speak and teach through Irish (O'Brien, 2018) is having a detrimental impact on the student-teacher relationship, as teachers, when sourced, are often not yet able to speak Irish fluently, in effect creating a language barrier both inside and outside of the classroom.

Both National and International evidence suggests that a comprehensive range of non-academic activities need to be made available for students who engage in Irish medium education. A range of opportunities needs to be provided outside of the classroom to encourage the use of the Irish language as a medium for communication in extra-curricular and leisure activities. Such opportunities would provide support for both stable and malleable influences in a student's life and would assist the development of the language identity (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007).

Furthermore, a greater provision of financial resources is needed to support and promote Irish language activities in order to extend the language learning environment beyond the school walls (Ó Duibhir, et al., 2017). Without adequate resources, it will be difficult to lower attrition rates as the Irish medium sector faces language challenges that the English medium sector does not. As exemplified in Wales, projects which are suitably bankrolled have a higher chance of success than those which lack adequate financial backing (Llywodraeth Cymru, 2008). Therefore, the Irish Medium Education sector must ensure that a strong lobby is maintained in order to

secure adequate funding to combat the unique variables which contribute to attrition and transfer in the sector, in a similar model to that seen in Wales (Welsh Government, 2019), and perhaps in the vein of the Delivering Equality in Schools (DEIS) model already in operation in the Republic of Ireland (Department of Education and Skills, 2019). This, therefore, has a direct influence on achievement within IM programmes, which will be discussed in the next sub-section.

2.4.8.1 Student Achievement within Immersion Programmes

As far back as Genesee (1979) the benefits of bilingualism were being researched and discussed, where it was acknowledged that students obtain a proficiency in some aspects of the target language that others might not necessarily obtain, particularly in receptive communication skills (Cadez, 2006; Lindholm-Leary & Howard, 2008). While they might not have the same levels of accuracy as native speakers, students in immersion education programmes tend to have levels of proficiency from the very good to functional range (Rivard, 2001).

Additionally, research in English speaking countries shows that students who are engaged in non-English immersion programmes do not suffer in terms of their English language ability as a result of their immersion education (Turnbull, et al., 2003; Lindholm-Leary, 2011; Genesee, 2008). In fact, the research shows that immersion students perform as well, if not better in English exams as their counterparts who study exclusively through the medium of English (Cadez, 2006; Leong, et al., 2005).

A similar conclusion has been reached by researchers into performance in other academic subjects. One older example of this can be found with Lambert and Tucker (1972) while more recently Lindholm-Leary confirmed that this was still the

case (Lindholm-Leary, 2011). This is consistent with the findings of Cadez (2006, p. 19) who found that “the more students are exposed to the second language, the better they perform in all areas”.

In relation to learning difficulties, a number of researchers suggest that learners with specific learning difficulties will not do any better or worse in an immersion environment than they would in an English medium school (Genesee, 1979; Obadia, 1996). Indeed, Bruck (1978) found that children with language acquisition difficulties learned at the exact predicted rate in immersion as would have been expected of them in English, that is, there was no evident disadvantage to them by learning through a non-native medium. Genesee (1979, p. 512) concluded the same whilst also looking at IQ, where he wrote “In the case of IQ, all evidence, direct and indirect, suggests that level of IQ is not an impediment to achievement in French immersion programs”. In fact, Cummins (1983) concluded that students were in some ways advantaged by participating in an immersion programme as they experienced cognitive benefits they might not otherwise have been exposed to, as he argued that “cognitive advantages may accrue to children who develop high levels of bilingual skills” (Cummins, 1983, p. 134). Rosseau (1999) concluded much the same, noting that students in the studies benefitted from extra learning supports, but that these supports would have been necessary in any educational programme they participated in, as their learning difficulties had nothing to do with second language acquisition (Cadez, 2006; Obadia, 1996). This, however, presents the idea of limitations evident within immersion programmes, which could be said to have an influence on completion and non-completion. Therefore, this idea will be addressed in the following section.

2.4.8.2 Limitations of Immersion Programmes

While the number of IM schools is slowly increasing in Ireland, it is not the most popular option for parents when choosing an education for their children. Historically, there have been charges of elitism levelled against immersion programmes, with Hart and Lapkin (Hart & Lapkin, 1998) noting as much. Traditionally, students with learning difficulties would be encouraged to leave immersion programmes, as were academically weaker students, leaving only the most capable learners (Cadez, 2006).

The charges of elitism appear to stem from two main branches, one is socioeconomic, the other academic profiles. Hart and Lapkin (1998) contend that these two factors converge in the perception of the wider public, who have the idea that children from the upper-middle-classes are sent into immersion programmes in order to maintain their advantages in society, thereby giving this children the advantage of more academically driven classes with similarly driven students and simultaneously depriving the local English medium school of the most capable students, essentially weakening the academic potential of these English medium classed (Hart & Lapkin, 1998).

The historical perception of elitism may derive from the beginnings of the immersion movement, where many of the more renowned and known school originated in suburban areas, which would now be viewed as middle class (Cadez, 2006). The perceptual problem here is that these areas were populated by well educated people with an interest in their children's education and futures, and so their children were going to be pushed academically at any rate, regardless of the medium of instruction (Hart & Lapkin, 1998).

However, the label of “elite” is gradually fading in the modern world. This may have something to do with the new prevalence of immersion options for students, something which did not exist in the past (Obadia, 1996). With the increased availability of immersion programmes, they are attracting a more economically, culturally and socially diverse population than previously seen, diminishing the label of elitism that once persisted (Obadia, 1996; Cadez, 2006).

This section examined the social factors which influence completion and non-completion. The educational context was discussed, establishing the idea that feelings of belonging can be linguistic as well as social and academic. The importance of a positive school environment was developed. Social engagement was of noted importance, in particular the notion of targeted interventions being helpful with completion. Teaching, learning and assessment were shown to have an influence on commitment and engagement while academic success and progression were also shown to be influential. Finally, student-teacher relationships were established as having a major impact on integration and positive perceptions. The next section deals with influences outside of the personal and local; environmental and economic factors which influence completion and non-completion.

2.5 Societal Factors Affecting Completion and Non-completion

This section deals with the societal factors at play with completion and non-completion. Firstly, international policy is discussed and its implications for completion and non-completion are noted. This leads to an analysis of national policy, as it relates to educational provision, Irish language provision and completion priorities. Finally, the economic benefit of Irish language post-primary education to the student is discussed,

with an emphasis on the benefits afforded by bilingualism and immersion education as a student continues beyond post-primary education.

Economic factors are identified in all of the models of attrition and retention earlier identified. Economic factors exist as external pressures that exist upon students as they prepare for the realities of living in the real world. As students mature, they are often confronted with economic realities and sometimes economics and financial concerns are key drivers in completion and non-completion, as opposed to cognitive and social factors (Makropoulos, 2007).

Thus, economic concerns such as international and national policy, the structure of the educational system and the provision of education must all be examined to offer an additional layer of understanding when examining the factors which influence completion and non-completion in the IM post-primary education sector.

2.5.1 *International Policy*

In 2015 the OECD expected that 85% of young people in OECD countries would complete post-primary education. Of those people in OECD countries who have already completed post-primary schooling, 97% have done so before the age of 25 (OECD, 2015). In this report Ireland had the third highest graduation rate, following New Zealand and Portugal. The report notes that graduating from post-primary school has become increasingly important in recent years as labour markets have become increasingly knowledge-based and workers require a higher level of consolidated education to successfully navigate the globalised market and economy, adding an economic necessity to completion and non-completion. Interestingly, the report makes

specific mention of the problems associated with non-completion and the difficulties that non-completion creates for early school leavers:

One of the challenges facing education systems in many OECD countries is students' disengagement and consequent dropout from the education system, meaning that they leave school without an upper secondary qualification. These young people tend to face severe difficulties entering – and remaining in – the labour market. Leaving school early is a problem, both for individuals and society (OECD, 2015, p. 48).

The next section looks into national policy and the relationship that exists between national policy and international influences by highlighting the influence that such policies can have on completion and non-completion.

2.5.2 National Policy

The 2021 study, *Retention rates of pupils in second-level schools: Entry cohort 2014*, is the most recent currently available from the DoE. In this report, student numbers are tracked by the DoE using the Post-Primary Online Database (P-POD) along with information obtained from the State Examinations Commission (SEC). This allows for more accurate numbers, as a number of students may leave DoE funded schools, and hence the P-POD system, as they move from public to private education, but will re-appear on the SEC system as they register as external candidates for the purposes of SEC examinations.

In this report it was noted that of the 62,364 enrolments in September 2014, 91.5 per cent sat their LC examination in 2019 or 2020. This represented an increase of 0.3 per cent in the completion rate compared to the previous year's cohort, reinforcing the ROI's policy of maintaining high completion rates.

There are 715 post-Primary schools in the ROI which receive funding from the DoE which are grouped into three categories: (i) Voluntary, (ii) Vocational and (iii) Community & Comprehensive (see Table 2.2) (Department of Education and Skills, 2018). These three types of school currently encompass 29 IM post-primary schools which are located outside of Gaeltacht areas, which are the focus of this investigation (see Table 2.3).

Table 2.2

Post-Primary Schools in the Republic of Ireland

School Type	Total 2020/21	Total 2021/22	Total 2022/23	Number of Students 2022/23
Voluntary	381	383	385	210,185
Vocational	246	251	247	118,262
Community & Comprehensive	96	96	96	63,251
Total	723	730	728	391,698

(Central Statistics Office, 2022)

Table 2.3

Student enrolment in Irish-medium schools in Ireland, ROI 2021-2022

Number of Students	Gaeltacht	ROI Outside the Gaeltacht	Total ROI
Irish-medium primary	7,059 (1.3%)	37,243 (6.7%)	44,302 (8.0%)
Total Primary	554,788	554,788	554,788
Irish-medium post-primary	3,602 (0.9%)	10,498 (2.7%)	14,100 (3.6%)
Total post-primary	391,698	391,698	391,698

(Department of Education, 2022)

However, each school in the ROI must deliver the same curriculum and specifications (NCCA, 2019). As such, the curriculum has been designed to provide for both academic and vocational education in order to meet the full spectrum of needs for all students, regardless of the type of school they attend or the language of instruction they choose. (State Examinations Commission, 2019), meaning that the same syllabus and terminal exams are available to students who begin their education through Irish, but complete their education through English.

This policy facilitates completion and non-completion, as the syllabus and content of courses does not differ between IM and English-medium schools, meaning that national policy regarding curriculum does not hinder non-completion on academic grounds. This has a direct impact in individual success and progression, which will therefore be discussed in the next section, where the impact of such national policies is examined in relation to the individual.

This section dealt with both the societal factors which affect completion and non-completion. International policy was examined, in particular OECD and European Union (EU) targets for completion. National policy was then discussed, contextualising the Irish education system as it currently stands for this study. The numbers of students in post-primary education in the ROI were provided before the numbers of students in IM post-primary education were analysed, establishing key trends and patterns which will be important in later chapters. Finally, the economic benefits of IME were discussed. It was noted that success in state examinations statistically leads to greater future opportunities whilst also recognising that bilingualism increases an individual's future market value. Learning difficulties were then addressed and it was

established that completion in IM post-primary school becomes an added value to students with learning difficulties because of the cognitive benefits of bilingualism. The following section looks at the implications of completion and non-completion.

2.6 Implications of Completion and Non-Completion

In this section, the implications of completion and non-completion are discussed and analysed in terms of both national and individual development. To do that, the implications of completion and non-completion are looked at in terms of the immediate requirements needed in order to address completion and non-completion in our schools and society.

Once the national implications are addressed, the implication of completion and non-completion for the individual are considered. Educational achievement and academic success are examined and the consequences of non-completion are explored using international research to provide an insight into the implications of non-completion in an immersion language context, the findings of which provide useful insight for students in IM post-primary education.

While the factors influencing completion and non-completion are interesting in and of themselves, they are situated in a wider continuum of education. That is, once the decision relating to non-completion has been made and implemented, the student, their family and their old and new schools must deal with the implications of that decision.

Each of these stakeholders in the educational development, and success, of the student in question is affected in a variety of ways. While the students themselves may not have gone through such a process previously, it is often the case that teachers,

schools and sometimes parents, have navigated the process of non-completion previously. Therefore, each stakeholder views and treats the non-completion differently, based on their previous experience. As such, it is important to note this experience in order to understand what, if any, influence the process of non-completion has on different parties.

Once the experience of the student and parent have been understood, profound implications for the school and its staff can be analysed. The transfer of a student can have a much wider impact than an individual student or their family might realise. As such, the impact of transfer on the school culture and community must also be understood in order to understand just how wide-reaching and complex the puzzle of transfer really is.

2.6.1 National Development

Relationships between stakeholders are a key variable in completion and non-completion. Positive relationships help students to flourish while negative relationships can drive students away (Chen, et al., 2008). These relationships are both stable and malleable factors, some are within the sphere of influence of schools, and some are not (Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002). However, one foundational relationship in terms of non-completion in IM post-primary schools is that of the student-teacher relationship. Most IM post-primary schools are experiencing difficulties in hiring qualified teachers (Teachers Union of Ireland, 2020) with the ability to speak and teach through Irish (O'Brien, 2018), which is having a detrimental impact on the student-teacher relationship, as teachers, when sourced, are often not yet able to speak Irish fluently, in effect creating a language barrier both inside and outside of the classroom.

Therefore, strategies are required to increase the number of teachers available to teach through the medium of Irish in order to minimise non-completion in IM post-primary schools.

Both National and International evidence suggests that a comprehensive range of non-academic activities need to be made available for students who engage in IME. A range of opportunities outside of the classroom are required to encourage the use of the Irish language as a medium for communication in extra-curricular and leisure activities (Ó Duibhir, 2018). Such opportunities would provide support for both stable and malleable influences in a student's life and would assist the development of the language identity (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). Furthermore, financial resources are needed to support and promote Irish language activities in order to extend the language learning environment beyond the school walls (Ó Duibhir, et al., 2017). As exemplified in Wales, projects which are suitably financed have a higher chance of success than those which lack adequate financial backing (Llywodraeth Cymru, 2008). The following sub-section develops this idea by looking at current and projected growth in the short term for Irish education, thus providing a societal context for the factors which influence completion and non-completion.

2.6.1.1 Projected Enrolment in Post-primary Schools

The Department of Education's own short-term projections for the next three years indicate a predicted growth in post-Primary numbers of 19,710 by September 2020. This forecast therefore anticipates a 5.5 per cent increase in post-Primary enrolment. Within these numbers, the DoE acknowledges and accounts for a

“noticeable increase in retention at second level in recent years” (Department of Education and Skills, 2018, p. 7).

In the DES’s most likely scenario, enrolment levels will increase to, and peak at, 401,754 students in September 2025. However, on the opposite extremes (less likely scenarios), enrolment numbers could peak at 404,010 on one side or at 399,498 on the other, still situated in 2025. In each scenario, student numbers are expected to grow by between 9.9 per cent and 11.1 per cent by 2025 (Department of Education and Skills, 2018). With a growth in availability and choice, an ESRI survey in 2018 reported that 23% of parents would choose Irish medium education for their child, if the option was available (Ó hEaghra, 2018). This suggests that a substantial amount of the anticipated growth will happen in the Irish-medium sector. This is consistent with research conducted in Northern Ireland (NI) by *Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta*, which indicated that the number of pupils enrolled in Irish-medium education will double between 2017 and 2032 (Doyle, 2017).

Table 2.4

Three Year Enrolment Prediction for Post-Primary Schools

Year Beginning	No. of Students	% Increase on 2017 (Final) Figures
2017 (Final numbers)	357,408	N/A
2018 (Predicted)	363,495	+1.7%
2019	369,673	+3.4%
2020	377,118	+5.5%

(Department of Education and Skills, 2018)

Table 2.5*DOE Enrolment Predictions for Post-Primary 2018-2025*

Year	Extreme Growth Scenario	Most Likely Scenario	Minimal Growth Scenario
2018	363,495	363,495	363,495
2020	377,377	377,118	376,860
2022	393,271	392,414	391,557
2024	403,943	402,176	400,409
2025	404,010	401,754	399,498

(Department of Education, 2018)

These numbers reflect already established national trends in the Primary school sector and are a direct continuous product of the primary enrolment estimates made by the DOE (Department of Education and Skills, 2018). These predictions are based on current and immediate primary enrolments and post-primary retentions. While the estimates take account of fertility and migration rates through assumptions, these rates do not mention economic influences, including the recent surge in demand for young people to enter into apprenticeships and trades (McGuire, 2018) which may impact retention and attrition rates in the post-Primary system.

However, the DoE predictions do note the increase in numbers opting to take part in the Transition Year programme, meaning that there will be a year-on-year increase in the numbers completing this programme, and therefore remaining in the system for an additional year. The impact of Transition Year (TY) on enrolment rates is dependent on a number of variables, including the number of schools offering TY, the

number of places they make available, whether TY is mandatory or optional and indeed whether the DoE will choose to retain TY after their review of Senior Cycle which is currently underway (NCCA, 2019). As TY has been identified as a natural transition (or attrition) point in Irish post-primary education, any impact on this programme can be said to have a knock-on effect on completion and non-completion. The following sub-section will examine the direct impact that such predictions have on IME, and, thus, on completion and non-completion.

2.6.1.2 Implications of Completion and Non-completion for the IM School

In a follow up to her initial study on student transfer in primary immersion education, Margaret Bruck (1985a) conducted further studies into student transfer, specifically looking at the academic and cognitive consequences of the transfer out of an immersion environment, as well as the emotional, social and attitudinal implications (Bruck, 1985b). The students were assessed using the same tools as in the original (1985a) study. Additionally, parents were asked to reflect on their decision to withdraw their child from the immersion school and to discuss any changes, positive or negative, that had occurred in their child since their transfer. Academically, both the control group and the transfer group were performing as expected for their age and stage of development, with no remarkable differences between the two groups. Parents of both groups felt that their child was doing better than they had in the previous year, with 33% of control parents reporting that their child's problems had disappeared over the past year as opposed to 16% of the control group. However, this is not consistent with the findings from the student tests or the teacher surveys which

were conducted. Bruck (1985b) accounts for this disparity with three arguments, namely:

1. Parents of the transfer group may have noted an improvement in their child's performance in order to justify having transferred them out of the original immersion programme, given the conflict they had gone through in order to reach this decision.
2. Parents of the transfer group may have been more attentive in looking for improvements and have perceived that a difficulty existed, even in instances where this was not the case.
3. Improvements in the control group may not have been as immediately noticeable as no change in educational setting had occurred (Bruck, 1985b)

Parents of the transfer group also expressed satisfaction with their decision to withdraw their child from the immersion programme, with 87% reporting that their decision was an "excellent one". This suggests that parents' perceptions had evolved since the transfer had occurred and that their perception of their child's initial perceived difficulty before the transfer had also changed in the interceding year between Bruck's studies, with parents viewing the original perceived difficulty more negatively and intensely than they had done a year previous (Bruck, 1985b).

This perception, however, is at odds with the finding from the other data sources. Teachers of the transfer group did note an improvement in work habits but also noted that instances of negative attitudes, hyperactivity and poor behaviour were still commonplace amongst the transfer group a year after the transfer out of the immersion environment had been made. Bruck therefore concluded that immersion

education cannot be blamed for behavioural problems which may emerge during a child's schooling. If there were a link between behaviour and immersion education then these problems should have dissipated after the transfer group's withdrawal from the immersion programme (Bruck, 1985b).

In her series of studies into attrition and transfer at post-primary level, Nancy Halsall (1994) noted that the transfer of students out of an immersion programme causes a unique stress to the English medium school receiving the students as they quite often require assistance after the transfer, usually in the form of additional learning supports, language reinforcement and resource allocation. The transfer of students also means that class sizes in the English medium school also increase (Beck, 2004).

While malleable factors in completion and non-completion are often outside of the school's sphere of control, the same cannot be said of the stable variables, which schools can influence to varying extents. To this end, schools, and in particular IM schools should have dedicated policies and interventions to limit and negate attrition and transfer amongst its student body. Proven strategies which have been applied across Higher Education institutions and which could be adapted to suit post-primary environments include:

- Improved provision of pre-entry information,
- Induction and transition support,
- Improvement of teaching and learning environments,
- Inclusion of formative assessment models,
- Enhancing student-teacher contact provision,

- Developing social engagement programmes,
- Devising data collection and monitoring systems (Kenny, 2018).

While these strategies are not a definitive instruction, they do offer an insight into successful avenues which have been explored and implemented in other educational environments which have actively engaged with attention, retention and transfer to the benefit of their institutions. As such, these ideas may represent a solid starting framework to base future intervention strategies to improve retention and reduce attrition and transfer, should such issues be identified as a problem. As such, studies such as this one are important for completion and non-completion in a national context, in particular for IME, as they establish definite strategies and interventions which could have a direct impact on completion and non-completion. The following sub-section will examine some of these strategies and interventions in the context of immersion education and IME.

2.6.1.3 Pre-entry Information and Induction

A divergence between student requirements and interventions and structures offered by a school can often occur at the entry point to post-primary education. That is, the schools support structures are already in place and students are required to adapt to those structures, as opposed to the structures being reformed in order to reflect the requirements of the students themselves (Yorke & Thomas, 2003). This divergence could be resolved by developing information sharing arrangements between the primary and post-primary school. While progress has been achieved by the introduction of the Education Passport in 2014 (NCCA, 2019) schools could do

more on a local level to facilitate the sharing of essential information prior to the student's enrolment in the post-primary school.

Harvey and Smith (2006) suggest that a comprehensive induction programme should be developed in order to effectively promote student retention by bridging any potential communication deficits between courses of study and institutions, i.e., the Primary Curriculum and the Junior Cycle, and the primary school and the post-primary school. Induction programmes also allow for staff to recognise and note the unique diversities apparent in any given year group intake in order to tailor initial subject introductions to target the most vulnerable student and those most likely to leave (Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1997). However, in addition to pre-entry data and information, teaching and learning itself, as well as assessment practices must also be examined in order to fully establish the implications of completion and non-completion on IME. Therefore, these ideas will be discussed further in the following section.

2.6.1.4 Teaching & Learning and Assessment Practices

While the assessment methods of the Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate are beyond the control of the school, whole school policies and implementation of assessment can have an effect on retention, attrition and transfer. While the quality of teaching and learning has a significant impact on retention (Crosling & Heagney, 2008), the frequency, quality and type of assessment experienced by students also has a profound impact on their commitment to and engagement with the school itself (Kuh, 2003).

As academic success can be viewed as an underpin in student retention (Chen, et al., 2008), teaching and learning, as well as assessment of learning must be engaging

and of high quality (Meyer & Land, 2005) in order to reward the students' investment in study and learning (Chen, et al., 2008). Therefore, the onus is on the school to deliver and assess the curriculum in ways that encourage participation and engagement in order to maintain high retention rates. This idea is reinforced by Tinto, where he states:

“to be serious about student retention, institutions would recognise that the roots of student attrition lie not only in their students and the situations they face, but also in the very character of the educational settings in which they ask students to learn, namely the classrooms, laboratories...They would recognize that student learning is the key to student retention and by extension realize that the involvement of faculty...is critical to institutional efforts to increase student retention” (Tinto, 2000, p. 81).

This emphasises the need for schools to play an active and pre-emptive part in student retention if they are to preserve the low national attrition levels that the Department of Education wants to maintain. It is also interesting for immersion schools which may have noticed that transfer is occurring, as transfer has such a large impact on wider school issues, such as budget, teacher allocation and subject availability. Tinto goes on to explain that to facilitate this level of retention, schools need to hold high expectations of their students regarding learning, recognise that not all students are academically prepared, make appropriate academic supports available, provide feedback concerning performance and promote involvement with fellow student and appropriate learning activities (Tinto, 2000).

The inclusion of formative feedback thus provides students with a roadmap upon which they can check their progress and signpost their immediate priorities in terms of advancement. This check-in also has the benefit of encouraging academic integration (Crosling & Heagney, 2008), one of Tinto's (1993) tenants of retention.

Following this section, the idea of national trends is discussed. These national trends develop and emerge from national development and are therefore important influences on the completion and non-completion puzzle.

2.6.2 National Trends

An Analysis of Models of Provision for IME conducted in 2013 and published in 2017 (Ó Duibhir, et al., 2017; Ní Thuairisg & Ó Duibhir, 2016) together with a further study (Ní Thuairisg & Ó Duibhir, 2016) revealed that the transfer rate between IM primary and post-primary still was a cause of concern. School principals in Ní Thuairisg and Ó Duibhir (2016) reported that 40.2% of IM primary students continued on to an IM post-primary school (see Table 2.4). When they factored in the lack of an IM post-primary school within commuting distance the rate of transfer increased to 53.6%.

Table 2.6

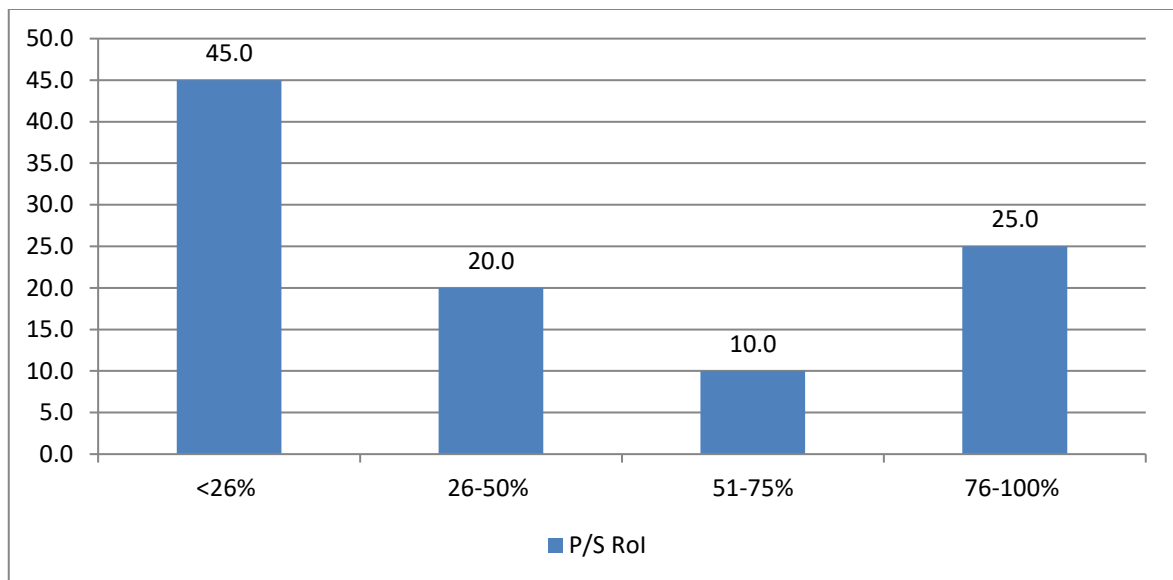
The transfer rate from the Irish-medium primary school to the Irish-medium post-primary

	Number of pupils in 6th class in 2014	Number of 6th class pupils in 2014 who went on to an IM post-primary school.	% Transferred
All schools in the research	764	307	40.2%
Schools without an Irish-medium post-primary school in the catchment area	225	18	8.0%
Schools with an Irish-medium post-primary school in the catchment area	539	289	53.6%

(Adapted from: Ní Thuairisg & Ó Duibhir, 2016)

Figure 2.3

Primary School transitions in the ROI in IME



(Adapted from: Ní Thuairisg & Ó Duibhir, 2016)

This figure is in line with the 49.8% of parents in the same study who stated that their children intend to attend an IM post-primary school (see Figure 2.3) (Ní Thuairisg & Ó Duibhir, 2016).

In terms of non-completion, principals of IM post-primary schools who were asked to provide data on the numbers of student who left the school during the year reported that the percentage was extremely low, coming in at 1.6%. The reasons for departure as reported indicate that 65% left because of learning difficulties, 20% because of dissatisfaction with the IM system, 25% on the advice of a psychologist and 30% for other reasons (Ó Duibhir, et al., 2017). This shows that statistically, in a single year, that attrition rates are low. However, the numbers provided are not for the life span of a student cohort's education, as with the DoE statistics, where the progression of a cohort is analysed, but rather refer to the entire school population over a given year in the sample schools.

However, with 23% of parents responding that they would choose IME for their child, if the option was available (Ó hEaghra, 2018; Darmody & Daly, 2015), and with the IM post-primary sector set to grow naturally by over 10% in the next decade (Department of Education and Skills, 2016), a greater sample of schools than previously used is required to ensure that adequate provisions are developed to ensure that non-completion is not an issue in IM post-primary schools.

Following on from this, the next sub-section looks at flashpoints in national retention and attrition, an area with a direct connection to completion and non-completion.

2.6.2.1 Flashpoints in National Retention and Attrition

However, the attrition rates show a number of flash points which occur during the post-primary educational continuum. Numbers relating to the Irish-medium sector are not specified in the published report by the DoE, but could provide for an interesting analysis and insight, should the flashpoints and rates differ from the national trends.

Table 2.7*Retention rates, by milestone, 2011 cohort*

Milestone	Cohort Progression	Retention Rates (%)
Entry	59,641	100
Junior Cycle Year 2	59,147	99.2
Junior Cycle Year 3	58,719	98.5
Junior Certificate Exam	58,175	97.5
Senior Cycle Year 1	57,128	95.8
Senior Cycle Year 2	55,221	92.6
Leaving Certificate Exam	54,642	91.6

(Department of Education and Skills, 2017)

Table 2.8*Early school leavers, by milestone, 2011 cohort*

Milestone	Cohort Progression	Retention Rates (%)
Junior Cycle Year 2	494	0.8
Junior Cycle Year 3	428	1.5
Junior Certificate Exam	544	2.5
Senior Cycle Year 1	1,047	4.2
Senior Cycle Year 2	1,907	7.4
Leaving Certificate Exam	579	8.4

(Department of Education and Skills, 2017)

These figures in Tables 2.5 and 2.6 show that between the Junior Certificate examination and the start of 5th Year that 1,047 pupils left the system. This is the

period when students usually have a choice between completing TY or progressing directly on to 5th year. Of this cohort, 39,347 participated in TY, meaning that the others either proceeded directly to 5th Year or dropped out (Department of Education and Skills, 2015). 1,047 pupils failed to transition into Senior Cycle from Junior Cycle from the September 2011 cohort. Combined with early school leavers from previous years, this shows that 2,513 students (or 4.2 per cent) disengaged with post-Primary education before entering Senior Cycle, increasing to 8.4 per cent by the Leaving Certificate examination (Department of Education and Skills, 2017), a pattern which Ireland shares with both Canada and the USA.

While students attending Irish-medium schools are included in these statistics, the report does not provide an individual breakdown of retention and attrition rate as they relate to Irish-medium education. These numbers also fail to specify movement between schools, i.e., students who remain in the education system, but move between educational institutions. Anecdotal evidence suggests that both drop-out rates and transfers may cause the numbers in Irish-medium schools to diverge from national trends and patterns. These numbers therefore merit further investigation.

Following on from this, the next section is concerned with international trends and patterns in attrition, retention and transfer, perhaps offering an international perspective on completion and non-completion. Therefore, the international context is explored in terms of both trends and completion rates.

2.6.3 *International Trends*

Internationally, there is an unprecedented expansion in upper secondary education, and therefore no baseline for comparison to make accurate predictions. As

such, all predictions being made by the OECD are based on previous trends of growth and patterns which emerged (OECD, 2015). However, the most recent growth emerged from a time of global economic recession and marked depression. During these financially difficult years, the majority of OECD countries increased their completion rates (OECD, 2016). This means that the education systems which expanded did so at a time of economic and financial hardship.

Future growth and trends in a post-recession market will therefore experience unpredictable consequences as economies begin to invest financially in their education systems in order to catch up with, or even improve upon pre-recession investment rates. This new territory makes accurate prediction on growth, or indeed national educational policy, difficult, especially in the context of recent global societal priorities, such as that of physical and mental wellbeing, developing resilience in young people, as well as social inclusion and provision for minorities, including language provisions (OECD, 2017).

2.7 International Retention Rates and Comparisons

Between 2005 and 2015, the OECD have noted that graduation rates in OECD countries have risen from 80 per cent to 85 per cent, suggesting that there is an increased drive to improve retention rates amongst OECD countries (OECD, 2015). This supports the notion that “attaining an upper secondary education is often considered to be the minimum credential for successful entry into the labour market and necessary for continuing to further education” (OECD, 2015, p. 50). This is borne out in Byrne and McCoy’s (2017) research where they noted that students from a higher socio-economic background were more likely to complete upper secondary education

and go on to Higher Education than their colleagues from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Byrne & McCoy, 2017).

While data show that retention rates in Ireland are high compared to other OECD countries, comparative analyses of retention rates with other countries can present challenges, particularly with regards to comparative pupil age, the structure of public examinations and the ways in which data are collected, collated and published (Morris & Parashar, 2012). Eurostat figures used by the DoE place Ireland second only to Croatia in the number of 20–24-year-olds who have completed Upper-Secondary education, with a rate of 94.2 per cent (Department of Education and Skills, 2017).

Table 2.9
Percentage of persons aged 20 to 24 with at least upper-secondary education in the EU, 2017

Geography	Upper-Secondary completion rate (%)
EU (28 countries)	83.3
Euro area (19 countries)	81.8
Croatia	96.3
Ireland	94.2
Lithuania	91.3
Poland	90.6
United Kingdom	85.6
Iceland	64.6

As evidenced in the NEWB report by Morris and Parashar (2012), one of the main challenges facing the Irish education system is that of student engagement, and subsequent disengagement and dropout. This pattern is also evidenced internationally within the OECD, whose report notes that pupils who disengage and subsequently drop out often face the same difficulty with engagement as they enter the labour market. This results in life-long problems for both the individual and society itself (OECD, 2017).

However, Ireland is only one of three nations within the OECD statistical analysis which provides true cohort data (as opposed to cross cohort data) whilst only providing general programmes for pupils, as opposed to offering both general and vocational options (OECD, 2017, p. 160), the other countries being Latvia and New Zealand. In comparison with both countries Ireland presents higher retention rates by at least 15 percentage points. Data were not available indicating whether Irish-medium schools maintain the same high retention rates as the national average. Therefore, the actual retention and attrition numbers in the Irish-medium sector warrant further investigations to see how they compare to both national and international standards, as this could offer a key insight into completion and non-completion in IME in the ROI. The following section will explore the insights which can be garnered from international research, which could offer some insight into completion and non-completion in the Irish context.

2.7.1 Insights in International Research

In 2015 the OECD expected that 85 per cent of young people in OECD countries would complete upper second-level education. Of those people in OECD countries who

have already completed post-primary schooling, 97 per cent have done so before the age of 25 (OECD, 2015). In this report Ireland had the third highest graduation rate, following New Zealand and Portugal. The report notes that graduating from Upper-secondary has become increasingly important in recent years as labour markets have become increasingly knowledge-based and workers require a higher level of consolidated education to successfully navigate the globalised market and economy. Interestingly, the report makes specific mention of the problems associated with early school leavers and the difficulties they will face in their futures:

“One of the challenges facing education systems in many OECD countries is students’ disengagement and consequent dropout from the education system, meaning that they leave school without an upper secondary qualification. These young people tend to face severe difficulties entering – and remaining in – the labour market. Leaving school early is a problem, both for individuals and society” (OECD, 2015, p. 48).

The OECD report, *Society at a Glance 2016*, noted that, internationally, investment in vocational education can be a key to the smooth transition from education to work for vulnerable youth. The report notes that in countries where dual-system apprenticeship programmes are made available at upper-secondary level there are lower attrition rates and greater future opportunities for students who would otherwise be at risk of dropping out of full-time education (OECD, 2016). No such analysis is provided for to analyse or discuss student transfer.

In reference to attrition in specialized programmes, such as language immersion education programmes, Canada can offer some interesting and unique

perspective in terms of French language immersion programmes. The Ottawa-Carleton Catholic School Board (2000), in an analysis of their historical data, found that students leave between grades 9 and 12, or between second and sixth year in the Irish equivalent. The board reported that “the drop out from French as a Second Language program begins to occur in grade 9 and continues to rapidly decline to grade 12” (2000, p. 12). On the foot of this, and similar studies, grade 9, or second year, has been identified as a flashpoint in attrition in the language immersion sector in Canada, in addition to other major transition points identified in the Canadian system (Cadez, 2006).

2.7.1.1 United States of America

A similar statistic, is mentioned in Hirschman, et al. (2008). However, the authors note that the more remarkable flashpoint in the United States of America (USA) is that of the transition between Middle and High school, the equivalent of the movement from Transition Year into Senior Cycle in Ireland. They note that increased academic demands, as well as a more complex educational and social environment result in a greater potential for attrition. This is reflected and supported by Barber and Olsen (2004) who argue that new entries to high school (senior cycle) are placed in larger classes with more project-work, course-work and homework whilst simultaneously being afforded greater responsibility for their own learning and academic careers. The greater availability of subject choice also means that these senior students must also move between classes more often necessitating the need to forge new relationships with previously unknown teachers and classmates (Schiller,

1999). This makes the transition between tenth and eleventh grades, fourth and fifth year in the Irish system, key flashpoints in attrition in the USA.

While the USA isn't altogether noteworthy in terms of immersion education, there is a growing body of research in the field of student transfer, where students are moving from one school district to another. While this is not directly equivalent to the immersion sector in Ireland, there are some overlaps, in particular with subject choice, perceived advantage/disadvantage, social and parental pressure as well as the availability of resources and support structure (Holme & Richards, 2009). Each of these issues has appeared in the available literature surrounding transfer out of immersion programmes.

2.7.1.2 Canada

Furthermore, a number of longitudinal studies in Canada have revealed that the most frequently reported reason for transfer from an immersion educational environment to an English medium environment was one related to academic achievement or an academic difficulty. As far back as 1989, Lewis and Shapson remarked that students who left an immersion environment "seemed particularly disappointed about their inability to keep up in the immersion program" (Lewis & Shapson, 1989, p. 545). This sentiment was mirrored by Hayden (1988), who wrote that "the most frequently cited reason for withdrawal focused on the children's academic difficulty in school with particular emphasis on their lack of success with language arts (90%)" (Hayden, 1988, p. 226). Subsequent analysis and studies reveal that students who have left immersion programmes felt that they might achieve

higher grades in English medium schools in comparison to the grades they were achieving in the immersion language environment (Cadez, 2006).

While student achievement and attainment, or the perceptions thereof, have been highlighted as key factors in a student's decision to leave an immersion programme in favour of one in the L1, international research has also identified other variables in the attrition puzzle. One such factor is that of suitable qualified teaching staff. The Canadian Educational Association (1992) reported that as immersion programmes gain in popularity and numbers of immersion language schools continue to rise, acute problems are emerging in sourcing and employing suitably qualified teachers willing and able to teach through the immersion target language. This difficulty has been noted by parents who reported that attrition and shortage of suitably qualified teachers were the most important issues that needed immediate addressing in the French immersion system in Canada (Canadian Parents for French, 2003).

2.7.1.3 Wales

In Wales the Welsh Assembly Government, in cooperation with the Welsh Language Board launched the *Immersion and Intensive Language Teaching Pilots Project* in 2008 in order to address the issues of attrition between primary and post-primary language immersion programmes (Estyn, 2006). Intensive language courses were offered to pupils in Year 6 and students in Year 7. The pilot project revealed that the intervention had been more successful with the Year 7 students, who reported using more Welsh with their post-primary friends and in the local community than those in Year 6 who also participated in the project (Llywodraeth Cymru, 2008).

Students who participated in the pilot project indicated that they enjoyed the intensive language course and were more positively disposed to the Welsh language than before the project. Teachers noted that attendance rates generally improved and that participation amongst students in extra-curricular also rose over the course of the project. The project included intensive training for teachers and included a number of language and financial resources which were noted as contributing to the success of the pilot (Llywodraeth Cymru, 2008).

In this section, the implication of completion and non-completion were discussed in terms of national and individual development. The impact of non-completion for schools and teachers was highlighted, in particular the influence that non-completion has on subject choice and permanent teaching jobs. The impact of non-completion on non-educational based language opportunities was also mentioned before the current financial provisions and barriers were identified. In terms of personal development, academic perceptions of both parents and students were contextualised through an analysis of a study on non-completion in an immersion environment. This analysis noted that perceptions of progress were based on individual cognitive influences rather than on factual evidence of success or failure. As a result, it was noted that adequate supports are a key factor in maximising completion. Finally, the impact of completion and non-completion on research was reviewed. Future growth and development trends were identified and completion and non-completion was linked with emerging global policy aims, such as well-being and social inclusion. Gaps in the current research were also highlighted. National research was examined, with a particular emphasis on IME research. Previous studies into completion and non-completion were considered before being analysed and their

recommendations were noted, further informing the direction of this study. The following section gives an overall summary of this chapter.

2.8 Summary

In this chapter, the nature of the research question was examined in relation to the existing body of literature that exists in the field of study. The literature was analysed thematically in terms of the research question to provide context and relevance. The key understandings and definitions pertinent to this investigation were provided and discussed at length.

The chapter began by looking at the nature of completion and non-completion with a particular emphasis on drawing parallels between completion, non-completion and retention and attrition. To this end, models of attrition and retention were analysed and their relevance to completion and non-completion was discussed. This discussion led to the next section which dealt with cognitive factors which influence completion and non-completion.

Within the cognitive factors section, identity, agency and motivation were all considered as each had been highlighted by more than one of the retention and attrition models. The relevance of each cognitive factor was analysed and related back to the research question to provide a deeper understanding of the scope of this research.

After cognitive influences, social factors were examined, with a particular emphasis on educational context, as this research is grounded in school environments. Engagement with the school and the school's situation were reviewed, contextualising the student's decision within their daily reality and experience. Teaching, learning,

assessment and the student-teacher relationship were all considered in this section in order to give a fuller picture of the lived experience of students as they make key decisions regarding their own education. These social factors led to wider environmental and economic influences, where international and national policy was discussed. The key European and National education priorities were identified and examined in relation to the Irish education system as it currently exists. The growth and development patterns for IM post-primary education were highlighted and statistical predictions and “most likely scenarios” were probed. This exploration of policy provided an insight into the relevance of this study and was connected to the research question through statistical analysis and made the connection between national policy priorities and the realities of future economic opportunities as a result of these policy goals. As a result, the implications of completion and non-completion were considered. National development, school development and personal development were all weighed in the context of the completion and non-completion puzzle resulting in an analysis of the ramifications that completion and non-completion pose for future national and international research.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The methodological approach taken during the present research and the paradigms used to answer the research question are described in this chapter. The data collection method and the ways to ensure best practice are outlined. The data collection method is also justified within the context of the research. Finally, ideas surrounding ethics are explored in order to provide a sound theoretical framework and justification for the investigation.

3.2 Purpose of the Research

The present research centres on Irish immersion education at post-primary level. In particular, it seeks to critically examine and analyse the student perspective on completion and non-completion in the IM post-primary education sector in order to ascertain the factors which influence a student's decision to remain in or to transfer out of an IM post-primary school. As such, the research question posed is:

What are the factors which influence completion and non-completion in IM post-primary education from the student perspective?

To answer this question, the present study used mixed methods to explore both general and individual experiences of participants. This chapter thus presents the methodological framework underpinning this research by analysing the paradigms which inform the study. The main methodology is presented and the rationale is explored. Other issues, such as sampling, questionnaires, focus groups and interviews are also outlined. Finally, the idea of ethical research is explored and addressed.

3.3 Theoretical Research Perspectives

A research methodology is the theoretical framework which underpins the application of methods within a field of investigation. It is a vehicle to systematically solve the research problem presented (Kothari, 2004). A methodology is distinct and separate from a method in that it is conceptual rather than practical, meaning that it is generally the study of the various steps undertaken by a researcher and the logic behind each (Kothari, 2004). Therefore, a methodology has an impact on the overall understanding of a phenomenon and on the choice of methods which best suit an investigation. This includes determining whether quantitative or qualitative methods should be used. The research methodology also influences the interpretation of data or findings discovered during an investigation (Howell, 2013). As such, it is important to understand the methodology employed in order to comprehend the logical process employed throughout the research.

While method is absolute, being the techniques used to gather evidence, methodology is philosophical, being concerned with the theory of how research should proceed (Harding, 1987). Moreover, methodology is a way of viewing patterns of the aggregate (King, 1994). As a theoretical concept, methodology is much more than method, as it concerns itself with the implications of the choice of method and how these implications may be of significance. As such, methodology should reflect the overall exposition of the research, and thus appropriately influence the methods for the research and the analysis of results (King, 1994). Methodology is therefore a complicated, abstract and oftentimes ambiguous concept (Cook & Fonow, 1986).

3.3.1 Paradigm

To counter the ambiguity between methodology and method, the selection of an appropriate paradigm is essential. On the commencement of any research study, it is important not only to decide upon a methodology and the related methods, but also to consider and recognise belief set and the world view that the researcher brings to the project, as this will impact on the research as it is undertaken and how data and results are interpreted and analysed (Morgan, 2007). As such, paradigms are often used in order to aid in ordering information and developing understanding. Paradigms provide a structure through which problems can be understood and analysed using a common set of agreements and beliefs which are agreed upon by researchers (Kuhn, 1996).

A paradigm consists of an agreed set of values and assumptions framing the scope and conduct of research (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2016). A paradigm creates a conceptual system from which an appropriate view can be structured and realised within a pattern of beliefs and values that defines the research in terms of the experience it seeks to study (Alkebulan, 2007). In essence, this means taking a perception and placing it within a logical, structured order to facilitate understanding (Basit, 2010).

3.4 Methodology in this Research

The primary methodological approach of the study was constructivist. Constructivism holds that people create knowledge and meaning based on their own experiences (Crotty, 1998). In terms of research into education, Constructivism allows for acknowledgement of the participants' past and experience as an influence on their

own understanding of education and use of the Irish language. As Eleveld (2016) points out, ideas play a central role in the constructivist approach. These ideas are not limited to planning and future projection, but also to perception, both of one's self and public.

As such, Constructivism is an appropriate methodology for this research. Constructivism is grounded in human interaction (Hurd, 2009) whereby meaning is created as we interact with others and our environments. As Constructivism aims to facilitate particular phenomena within their situations (Harrison, et al., 2017), this methodology fits well with the overall goals of this research, as participants are encouraged to share and reflect upon their personal experiences and those of others. Additionally, Constructivism is directed at analysing and solving the social problems of a particular target group (Andrew, et al., 2018). In this research, the phenomenon is completion and non-completion, the situation is IM post-primary schools, the social problems are those which lead to and result in non-completion and the target group is that of students who are engaging in IM post-primary education.

Constructivism is often used in educational research as it is viewed as an efficient tool with many benefits (Dickson, et al., 2016). Constructivism in education advocates a student-centred approach, which is a key objective of this research, as the current study is an endeavour to gain the student perspective (Krahenbuhl, 2016).

In education, Constructivism also leads on to Social Constructivism, the idea by which people learn. While not a research paradigm in the true sense, Social Constructivism holds that people develop, grow and re-shape their understanding of reality as they progress through various social interactions (Keaton & Bodie, 2011). These new understandings develop as people engage with active learning experiences,

benefiting from collaboration and social interactions (Kalina & Powell, 2009). Social Constructivism can be seen at the heart of research conducted by Vygotsky and is particularly relevant to this study as the research question specifically engages with the ideal of language and education. This is asserted by Kalina and Powell (2009) where they argue that “Language usage in the classroom is the most important process in a social constructivist setting. Vygotsky stated that language enhances learning and that it precedes knowledge or thinking.” (Kalina & Powell, 2009, p. 245).

Detractors of Constructivism argue that the approach often ignores the material factors that influence the possible range of actions, such as economic conditions, power structures, institutional constraints, or physical resources (Vis & Kersbergen, 2013). There can also be issues such as limited explanatory power, a disregard for power dynamics and the potential to lean towards idealism. These issues can be overcome by combining Constructivism with elements of critical theory and interpretivism, creating a more general and well-rounded theoretical framework. Critical theory allows for opinions and understanding to be placed within historical and social contexts, meaning that the research can take a social dynamic and analyse environmental and historical situations when looking at the responses collected and the data generated (Kellner, 1990). Critical theory therefore focuses on interpretation and explanation as a tool to induce transformation by examining how a society got to a specific point (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002). Interpretivism involves acknowledgement that the subjects are people and are subject to society, social norms and pressures. It encourages a qualitative approach as the research explores personal/social issues rather than a scientific exploration of the natural world (Macionis & Gerber, 2011). By combining these approaches with Constructivism, the current study gains a more

considered approach with a greater opportunity to advance current knowledge and understanding, while acknowledging the limitations of each methodology. This integration of Constructivism with elements of critical theory and interpretivism provides for a comprehensive understanding of social phenomena, addressing ideational, social, and material dimensions and ensuring a well-rounded and rigorous research structural framework.

3.5 Mixed Methods

The specific research design chosen for this study by the researcher is explanatory sequential mixed methods. While both quantitative and qualitative methods offer insight and explanations into phenomenon, combining the two methods offers a greater strength and a superior understanding that neither quantitative nor qualitative methods can provide alone (Creswell, 2002). As such, mixed methods research offers the opportunity to answer the research question more robustly (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Mixed methods attempt to offer the best of both worlds by respecting the objectives and perspectives of both quantitative and qualitative methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), where one method can often compensate for the shortcomings of the other, whilst simultaneously reinforcing the argument (Johnson, et al., 2007).

Mixed methods, or multi-methodology, is data collection approach that is increasingly popular with researchers (Burke-Johnson & Christensen, 2012). Proponents value the precision that results from the blending of quantitative and qualitative data, using a variety of methods and multiple methodologies. Mixed methods offer the benefits of both quantitative and qualitative investigation as the

two types of datasets must be integrated (Hughes, 2016). While the integration of data is a complex process, a mixed methods approach allows for a more rounded interpretation of the information collected by integrating qualitative and quantitative methods, by building on the strength of both individual approaches. Researchers using mixed methods can enhance the comprehensiveness and richness of their interpretations, leading to a more nuanced and robust understanding of the research topic. (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003). The dynamic between quantitative and qualitative data offers researchers a unique opportunity as each set of resulting data can mirror the other, to the benefit of the research in its entirety (Hughes, 2016). However, detractors argue that the process is time consuming and too complex. Researchers who are used to either quantitative or qualitative methods often struggle to adjust adequately to a mixed methods framework (Hughes, 2016).

Mixed methods also require a high degree of pragmatism (Creswell, 2003). Researchers must draw conclusions liberally from both quantitative and qualitative assumptions. They must use multiple approaches to data collection and analysis, and they must be aware that research occurs in context. All of this must occur to provide the best understanding of the research problem (Creswell, 2003).

In order to be deemed authentic, the quantitative elements of the research must address the issues of validity and reliability (Bryman, 2004). In the case of validity, the primary concern is that the research in question is authentic, trustworthy, credible and true. The project must achieve its own goal in evaluating that which it set out to research (Merriam, 1998), in a dependable, transparent and truthful way.

In the current study, as quantitative methods were being employed, it was important for the researcher to take account of his own personal biases, which could ultimately influence methodologies and findings (Noble & Smith, 2015). The researcher has worked in IME for over a decade, and works on IM residential summer courses each year. As such, measures were required to ensure that bias, unconscious or otherwise, did not occur, in particular to enable the researcher to report on the perspectives and opinions of participants in a clear and accurate manner. The researcher followed a clear and transparent process at all times in order to ensure consistency.

Other methods used to limit bias were the maintenance of records and the use of a reflective journal. The reflective journal was a key instrument in documenting rationale and in questioning and analysing decisions made throughout the research process. The research journal served as a personal and reflective space where the researcher documented his thoughts, observations, and experiences throughout the research process. It allowed for the systematic recording of ideas, research design decisions, data collection methods, analytical insights, and emerging patterns. The journal enabled the researcher to maintain a detailed account of his progress, which, in turn, aided in tracking the evolution of his ideas and in identifying any potential biases or assumptions which emerged. Additionally, the journal acted as a source of self-reflection, promoting critical thinking and helping the researcher to refine his research questions, methodologies, and interpretations. By maintaining this research journal, the researcher was able to enhance his own understanding, sustain transparency, and maintain overall rigor and credibility in the current study, as the researcher consulted and reflected upon the journal throughout the research journey.

Using defined processes such as explanatory sequential mixed methods ensured that all decisions were consistent, and that a transparent and ethical process was used. This was done in an effort to ensure the reliability of the current study. Additionally, debriefing sessions were convened regularly with the researcher's supervisors, offering another safeguard against biases (Houghton, et al., 2013).

3.6 Triangulation

In general, the purpose of triangulation in both quantitative and qualitative studies is to strengthen the credibility and robustness of the research findings (Johnson, et al., 2007). Triangulation was used to combine the accumulated data gathered from both quantitative and qualitative methods in a genuine and meaningful way. Triangulation is the "combining [of] different sorts of data on the background of the theoretical perspectives, which are applied to the data" (Flick, 2008). As such, triangulation is a strategy used to strengthen the understanding gained from combining data assembled through various methods. Triangulation is not merely the combining of methodologies to produce a result, it requires an analysis of the data collected through the combination of several different perspectives (Kern, 2016). Triangulation was used in this study because it further allows for a comprehensive and robust examination of the research question from multiple angles and data sources. By combining qualitative and quantitative methods, triangulation enhanced the analysis of the data by causing the researcher to engage in the cross-verification and corroboration of the results. Triangulation was therefore treated as a multi-step process, requiring both the triangulation of data and of methodology (Kern, 2016). This was further broken down into simultaneous and sequential triangulation, where methodologies were combined at the same time or in a rotating sequence, as

appropriate, where one informed the other (Kern, 2016). This combination means that triangulation often highlighted patterns of convergence and divergence, thus strengthening analysis and understanding within the present study (Kern, 2016).

Triangulation also provided for more accurate results, which is why it was used in the current study. With more sources of information to combine and analyse, from more perspectives, triangulation often produces more reliable conclusions for analysis. However, triangulation is not infallible. Sometimes triangulation results in a divergence. While some dismiss this phenomenon as a problem stemming from the data collection measurements, constructivist researchers believe that this a natural result where logical scientific knowledge and the conceptual social understanding diverge (Kern, 2016; Flick, et al., 2012). In this case, researchers can gain as much understanding from the resulting divergence as they may have gained from a convergent result.

Regardless, triangulation is a useful tool by way of its inherent strengths. Triangulation allows for comparison, contrast and integration of different types of data and methodology (Torrance, 2012). As such, within this study, triangulation offered a wider perspective and produced a redundancy of information as each data set retrieved was interpreted on a variety of methodological levels (Youngs & Piggot-Irvine, 2012).

3.7 Data Collection

3.7.1 Questionnaires

Questionnaires were used in this study as the primary tool for gathering quantitative data. Questionnaires are an objective method of collecting information on

people's beliefs, attitudes, behaviour and knowledge (Boynton & Greenhalgh, 2004). Stone (1993) remarks that questionnaires are essentially an instrument of human interaction, and as such are subject to the same complexities and failures as any other form of communication (Stone, 1993). The overall aim of any questionnaire is to facilitate the useful transmission of information between the respondent and the inquirer (Stone, 1993). Questionnaires remain a reliable and useful tool for researchers as they can be both quantitative and qualitative in nature. They continue to be the most efficient, productive and cost-effective data collection method available and allow for a greater assessment of a population, stronger statistical power and more accurate measurement of data (Nieuwenhuijsen, 2005).

Effective questionnaires require careful design (Nieuwenhuijsen, 2005). A key consideration in this area must concern the information required from the survey. The researcher must be clear as to the information they wish to collect, as this will determine the subsequent composition and elements of the survey (Boynton & Greenhalgh, 2004). Once the aims and objectives of the questionnaire are determined, elements must be selected which require translation into questions (Nieuwenhuijsen, 2005).

A questionnaire should be appropriate, intelligible, unambiguous and ethical (Stone, 1993). Questions used should be unbiased, where the function or phrasing of the question is no more likely to trigger one response over another. They should also be omni-competent, in that the questions are built so as to allow for all possible responses (Stone, 1993).

The choice of open- or closed-ended questions can impact the completion and response rates. Open-ended questions allow for a response without restriction. They permit the respondent the opportunity to elaborate on their answer and articulate their thoughts and opinions. However, this is more difficult to tally as the possibilities for varied answers are vast (Nieuwenhuijsen, 2005). Open-ended questions, therefore, may be incorporated into questionnaires to allow for free and open expression to fully address the research question, which seeks to gain the student perspective. While including this type of question may create subsequent difficulty in the data analysis stages, the richness of data collected from such questions often proves to be worth the extra effort it engenders. It is also an effective way to account for any omissions that may have occurred within the survey.

Closed-ended questions restrict responses to a limited number of possibilities provided by the researcher. While these questions provide data which are more easily calculated, they can also limit the richness of the data, as they do not allow for explanation or elaboration (Boynton & Greenhalgh, 2004). As such, closed-ended questions must be well planned and considered in order to account for the broadest range of answers possible (Nieuwenhuijsen, 2005). Free text boxes and free text annotations allow the participant to explain their responses and are an effective way to combat frustrations that may arise should the option they wish to express not appear amongst the choices (Boynton & Greenhalgh, 2004).

Likert scale questions, which encourage respondents to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with a statement, can yield useful quantifiable data regarding perceptions and opinions. However, these statements must be planned to

compensate for 'yea-sayers', that is people who tend to just agree with statements, by including statements phrased in the negative (Boynton & Greenhalgh, 2004).

Therefore, where Likert scale questions are used, the phrasing of statements must be alternated between positive and negative to ensure a variety of response diversification.

Questionnaires should be piloted prior to distribution (Stone, 1993). This allows for errors to be corrected and for any perceived gaps to be filled (Stone, 1993). A small group of participants should be selected and their responses should be evaluated (Stone, 1993). These responses will highlight any deficiencies in the adequacy of the questions, the order of the questions, the comprehensiveness of the expression and will establish whether instructions were clear and unambiguous (Regmi, et al., 2016).

Response rates with a questionnaire are also important. (Childers & Ferrell, 1979). If a questionnaire is too long, or if the questions are complicated or unclear, then there is the risk of a low completion and response rate (Nieuwenhuijsen, 2005). Response rates also vary greatly depending on how the questionnaire is administered.

Questionnaires can either be self-administered or administered by an agent (Nieuwenhuijsen, 2005). Additionally, they can be distributed using hard copies, or they can be conducted using information technology (Nieuwenhuijsen, 2005). Self-administered questionnaires are logistically easier to manage, as they require less time and cost on the part of the researcher, however, they also have a lower response rate. Questionnaires administered by the researcher or an agent typically have a higher response rate, but are more time and cost intensive (Nieuwenhuijsen, 2005). Self-administered online questionnaires are becoming increasingly popular with

researchers. The benefit of using the internet is that a wider, more geographically diverse population becomes accessible (Regmi, et al., 2016). Another advantage is the increased speed of data collection and the lower cost, as questionnaires do not need to be printed (Regmi, et al., 2016).

For the quantitative elements of the questionnaire to be deemed valid, they must measure that which they claim to measure (Boynton & Greenhalgh, 2004). This must encompass both internal and external validity. This can be achieved by following the scientific method in the design stages of the questionnaire and by generating data which are transparent and can be replicated and sourced by other researchers (Stone, 1993).

The questionnaire (Appendix G) contained both open and closed questions which were designed in order to capture the general profile of participants as well as their motivations and perspectives. The questionnaire consisted of four thematic sections, where questions were organised around a common idea, so that participants could easily follow the logical flow of questions. Questions which were considered too demanding during the pilot study or which required extensive elaboration were avoided. Branching was used within the questionnaire to ensure that participants were confronted with questions relevant to their experience.

Microsoft Forms was used for the questionnaire in this research. This platform provided a reliable and secure means of collection and management of the questionnaires, as the responses could be password protected and responses could be logged anonymously.

With the agreement of facilitating schools, the questionnaire was distributed via a website (Appendix L) which was created by the researcher with the specific purpose of facilitating this research study. Principals and/or Vice-principals of facilitating schools circulated the website to eligible students via email. Both the website and the questionnaire itself outlined the research process and explained the purpose, scope and reasoning behind the research.

Details about the research, including the right to withdraw and the option to engage in the focus group and interview stages, were included on the website and on the questionnaire itself. All questions, apart from those requesting further participation, were mandatory within the questionnaire. Participants completed the questionnaire voluntarily as there was no incentive to participate.

3.7.2 Focus Groups and Interviews

In the present study, both focus groups and interviews were used to collect qualitative data from voluntary participants. Focus groups and interviews remain the most common methods used in qualitative research (Berg, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Focus groups and interviews provide rich information on behaviour, attitudes and beliefs and assist in understanding perspectives and experiences (Dushku, 2000). They can be loosely divided into three dominant categories; structured, semi-structured and in-depth (Britten, 1995). Structured interactions pose closed-ended questions with fixed choice responses. Semi-structured interactions follow a looser structure and allow for open-ended questions from which an interviewer or facilitator may diverge to explore an idea in greater detail. In-depth focus groups and/or interviews consist of an even looser structure, where questions are used as an initial

prompt and further questions mainly consist of clarifications and probes for greater detail (Britten, 1995). These interactions typically follow the responses of the interviewee(s) and are more conversational in nature than their structured and semi-structured counterparts (Moyle, 2002).

One-on-one interviews, organised along semi-structured lines, offer the individual perspective of the interviewee, which provides rich streams of data by exploiting the social element of the interaction and also by allowing for more in-depth probing of issue orientated ideas raised (Dushku, 2000; Berg, 2009).

Participant selection should be determined by the nature of the research question (Britten, 1995). Statistical representativeness is not always required as other factors may influence candidate selection, such as the depth and duration of the interview as well as specific questions raised during earlier data collection stages which merit further investigation (Britten, 1995; Ryan, et al., 2009).

However, once participants have been selected, a clear, ethical process must be adhered to in arranging the interview. For this reason, informed consent forms (Appendix A) and plain language statements (Appendix B) were created for schools by the researcher. Additionally, plain language statements (Appendix C) and informed consent forms (Appendix D) for the student participants were also created, separate to those made for schools. Participants must be approached and the purpose of the interview explained. To facilitate this, all IM post-primary schools, outside of the *Gaeltacht*, were contacted by email (Appendix E). Each school was asked to facilitate the research and to distribute an email to students on behalf of the researcher (Appendix F).

During the recruitment and subsequent processes, it must also be made clear that refusal to participate or withdrawal of participation is allowed at any stage and that this will not prejudice the candidate in any way. This information was communicated to participants multiple times through the study. The structure of the interview should be explained, as should the estimated duration of the interview. Participants should be reminded of confidentiality and the interview should be arranged at the interviewee's convenience (Britten, 1995), all of which processes were followed throughout this study.

A clear and logical process must be established prior to and during any focus group or interview. This was achieved by planning out the focus group questions (Appendix H) and the interview questions (Appendix I) ahead of time. The researcher must build a rapport of trust with the interviewee(s) (Legard, et al., 2003; Ryan, et al., 2009). Leech (2002) suggests that this occurs when the interviewer appears professional and generally knowledgeable, but less knowledgeable than the interviewee on the topic at hand (Leech, 2002). The interviewee should be put at ease and every effort should be made to relieve nervousness (Ryan, et al., 2009). The researcher made every effort to follow these guidelines, which can be seen in the language and tone used in both the focus groups (Appendix J) and the interviews (Appendix K).

During the interview, it is important to actively listen to the interviewee (Ryan, et al., 2009; Leech, 2002). It is also important to allow the interviewee time to speak uninterrupted. Silences can be effective in giving the interviewee a chance to collect their thoughts (Ryan, et al., 2009). The order of questions also impacts on the rapport.

More difficult or controversial questions should be held until the end of the interview, so as not to disrupt the interaction and make the interviewee uncomfortable (Leech, 2002). Questions should also be accompanied by the use of non-judgemental language and a non-threatening tone (Leech, 2002). All of these considerations were taken as the questions for the focus groups and interviews were designed. Questions were written by the researcher and discussed with their supervisors. These questions were then re-drafted based on feedback. Questions were subsequently piloted amongst a small group in the researcher's own school, with the permission of the school's management. Feedback was sought by the researcher from the pilot and some questions were subsequently amended where necessary. The researcher then consulted with their supervisors again before agreeing on the final wording of the questions for the focus groups (Appendix H) and the interviews.

The validity of the interview depends on the trustworthiness of the process employed (Koch, 2006). If the process is dependable, credible and transferrable, then the chances of validity increase (Ryan, et al., 2009). However, the potential for bias exists and must be limited. This can be achieved both by careful planning and by constant critical reflection both in- and on- action (Doody & Noonan, 2013).

In the current study, focus group and interview participants were recruited from the questionnaire and through facilitating schools. Volunteers available to participate in the focus groups were asked to indicate their willingness by completing a non-mandatory section in the questionnaire. Volunteers for the interviews were recruited in one of two ways:

1. They were supplied with the details of the study, including the website, by a facilitating school, or,
2. They were supplied with details of the study, including the website, by a student who participated in either the questionnaire or a focus group.

A total of three focus groups were completed, with five participants in each group. Each participant in the focus groups had indicated their interest and availability to participate in the focus groups on the questionnaire. Five interviews were also completed, each with a participant who had left IME before the end of their post-primary education. These participants contacted the researcher directly through the contact form on the research website.

In both the focus groups and the interviews, each participant was contacted by the researcher and asked to confirm their willingness and availability to participate in these stages of the research. The various processes were outlined, the approximated duration of the session was discussed and the themes of the questions were shared. Times and dates were discussed and agreed upon. Prior to each focus group or interview, each participant was sent an email with an informed consent form, which they were required to complete prior to the session. Informed consent, the right to withdraw and supports for those affected or impacted by the questions were discussed in detail at the beginning of each focus group or interview. Consent was also obtained to voice record each session for the purposes of transcription. Each focus group lasted approximately 30 minutes and each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes. Participants were pleasant, confident and were very generous in the sharing

of their opinions and perspectives. They were also very willing to elaborate and to expand upon points raised.

3.8 Sampling

Sampling draws a representative sample from the population for a study so as to enable the subsequent results to be generalised and applied back to the wider population (Marshall, 1996). Sampling offers a practical compromise between certainty and guesswork (Semon, et al., 1959). As such, sampling is often used to ensure that studies remain feasible and that statements and inferences may be made regarding the wider group that the study concerns (Tansey, 2007). In essence, the information gained from sampling represents an estimate of what would have been found had the entire target population been studied in the same manner (Semon, et al., 1959).

Within sampling itself, there are two dominant strands that are commonly used: probability sampling and non-probability sampling.

Probability sampling, sometimes known as random sampling, involves the nature of the population being defined and affording all members of this population an equal opportunity of selection (Marshall, 1996). The researcher can then estimate the extent to which the data obtained from the sample might be likely to differ had the data been obtained from the wider population (Tansey, 2007). The randomness of the selection process ensures a robust data stream which is free from accusations of bias or data manipulation (Tansey, 2007).

However, probability sampling is largely unsuited to research incorporating qualitative studies (Marshall, 1996). As qualitative studies tend to be smaller in nature,

the choice of participants needs to be more focused, as is the case with this research. Within qualitative studies, the characteristics and opinions of individuals are examined. However, these characteristics and opinions may not necessarily be shared by the entire population (Marshall, 1996). Random selection of participants is therefore likely to yield unreliable results which, if applied to a wider population may prove inaccurate.

Non-probability sampling draws samples from larger populations without employing the principles of random selection (Tansey, 2007). Participant selection thus becomes subjective as the researcher determines which units of the population may participate (Tansey, 2007). This gives the researcher greater discretion to ensure diversity and variety amongst participants (Semon, et al., 1959) rather than leaving it to random chance.

One key drawback to non-probability is that the results yielded may limit the potential to generalise over a wider population (Tansey, 2007). Selection bias may become a concern, limiting the potential robustness of findings (Tansey, 2007).

Within non-probability sampling, purposive sampling has proven useful as a participant selection method. In this form of participant selection, the researcher's knowledge of the population is used to guide the selection process (Tansey, 2007) allowing the researcher to select the most productive sample to answer the research question (Marshall, 1996). In this way, an appropriate strategy, using a framework of variables, can be developed by the researcher, who may, using their own good judgement, identify respondents who are of particular interest to the research and who represent typical case samples of data previously obtained from various sources

including relevant literature, data currently available and evidence from the research itself (Tansey, 2007; Marshall, 1996). In this instance, it may prove valuable to widen the participant pool to include subjects with specific experiences or special expertise (Marshall, 1996).

The size of the sample required is dependent on the population being studied. Larger samples, relative to the population, offer a more limited opportunity for random sampling error. However, the optimum size of a sample ultimately depends on the parameters and nature of the phenomenon being studied weighted against the optimum number of required participants to ensure the validity of the sampling inferences (Marshall, 1996). Within the realms of research, a sample size can be deemed appropriate if it adequately answers the research question (Marshall, 1996). If a question is more complicated, a larger sample may be required, however, as Marshall (1996) points out, the optimum number of subjects required usually becomes more obvious as the study progresses (Marshall, 1996).

When designing the parameters for a sample population, stratification often becomes necessary (Semon, et al., 1959). This involves dividing the population into smaller populations in order to limit the possibility of sampling error. Stratification can therefore be used to designate the target population in terms of 'sampling units' or 'strata'. These units may contain a number of unique elements, however, when combined, they constitute a sampling that encompasses all elements of the desired population (Semon, et al., 1959), thus offering a reduction in the frequency of sampling error.

Within sampling, the terms accuracy and precision often occur, and are used as measurements for success. While these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, it is important to note key differences between them. Accuracy refers to freedom from error, whereas precision references the reproducibility of sample results (Semon, et al., 1959). However, neither of these terms should be used as descriptors to determine the success or failure of a sampling, as measuring the accuracy or precision of a sampling is virtually impossible (Semon, et al., 1959). This is because sampling happens in context, where human influence is often a contributing factor to any data obtained.

In the present study, non-probability sampling was used in order to ensure that members of each target group were included. This meant three distinct groups had to be accounted for:

1. Students who were completing their post-primary education in an Irish-medium school who had not actively considered non-completion;
2. Students who were completing their post-primary education in an Irish-medium school who had, at one point or another, actively considered non-completion (transfer and/or drop out);
3. Students who have not completed their post-primary education in an Irish-medium school, despite having begun their post-primary education in an Irish-medium post-primary school.

Within this group, student in 6th year were chosen as the most appropriate cohort to participate in this research. This was decided for a number of reasons. 6th year students are the oldest stream in any given post-primary school. While they are participating in the LC programme, they are actively considering their future

opportunities and career paths outside of the education system. This makes them one of the most active and productive groups in the school in terms of identity, motivation and agency. The grouping is also situated close to the natural transition where the decision to continue in or leave the IM school was made – the movement from Junior Cycle to Senior Cycle. All participants in this study were over the age of 18. This decision was made in order to ensure that ethical considerations were minimised and informed consent was sought from each participant prior to participation in the study.

However, such a narrow sampling did present challenges. Recruiting enough participants in each of the three fields was particularly challenging, especially given the age restraints of participants. Also, locating and contacting students who fell into category three (students who had left the IM environment) was difficult and relied heavily on the students' own social networks, where students in participating schools were asked to reach out to friends who had left the school before completing their LC there.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

Ethical research refers to the moral obligation of the researcher to bring no harm or disadvantage to any participants who engage with their research (Zhang, 2017; Lambert, 2012). This idea of ethics as moral obligations can be more simply defined as doing “what is right, good and virtuous” (Isreal & Hay, 2006). Ethical research demands that the researcher maintains ethical standards and behaviours throughout the research process, not just when working with participants, but at all stages including evaluation and reporting (Pulverer & Armbruster, 2017). Throughout this study, the researcher has followed strict protocols and processes, in line with the

DCU Research Ethics and Integrity policies and frameworks to ensure that this study is in line with ethical practice at all times.

Pulverer and Armbruster (2017) define the scope of this ethical obligation in three thematic areas:

1. Ethical conduct,
2. Ethical reporting,
3. Ethical assessment.

Within the conduct of the research, this implies an ethical obligation on the part of the researcher to all participants within the scope of the research, including people, institutions and the researcher themselves. The research should do no harm to anybody who participates (Pulverer & Armbruster, 2017). To this end, the study was designed so that neither participants, nor their schools, would be harmed through the participants' participation in the study.

Ethical reporting is the notion that the research does not include any falsification or fabrication of data or results. Similarly, there is an obligation to ensure that no plagiarism has occurred and that all works and ideas are appropriately attributed (Pulverer & Armbruster, 2017). As such, all external sources of information and ideas used within this study have been referenced and reported in the reference list.

Finally, ethical assessment holds that the researcher, reviewers and publishers all have an obligation to follow ethical standards when producing and publishing

material, especially in relation to ethical conduct and ethical reporting (Pulverer & Armbruster, 2017).

It is the obligation of the researcher to ensure that the entire process of the study is conducted in an ethical and moral manner, both in theory and in the field (Zhang, 2017). In order to ensure that ethical considerations move from theory into practice, Fontana and Frey (2000) identify four major ethical considerations to be regarded;

1. *Informed consent* works on the principle that participants must be shown due respect and have the right to be provided with enough information to make an informed decision. This includes provisions to ensure that the participant understands the information provided and that the decision they make is voluntary (Taylor, 1999).
2. The *right to privacy* refers to the participant's absolute right to control any information related to them including the restriction of access to this information. This requires that any information a participant supplies be treated with confidentiality. Confidentiality is essential to establish a relationship of trust and a secure environment in which the participant feels safe in sharing information without the threat of judgement, reprisal or prejudice. All personal data about a participant must therefore be treated as strictly confidential and as such must be vigorously protected (Demirsoy & Kirimlioglu, 2016).
3. Participants also have the right to be *protected from harm*; physical, psychological or otherwise. This right to protection is a moral right. DeGraza, et

al. (2017) define moral rights as “a type of protection afforded by the requirements of morality just as legal rights are a type of protection afforded by the law” (DeGrazia, et al., 2017, p. 133). As such, the protection from harm should be seen as a fundamental obligation of any researcher.

In order to meet the obligations set out in points 1 to 3 above, all participants in the study were facilitated in making informed consent while participating (Appendix C and Appendix D). All names of participants and referred to by participants were anonymised and pseudonyms or numbers were used instead. Information which could identify an individual or a school was redacted or anonymised. Participants were protected from harm by the assurance of the right to withdraw at any stage and privacy protections. They were also provided with information on support services, were they required (Appendix L).

The influence, or perceived influence, of the researcher over the participant must be considered. Siegrist, et al. (2005) state that “perception of risk influences a person’s decisions and behaviour” (Siegrist, et al., 2005, p. 145). Therefore, any perception of a power bias must be eliminated for genuine information to be elicited from a participant. This can be achieved by providing informed consent, assuring confidentiality and taking every possible measure to ensure protection from harm (Fontana & Frey, 2000), all of which were done in this study.

3.10 Roadmap of the Research

In this section, a roadmap of the research is presented. The roadmap outlines the main steps taken during the current investigation and highlights the key tasks

completed within each step. While some steps were ongoing throughout the study, such as the review of literature, others were one-time events, such as the pilot study.

Figure 3.1

Research Pathway



This section outlines the steps taken during this investigation to produce findings for analysis. An overview of the study is provided, as is an account of the research population. The procedures taken with both the questionnaires and interviews are outlined from planning, to piloting to administration. The steps undertaken to ensure that the study was ethical are described, as are the strategies used to analyse the data. All of this is outlined so as to ensure full validity of findings, by providing a transparent and replicable series of steps which can be followed precisely by any future researcher.

3.11 Overview of the Processes in the Current Study

This research is a mixed methods study using triangulation, incorporating elements of Constructivism, critical theory and interpretivism. The research strategies included both quantitative and qualitative methods. A mixed methods approach was selected for this research in order to ascertain the factors which influence completion and non-completion in Irish-medium post-primary schools. The research was conducted using a combination of questionnaires, focus groups and interviews. Questionnaires were used as they provided access to the largest possible proportion of possible participants in order to gather the greatest amount of relative data. Focus groups and interviews were used to expand on the ideas, issues and patterns that became evident in the questionnaire responses. These focus groups and interviews allowed for a more in-depth investigation into common beliefs, attitudes and experiences of the target population.

The study was carried out in seven Irish medium post-primary schools located outside of the *Gaeltacht* but within the ROI. Each school principal was approached

formally by means of an email (Appendix E) and the purpose and scope of the research was explained. Their permission was sought and granted on behalf of the Boards of Management (BOM), with the school agreeing to facilitate the research and the recruitment of participants.

The questionnaire was distributed digitally by means of an email sent from the participating schools which provided a link to the research website and the online questionnaire (Appendix L). Hard copies, and copies of the questionnaire in Irish were made available upon request, however, no such request was received. A webpage was created (Appendix L) to host the questionnaire. This webpage contained additional information on the research, including its scope, aims and procedures. Copies of the Plain Language Statement (PLS) (Appendix C) and the Informed Consent Form (ICF) (Appendix D) were available to read or download, as were the contact details of the researcher. All of this information was also included within the questionnaire itself. A Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section was provided explaining the layout of the questionnaire, the approximate time envisaged for completion, as well as the procedure to withdraw participation. The online questionnaire remained live to participants for a period of one month.

The focus groups and interviews were carried out after the data from the questionnaires had been gathered, compiled and preliminarily analysed. Candidates were contacted and arrangements were made to facilitate the focus group and/or interview. Each participant read and signed a copy of the PLS and ICF, and were provided with a digital copy of both. Each focus group and interview was digitally recorded, with the participant's permission, and these recordings were transcribed

(Appendix J & Appendix K), omitting any details which could be used to identify an individual or school. A research log was kept and updated throughout the investigation.

3.11.1 Research Population

Participants in this study are current or former students of IME who have reached the age of 18 and who have or had attended an Irish-medium post-primary school in the ROI. For the purposes of this study, the term *student(s)* is taken to mean a current or former pupil of a recognised post-primary school in the ROI. An Irish medium post-primary school is defined as a second level school, recognised by the DoE, which functions using Irish, or *Gaeilge* as the primary medium of instruction, communication and administration. As such, English medium second level schools which incorporate an *Aonaid Lán-Ghaeilge* (Irish medium unit) or a *Sruth Lán-Ghaeilge* (Irish-medium stream) were not included in the study.

In addition, Irish medium post-primary schools located within a designated *Gaeltacht* area were not included in this study. This decision was made as second level schools in a *Gaeltacht* area function through the medium of Irish as a matter of course, rather than as a result of a conscious lobby for the provision of Irish medium education by a local population or demographic.

The population was further limited to students due to sit their LC examinations in 2021. This was due to the time and resource limitations of the study, in order to ensure effective use of the limited time and resources available. For the purposes of clarity, first year is taken to refer to year one of the *Junior Cycle* programme (JCP), following directly on from the completion of the primary school curriculum. Fifth year

refers to the first year of the two-year Leaving Certificate programme, typically following completion of either the Junior Cycle or Transition Year (TY) programme.

These participants were chosen as they had the most recent experience of IME and were able to give informed consent without the need for parents or guardians. Therefore, in order to be eligible to participate in this study, participants must:

- Be at least 18 years of age,
- Be attending or have attended a post-primary Irish-medium school,
- Be attending or have attended a post-primary Irish-medium school outside of a *Gaeltacht* area,
- Be in 6th year, or due to complete the LC examination, based on entry year, in the 2020-2021 school year.

All of the schools which met with the criteria established above were contacted via email (Appendix E) and asked to facilitate engagement with the research project, with 7 schools agreeing to facilitate the study.

3.11.2 Sampling Procedure

This study employed a non-probability purposive sampling procedure. Purposive sampling was used due to the time and resource limitations of this study. Within the study, three initial cohorts of samples were required, one to participate in the questionnaire, another to participate in the focus groups and another to participate in the interviews. The focus group sample was comprised of fifteen participants who indicated a willingness to be interviewed. The third sample for interviews comprised of five participants who had formerly attended IME but who had not participated in the initial questionnaire.

3.11.3 Questionnaire

The sample population of students were furnished with a questionnaire (Appendix F) to complete. Each eligible student was contacted via school email inviting their participation. The email contained a link to the online questionnaire. The questionnaire was to be completed online; however hard copies were available from the researcher upon request. No such requests were subsequently received. All questionnaire responses were anonymous and data collected were randomised to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

3.11.3.1 Questionnaire Design

In designing the questionnaire, a number of different questioning techniques were used:

- A combination of open- and closed-ended questions was used.
- *Closed-ended questioning* was used where the data requested were objective and where no views, beliefs or attitudes were queried.
- *Open-ended questioning* was used where the data requested were subjective and where views, beliefs and attitudes were elicited.
- *List questions* were used where participants were requested to select one or more answers from a list. Any list question was also supplemented with an open text or “other” option so that participants could provide an honest reply that reflects their true beliefs, regardless of whether that option appeared on the list.

- *Likert Scale questioning* was used to generate quantifiable data regarding attitudes and beliefs to certain statements and preconceptions. This style of questioning allowed for a quantifiable measurement of attitudes, values and beliefs in a closed and more scientific environment.

Once the questionnaire was designed, it was forwarded to the researcher's research supervisors for comments and amendments. The research supervisor then returned the questionnaire with suggestions, notes and comments, all of which were then applied and implemented. The questionnaire was then submitted to the Faculty Research Ethics Board, where it was included as part of the ethics approval procedure. Changes suggested by the board were applied and the questionnaire subsequently received approval, along with the entire research application.

3.11.3.2 Piloting the Questionnaire

Students in the researcher's own school were initially selected to pilot the questionnaire. The students selected for the pilot were students who the researcher did not teach and all met the participant requirements. The students were each given a copy of the questionnaire and were asked to review it. Three students had suggestions regarding the phrasing of questions and the options on list questions. The suggested changes were then applied to the questionnaire. The digital version of the questionnaire that the students received remained with the participant and any replies they may have composed were not seen by the researcher or included with the responses subsequently received. The students were also informed of this and were reminded at multiple intervals not to forward any completed questionnaires with answers as they were ineligible to participate in the study themselves.

The questionnaire was then tested digitally. Five co-workers of the researcher were asked to trial the online version of the questionnaire to check for technical or layout issues. They used the URL link from the website that would be provided to participants and accessed the questionnaire using multiple technologies, including:

- A computer using Windows operating systems, using Google Chrome,
- A computer using Windows operating systems, using Internet Explorer,
- A computer using Apple operating systems, using Mozilla Firefox,
- A tablet device using Apple operating systems, using Safari,
- A smartphone using Android operating systems, using Google Chrome.

The link to the questionnaire, the website hosting the questionnaire and the questionnaire itself all worked within expectations in each of these digital trials. The trial also subsequently highlighted some minor grammar and syntax mistakes, as well as some difficult phrasing. These errors and complications were corrected. The responses of the researcher's colleagues were not recorded and the participant counter was reset after this trial. The questionnaire was then made live for active participation.

3.11.3.3 Administering the Questionnaire

The questionnaires were self-administered by the participant. To aid this administration, a website was created by the researcher to host the questionnaire and any other relevant information pertaining to the study. The rationale and scope of the questionnaire were explained on the webpage (Appendix L) as was information

relating to withdrawal from the study. The contact details of the researcher were also included for any participants wishing to discuss the questionnaire in further detail.

Once live, the participant schools distributed the link to the survey via email. This email was sent to all eligible participants. The same link was sent to the participants in all seven schools, and as such, they each completed the same undifferentiated survey. This was done to assure the anonymity of the schools involved, a key concern and stipulation of the principals involved. As the *Gaeloideachas* movement is still relatively small, it was felt that certain response trends could be used to identify an individual school were each school to have its own version of the survey. While this removed the option of cross comparison, it ensured that the identity of individual schools was protected. As the research includes the participant's attitudes, values and beliefs regarding *Gaeloideachas* and immersion education rather than the school being attended, this decision had no impact on the data received or on how they were interpreted. A total of 132 valid responses were received.

3.11.4 Focus Groups and Interviews

Subsequent to the questionnaires, some participants were invited to participate in a focus group and/or one-on-one interview with the researcher. In the final section of the questionnaire, participants were asked to indicate whether they would be willing to be interviewed at a later date. For those who indicated they would not be willing, they were immediately redirected to the submission page of the questionnaire. Individuals who indicated a willingness to participate were asked to

provide contact details. 18 participants provided such information after expressing a willingness to be interviewed.

All respondents who indicated a willingness to participate in the focus groups were invited to participate in the focus groups. In total, 15 participants were willing to continue to the focus group stage. Candidates were contacted by the researcher and a time and date convenient to the participants for a digital focus group was arranged. Each member of each focus group was assigned based on their availability to participate at set times on set days. Where participants were available for multiple sessions, they were allocated to a group randomly. Participants were not allocated to focus groups based on whether they had or had not considered leaving IME. This random assignment had the benefit of helping to create more diverse and representative opinions within each of the focus groups, as there was a mix of students who had and had not considered leaving IME. These sometimes-conflicting perspectives and experiences enhanced the richness and depth of the discussions, as participants with different backgrounds and perspectives contributed their unique insights, encouraging others to reflect and develop their opinions. All focus groups were conducted digitally on Zoom.

Interview candidates were recruited after the completion of the focus groups. Focus group candidates were asked to contact any friends or former school-friends who were eligible to participate and who had left IME before reaching 6th year. In total 5 participants made contact with the researcher. None of these interview participants had been part of the questionnaire or focus groups. These candidates also agreed a

time and date with the researcher which was convenient for them and the meeting was scheduled. All interviews were conducted digitally on Zoom.

Before each focus group or interview formally began, the scope, purpose and aims of the interview were explained. Participants were directed to the Plain Language Statement (Appendix C) and the Informed Consent Form (Appendix D) and agreed that they had read and understood the same. The confidentiality of the focus group and/or interview was emphasised to the candidates throughout this process. Each candidate consented to the interview being digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed (Appendix J & Appendix K) for the purposes of this research. Candidates were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, including during and after the focus group or interview. No candidate has, to date, expressed a desire to invoke this right.

3.11.4.1 Question Design for the Focus Groups and Interviews

The questionnaire data were preliminarily analysed and organised into thematic patterns established during the literature review. The responses from the open-ended questions in the questionnaire also provided a rich source of information regarding topics which had not been explored in depth within the digital survey. As such, a series of questions were designed to probe these patterns and to elicit further discourse surrounding these themes (Appendix H & Appendix I).

Each question was designed to be open-ended and to provoke a sustained exploration of the topic. Questions which allowed for a simple yes or no response were omitted, as this type of data could have been obtained from the questionnaire.

The order of the questions was also planned so as to allow for a natural flow of ideas which linked with the subsequent question. Questions which could be viewed as negative were scheduled for nearer the end of the interview so as not to adversely influence the mood or humour of the interviewee.

3.11.4.2 Piloting the Interview Questions

The questions compiled were piloted on three colleagues of the researcher, who had attended IME in their youth. A variety of interview styles was also piloted:

- A semi-structured interview with a definite list of open-ended questions,
- A semi-structured interview with a list of themes and topics to be discussed, but which was primarily led by the participant's responses,
- An in-depth interview with a focus on specific themes, led primarily by the interviewee's responses.

While all three interviews yielded rich information, the semi-structured interview with a definite list of questions provided the most comprehensive information regarding the topic. The other two interviews raised very interesting ideas and questions, but allowing the questions to follow the interviewee and their responses made it difficult to maintain a consistency between participants, themes, patterns and topics.

After some critical reflection and an analysis of the data obtained through the three pilot interviews, it was decided that subsequent interviews would be semi-structured with a definite list of open-ended questions. The final list of questions was

written to elicit information around the major themes which emerged through the literature review, questionnaire and pilot interviews.

3.11.4.3 Administering the Focus Groups and Interviews

After piloting the initial questions, volunteers were invited to participate. Each focus group and interview was conducted following best practice as outlined by Leech (2002). The researcher and the interviewee(s) discussed the scope, purpose and aims of the interview and participants confirmed reading and understanding the PLS and ICF. They also indicated the same digitally. Each interview was digitally recorded with the consent of the participants.

In the focus groups and interviews, participants were presented with a series of questions (Appendix H & Appendix I). Participants were encouraged to expand on their answers and to articulate their own experience, as appropriate. The pace of each session was determined by the participants at all times and they were afforded the opportunity to speak at length.

No time limit was set, however sessions typically ranged from 20 to 30 minutes in length. After each interview was completed, the recording was transcribed *verbatim* (Appendix J & Appendix K). These transcripts were subsequently analysed and divided thematically into significant statements based on topical headings that emerged during the literature review.

3.11.5 Ethical Considerations

Throughout this research all participants contributed voluntarily. This was achieved by providing full and open information at all stages of the research. All

participants were provided with a Plain Language Statement (Appendix C) and were asked to confirm that they had read and understood this statement. Additionally, each participant was provided with the contact details of the researcher who was available to answer any questions they may have had.

The website created to host the questionnaire had additional information (Appendix L), including an FAQ section and copies of both the PLS and the ICF. During the focus group and interview stages of the research, participants were provided with a verbal description of the study as well as a detailed explanation of the research, before being asked to confirm reading and agreeing to the ICF.

Participants were made aware that they had the right to withdraw from the research at any time without prejudice or consequence. As yet, no participant has exercised that right. Regarding privacy, all private data collected during this study will be kept confidential and every effort will be made to ensure that confidentiality. One single online questionnaire was used so that individual schools cannot be identified. Additionally, all data collected via the questionnaire were randomised so that a participant or school cannot be identified by a pattern of answers. Any data collected will be stored securely and any data made public will make use of pseudonyms.

While there was no potential for physical harm during this investigation, participants were protected from emotional or mental distress through the assurances relating to privacy, confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any stage of the study. They were also informed about supports available to them should they have any issues with ideas or memories raised during the process.

Finally, as a number of schools participated in the study, participants were assured that their responses could not be tied back to any one school, as participants could potentially come from any of the participating institutions. This, along with adequate procedures in place regarding consent, privacy and protection, meant that any perception of influence could be overcome.

3.11.6 Data Analysis

The data were analysed in a sequential and logical manner in order to provide accuracy, transparency, coherence and clarity in the research process. An explanatory sequential approach was used to allow the researcher to capitalise on the complementary elements of qualitative and quantitative methods, sequentially explore the research question, develop and probe theories, triangulate findings, and enhance understanding. This approach provided a powerful framework for the current study and allowed for a comprehensive and rigorous process throughout the research.

The results of the survey were compiled using Microsoft Excel and a series of charts and graphs were created to represent the data visually. These graphics were then arranged thematically, in sections initially developed during the literature review. As such, the five sections used were:

1. Personal Information,
2. Education and school experience,
3. Completion and Non-completion,
4. Immersion education,
5. Attitudes and beliefs.

These data were subsequently used to help draft the questions to be used during the focus groups and interviews.

Once the focus groups and interviews were completed and transcribed, they were reviewed and analysed in a sequential and logical manner, similar to that used to analyse the questionnaires. A clear process was followed (Figure 3.2), aided by NVivo, a qualitative data analysis (QDA) computer software package.

Figure 3.2

Process to Create deductive Themes from Qualitative Data Analysis

Familiarisation with the literature	The researcher developed a solid understanding of the relevant literature which related to the research question. This involved conducting a comprehensive review of existing studies, theories, frameworks, and concepts related to the research area. This allowed the researcher to gain insights into the existing themes, concepts, and factors that have been identified in the literature.
Data immersion	The researcher then immersed himself in the collected data. This involved transcribing the focus groups and interviews, organising and structuring the data, and ensuring that all data were ready for analysis.
Open coding	The researcher then engaged in open coding, which involved reading through the data line-by-line and assigning codes to meaningful units or segments of data. These codes were descriptive or representative of the content, ideas, and concepts found in the data. At this point, the researcher was open to emerging themes and endeavoured to avoid preconceived notions or biases from the literature.
Identification of preliminary themes	After open coding, the researcher reviewed the assigned codes and looked for patterns, connections, and similarities across the codes. This process helped in identifying preliminary themes or categories that emerged from the data. The researcher noted recurrent ideas, concepts, and phenomena that aligned with and/or diverged from the existing literature.
Iterative coding and theme refinement	The researcher then engaged in iterative coding, where he further refined the themes by continually revisiting and reviewing the data. This involved comparing codes, grouping related codes into broader themes, and sub-themes where necessary. At this stage, the researcher also referred back to the literature to validate, expand, and challenge the emerging themes whilst also making connections with the existing body of knowledge.
Constant comparison	Throughout the data analysis process, the researcher engaged in constant comparison. This involved comparing new data with previously analysed data, examining similarities and differences, and refining the themes based on the ongoing analysis. This iterative process helped ensure that the themes were grounded in the data and accurately captured the key ideas and concepts within the research data.
Saturation and finalisation of themes	As the analysis progressed, the researcher aimed to achieve data saturation, where new data began to reinforce existing themes without introducing significant new information. Once saturation was reached, the researcher finalised the themes and sub-themes. The final themes were comprehensive, coherent, and supported by the data.
Linking to the literature	Finally, the researcher connected the identified themes to the existing literature. He compared the themes deduced from the data analysis with the themes and concepts identified in the literature review. This helped the researcher to determine whether the emerging themes aligned with or contributed to the existing body of knowledge.

During the qualitative data analysis stages, the following process was followed within NVivo to analyse the data:

1. **Data Import:** The researcher input the data from the focus groups and interviews into the NVivo software. This was done by uploading typed transcripts from the individual focus groups and interviews.
2. **Creating Nodes:** Nodes in NVivo are used to represent different themes, concepts, or categories in the data. Nodes were initially based on the research question and on the headings which were identified in the literature review. As emerging patterns in the data were identified, additional nodes were included and data were re-sorted and re-classified where they fit into multiple nodes.
3. **Coding:** Coding involved linking specific sections of the data to the relevant nodes. Data were manually selected and coded text based on text searches and pattern recognition. This process was used to categorise and organise the data according to themes.
4. **Analysis:** Various native tools on NVivo were used in analysing the coded data. In this way, various relationships between codes were explored and patterns or trends in the data were identified.
5. **Reporting:** Finally, reports were generated, summarising Nodes, Codes and Themes. The reports generated included quotes, and key terminology that supported the research question.

Once the data were analysed using NVivo, the order of participants' responses was randomised and pseudonyms were applied to each participant. Each pseudonym

was randomly chosen by the researcher using letters, with each group having the same letter. Significant statements were then extracted from the text of each interview, grouped under topical headings and numbered for reference using NVivo. These headings spanned five themes, each of which had multiple sub-themes. As such, the five sections are:

1. Personal information,
2. Attitudes to post-primary education,
3. Social influences,
4. Perceptions of post-primary education,
5. Perceived future prospects.

Each of the significant statements was then redacted to a summative topical phrase and was grouped into a series of patterns within a thematic heading. It is interesting to note that the patterns that became evident through the statements coincided, for the most part, with the topics and themes evident in the literature review.

All of this data and analysis were then written up and discussed in Chapter 4, where the findings of the questionnaires, the focus groups and interviews are presented and subsequently analysed together, along with the themes which were identified during the analysis.

3.11.7 Summary of the Processes in the Current Study

This section provided a step-by-step breakdown of the processes undertaken during this study. An overview was provided before the mechanisms of the

investigation were described in detail. Each action taken was depicted from the design phase, to the piloting to the administration of the data collection method. The sample population was defined and the ethical considerations were discussed.

As each step was documented, this section also provides a blueprint for replication of the research processes employed so that the research may be subsequently replicated in the same or similar conditions to provide additional credibility to any findings or recommendations that may be made.

3.12 Conclusion

In this chapter, the methodologies used to conduct this research and the philosophical frameworks were described and subsequently justified. The advantages and disadvantages of quantitative and qualitative methodologies were outlined and the methods of data collection were discussed. The benefits of mixed methods and triangulation were also presented. The idea of sampling was broken down, as were the ethical considerations of the study.

This chapter established the research investigation as employing a combination of Constructivism, critical theory and interpretivism. The impact of social Constructivism was briefly discussed and the appropriateness of this approach was explained. This variety of perspectives is married by using quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, with the analysis of results being coordinated by triangulation.

This chapter also outlines the primary modes of data collection being used: questionnaire, focus groups and interview. A brief description of each is provided as is the theoretical justification of each. The subsequent section gives a detailed account of

how the research was conducted and the data gathered. All of this is outlined in an effort to create a scientific investigation which is transparent, replicable and credible.

Chapter 4 – Findings

4.1 – Introduction

This study builds on the limited existing research on student completion and non-completion in IM post-primary schools known as *Gaelcholáistí* and examines the factors affecting completion and non-completion in IM post-primary education from the student perspective.

The researcher presents and discusses the findings of the study in this chapter which is organised into four sections, stemming from a theme generated during analysis. The following four themes are used to order this chapter:

1. Attitudes to Post-primary Education and IME
 - a. Attitudes to Irish and Irish-medium Education
 - b. Attitudes to English and English-medium Education
2. Social Influences
 - a. The Influence of Family
 - b. The Influence of Friends
3. Perceptions of Post-primary Education
 - a. The Irish-medium school and community
 - b. The Student-Teacher Relationship
4. Perceived Future Prospects
 - a. Perceived benefits in the Leaving Certificate Examinations
 - b. Third-level Education

The findings below are presented in a sequential manner, with an analysis of each emergent theme and a discussion of these themes in relation to completion and non-completion. This type of thematic data analysis allows for in-depth analysis of quantitative data, while allowing the qualitative data to be categorized, compiled, analysed and presented in a clear and logical manner (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

4.1.1 – Participant Profile

As discussed in Chapter 3, the quantitative data were collected voluntarily using an online questionnaire completed by students (n=132) while the qualitative data included three focus groups with students (n=15), and five interviews with students (n=5).

The research participants were recruited from 6th year students who were due to complete their LC examinations in 2021 and who had attended an IM post-primary school for all or part of their post-primary schooling. All of the participants were aged 18-20 years. Participation in this research was voluntary.

There are three cohorts of participants in this study:

1. Students who never considered leaving IME
2. Students who considered leaving IME but decided to remain
3. Students who left IME

As illustrated in Table 1, almost all of the students who responded to the questionnaire (n=132) (98%) were still attending an IM post-primary school, and just 2% had transferred to an English-medium school. All of the students (n=15) in the

focus groups were still attending an IM post-primary school whereas all of the students interviewed (n=5) had transferred to an English medium school.

Within each data cohort, there were also subgroups (see table 4.1), those who never considered leaving and those who did.

Table 4.1

Student participants in questionnaires, focus groups and interviews

	Questionnaire (n=132)	Focus Group (n=15)	Interview (n=5)
Students who had never considered leaving IME	69% (n=91)	33% (n=5)	0% (n=0)
Students who considered leaving IME but decided to remain	30% (n=39)	66% (n=10)	0% (n=0)
Students who left IME	1% (n=2)	0% (n=0)	100% (n=5)

Throughout this chapter, the themes are analysed in a sequential manner, usually beginning with data from the questionnaire before following with data from the focus groups and the interviews. Once these data are introduced, the various responses from participants are compared and contrasted before being further analysed with reference to the literature on the given topic and the research question. Respondents to the questionnaire are referred to as Participant (Number). The numbers used are random allocations which were given during the data analysis stages. Focus Group participants are referred to by name and group number. These names are pseudonyms and were chosen based on the groups number (see table 4.2). Numbers were assigned to the groups randomly after transcription.

Table 4.2*Coding of Participants in Focus Groups*

Group Number	Group Code	Group Letter
Focus Group 1	FG1	Names beginning with the letter "C".
Focus Group 2	FG2	Names beginning with the letter "A".
Focus Group 3	FG3	Names beginning with the letter "M".

As with the focus groups, interviewees are referred to by name and interview number. These names are pseudonyms and were chosen based on the gender the interviewee chose (see Table 4.3).

Table 4.3*Coding of Participants in Interviews*

Interview Number	Interview Code	Interviewee Name
Interview 1	Int 1	Sarah
Interview 2	Int 2	Orla
Interview 3	Int 3	Nathan
Interview 4	Int 4	Jack
Interview 5	Int 5	Paul

4.2 Attitudes to Post-primary Education

This section outlines the data collected and analysed using the thematic analysis model as described in Chapter 3. Initially, in the questionnaire, participants were asked whether they had considered leaving their IM school. They were asked to explain and expand upon their answers and clarify why they had, or had not considered leaving IME. The responses from the questionnaire were subsequently

used to inform the creation of a list of questions for the focus groups and the interviews.

Analysis of the questionnaire responses showed that attitudes to IME and immersion education were key factors in the participants' decision to remain within or leave IME, something which is also seen in the literature on the topic (Oyserman, et al., 2017; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2004). This theme was expanded upon in the focus groups and interviews. The following section presents and analyses the findings within this theme.

4.2.1 Attitudes to Irish and Immersion Education

The participants in this study described learning through Irish, as well as learning the Irish language, as a key factor which influenced their decision to remain in or leave an IM post-primary school. In general, they described learning through Irish as playing a key role in their educational experience and academic success. Across the sample groups in the study, the data revealed the diversity of the participants' experiences of learning through Irish and the varying levels of effort made by the participants to engage with their own learning through the medium of Irish.

There was a high level of commitment evident amongst participants towards IME and advancing their learning through Irish, which is consistent with the literature on the subject, finding that, overall, Irish immersion learners have a positive disposition to learning Irish and maintain a willingness and motivation to continue their education through Irish (Harris & Murtagh, 1999). Participants articulated both positive and negative experiences as they reflected on their educational journey to date.

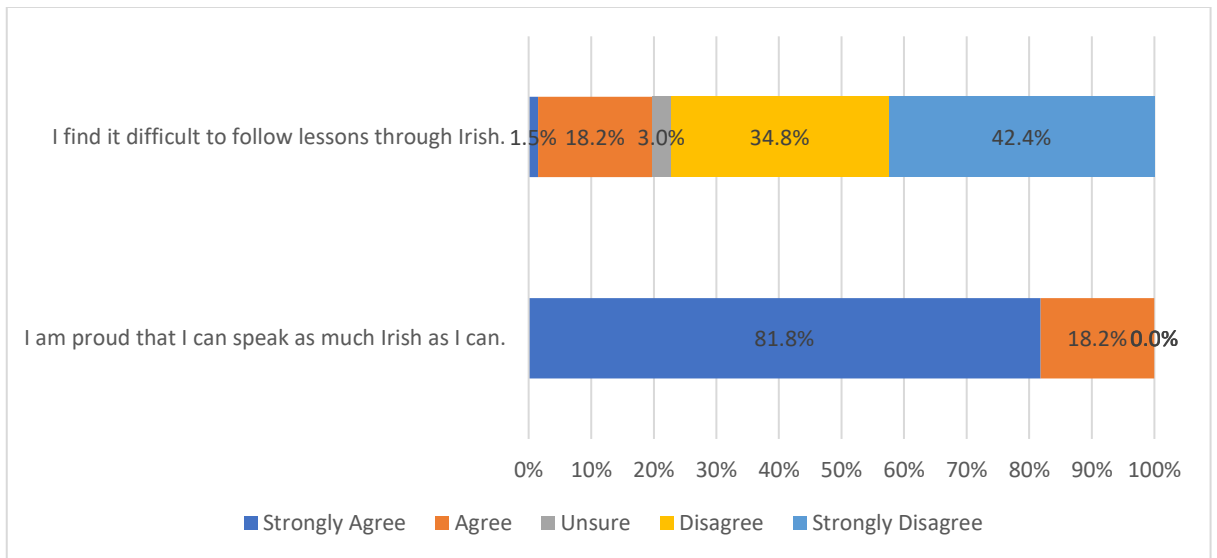
4.2.1.1 Positive Opinions of Immersion Education

When asked why they never considered leaving the IM school, 39% of questionnaire respondents referred directly to the Irish language and learning through Irish as a positive experience, with a further 10% referring to their love of fluently speaking Irish on a daily basis in school.

These same sentiments were evident throughout the focus groups and interviews. Overall, there was a very positive disposition to the Irish language and learning through Irish evident from participants. When asked if they were proud of their ability to speak Irish, 100% of the questionnaire participants said that they were. On a similar positive note, when asked if they have difficulties following their lessons through Irish, 77% said they did not, with only 1.5% reporting difficulty with keeping up (Figure 4.1). However, some participants also noted their negative experiences and the disadvantages that they experienced as a result of their choice to learn through Irish.

Figure 4.1

Attitudes Towards Learning Through Irish.



The general experience of learning through Irish, despite some of the difficulties, is best exemplified in the students' questionnaire responses. When asked why they had remained in an IM school, participants responded with statements such as:

I'm proud of my language and love to be able to speak it. (Participant 20)

Because I like learning through Irish. (Participant 28)

I like Irish. (Participant 74)

I love the Irish language. (Participant 75)

I stayed...because I do have some semblance of pride in my ability to speak Irish. (Participant 106)

I enjoy having another language and I think Irish is a beautiful language.

(Participant 113)

I prefer learning in Irish. (Participant 117)

I like learning through Irish. (Participant 119)

These same ideas were replicated in each of the focus groups. In Focus Group 1, Callum summed up the general attitude when he remarked “I think it’s a good thing to learn through Irish” (Callum, FG1). A similar idea was articulated by Participant 115 in the questionnaire, who considered leaving the Irish medium school, but decided to remain, writing that they had considered leaving “not for reasons related to the language; Irish was why I stayed.” Remaining in the school because of a love of learning through Irish was also articulated in Focus Group 2 by Alison, who noted:

I just always remember in primary school that I loved learning all my subjects through Irish and I just didn’t want to stop doing that. (Alison, FG2).

With 91% of participants having attended an IM primary school, this is a feeling that was replicated throughout the data collected. In the questionnaire, Participant 118 discussed why they had never considered leaving *Gaeloideachas*, writing: “I attended an Irish primary school and enjoy the Irish language, the atmosphere of the school is great and I was never really unhappy here”. This was a sentiment repeated by Áine, who noted that while difficulties exist with learning through Irish, she never considered leaving and moving to an English-medium form of instruction.

It [learning through Irish] can be hard at times but I never thought I was going to leave it but I definitely did see the difficulties that can come with being in an Irish school. (Áine, FG2)

Áine, like 69% of participants in the questionnaire, states that she has never considered leaving her IM school as she feels her needs are being met within her current educational context. Attitudes similar to Áine's were evident in the other focus groups, with Máire in Focus Group 3 saying:

Personally, I am very happy just doing it [learning] through Irish because I feel like I am comfortable enough learning everything and I don't feel like I struggle in exams just because I speak in Irish instead [of English]. (Máire, FG3)

Like Áine, Máire is aware that difficulties exist within IME, however, she feels that she is "happy" to continue learning through Irish as learning through the language doesn't pose any significant difficulties for her. Just like Áine, Máire acknowledges that difficulties exist, but she is positively disposed to learning through Irish as a general concept. This is consistent with Bean and Eaton's self-efficacy model (2001) which highlights the importance of a student's belief that they have some control over their own performance and/or circumstantial events, despite the emergence of difficulties in the learning environment (Bean & Eaton, 2001), which also supports the model created in this study (see Figure 2.1), where malleable factors within the student's locus of control create a feedback loop of cognitive influence from social and societal experiences. In Máire's case, the social experience of learning and the societal experience of exams, both feedback into her cognitive belief that she is capable and competent to continue on in IME.

Similarly, Callum showed an appreciation for learning through Irish when he stated:

As you get older you do start to appreciate the Irish and learning through Irish, which is something that people in English schools don't really get the chance to appreciate. (Callum, FG1)

Here, we see that Callum sees learning his other subjects through Irish as having supported his developing an appreciation for the Irish language. He notes the differences between his experience of Irish and those of counterparts in English medium schools. In his life, Irish had been the medium of instruction, whereas in other schools, they have experienced Irish as a subject rather than a working language. Aodán also references this distinction, though in a more subtle way, when he said:

I feel like learning everything through Irish and speaking to people through Irish, trying to sort of in a way embrace the Irish culture it sort of brings people together. (Aodán, FG2)

Like Callum, Aodán views learning through Irish favourably as, in this case, it has facilitated his social and cultural development within his school community. This is again consistent with the completion model developed in this study, with the positive social interaction influencing his cognitive reaction to IME. He sees the language, through IME, as a way to “embrace” aspects of culture and society that might otherwise be unavailable to him if he were not as experienced in the language as he is; as Callum put it, without his ability in the Irish language facilitated through IME, he wouldn't “really get the chance to appreciate” Irish and learning through Irish. These views are consistent with Tinto's Attrition Model (1993) where the individual's

motivation and academic ability are complemented by the school's academic and social characteristics, which is also reflected in this study's model, where the social aspect of the school influences less malleable cognitive characteristics, such as normative beliefs and past experiences.

4.2.1.2 Negative Experiences of Learning through Irish

While in general the data collected were positive, negative opinions towards learning through Irish did emerge. This was most evident in the 30% of participants who had considered transferring out of the IM environment to attend an English-medium school. One of the factors mentioned by this cohort was the Irish language, and in particular learning through Irish, although Irish was, for the most part, only one of a number of reasons identified as causing them to consider non-completion:

I also don't want to do my leaving cert in Irish. (Participant 11)

Really found the Irish difficult. (Participant 69)

I found the Irish difficult. (Participant 82)

Difficulties with the language. (Participant 86)

I wasn't receiving any extra support especially in subjects I was struggling with especially through Irish. (Participant 104)

I did not have huge confidence in my Irish and that could end up affecting the results of my other subjects if I learned and took the exams through the language. (Participant 123)

Each of these respondents identified the Irish language as one of the factors which caused them to consider leaving the IM school. However, despite facing difficulty with the language of instruction, each of these participants chose to remain in the Irish school until 6th Year, hinting at the idea that their decision may have been influenced by controlled situations, such as parental pressure, familial or social expectations as well as self-esteem issues (Meensa, Bakx, Klimstra, & Denissen, 2018). This is again consistent with the model of completion and non-completion developed in this study, where the cognitive sphere is influenced by the outer two spheres in a feedback loop. In these instances, while the respondents believed that Irish was creating a difficulty, other factors influenced their decision to remain in IME, as their agency and motivation remain malleable cognitive factors and are open to influence from social and societal factors.

In addition to comments about the Irish language in general, Participant 61 noted a specific negative interaction with the Irish language, feeling that the language was prioritised over their own self-expression and development, possibly impacting on the participants notions of motivation and identity. When asked why they had considered leaving the IM school they wrote that their issues stemmed from an:

Emphasis on rigid Irish grammar rules and technicality in place of self-expression and adaptation. (Participant 61)

This view expressed by Participant 61 was also articulated in the interviews by Nathan, who had left IME for an English-medium alternative. When asked why he had chosen to leave IME, he explained that:

Going through primary school, the Irish speaking was very strict and then coming into secondary school it was very strict as well and it was more so getting given out to for speaking English on lunch or in the corridors and it became something that bothered me and that was what kind of pushed me.

(Nathan, Int 3)

While Nathan later explained that he is happy with his Irish ability and proficiency, stating “I am fluent in Irish and I think that is a big benefit”, he also identified rigid structures and rules surrounding Irish speaking in his school as being a determining factor in his non-completion. In this instance, the use of English in social settings was punished in his school, meaning that the enforcement of immersion rules was one of the factors which eventually led him to leaving IME. Similar to Participant 61, he interpreted being “given out to” as limiting his self-expression within the culture and nature of the IME model in place in the school. In terms of the model of completion and non-completion, this highlights the impact that school rules, which are outside of the student’s locus of control, can play on an individual’s cognitive responses, where the non-malleable social factor (school rules) meets the malleable cognitive factors (agency, motivation and identity) and conflict arises between the two, with the social impacting the cognitive. This occurred as Nathan left IME despite feeling that his ability in the Irish language was a “big benefit”, showing the power that his negative interaction with the school rules regarding the Irish language had on his willingness to remain in the school.

A negative disposition towards the language was also articulated by Participant 39, who, when asked why they had considered leaving IME, responded to the question by writing that they:

Couldn't see a huge benefit in having Irish moving forward. If anything, I considered it a hinderance. (Participant 39).

A similar, but not identical response was given by Jack in his interview. While not considering Irish a "hindrance", like Participant 39, Jack did feel that he could not achieve as much in his other subjects if he continued to study them through Irish, saying:

I found it a bit difficult doing it [other subject] in Irish and I felt like it would be much easier for me in English... They try to make us speak Irish most of the time. But I feel like still in some subjects it was very confusing in Irish.
(Jack, Int 4)

Like Nathan, Jack was positive when recounting his ability in Irish and with Irish as a subject, remarking that "at the same time with Irish and stuff like that it is really easy" (Jack, Int 4) but, like Participant 39, he viewed learning all of his subjects through Irish as not offering an additional benefit, commenting that "I felt like it [finishing school] would be much easier for me in English" (Jack, Int 4). While Irish was not the determining factor in his decision to leave IME (he noted friends as the most influential element), Irish was still an influence and a justification in his decision.

However, unlike Nathan and Jack, Participant 61 and Participant 39, along with the 30% of questionnaire respondents who had considered leaving IME at some point;

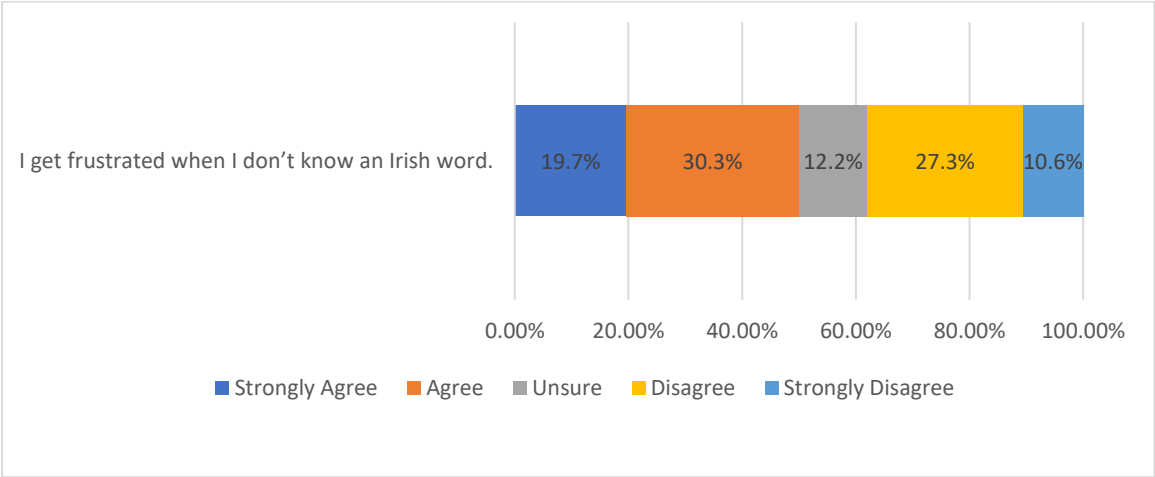
each of these participants in the questionnaire ultimately chose to remain in their IM school. In the case of Participant 61, they stayed in an IM school because of “culture, school educational support, high standard of teaching, atmosphere and ethos”. If Participant 61’s self-expression and adaptation were seriously challenged, then that could have a negative effect on their self-concept of identity. As Participant 61 mentions language as a factor for them considering leaving IME, the challenge was to their language identity, which would have been the dominant identity at the time (Oyserman, Lewis Jr, Yan, Fisher, & Casey, 2017), as was the case with Nathan. This means that negative experience actually surrounds identity-based motivation. According to Smyth (2017), any shift to identity-based motivation can have a major influence on a student’s educational experience and on shaping their future perspectives and outcomes, explaining why Participant 61 may have mentioned this issue as a reason behind them considering leaving the IM school. However, the language identity was ultimately protected as other aspects of Participant 61’s educational experience compensated for the negative experience of using the language within rigid and technical structures, unlike the experience which Nathan underwent.

Participant 39 decided to remain because of “small advantages in subjects and I had never learned in any other medium except Irish. I liked the school I was in also”, highlighting how their interactions with the Irish language were just one aspect of how they viewed their school experience, again reinforcing the idea of multiple identities identified by Meensa, et al. (2018). This is similar to the experience of Jack, who, despite leaving the IM school, noted that the “atmosphere in the school is what makes it great.... I feel like everyone enjoys being in the school”. He said this in spite of his

difficulties with the Irish language, again highlighting how students view the school from the perspective of multiple identities. This fits with the model of completion and non-completion developed in this study, as it highlights the differing impacts that the social sphere can have on the cognitive sphere, and how the more malleable factors can have a stronger influence on an individual than the less malleable factors as was the case with Participant 39 and with Jack.

Most of the negative opinions recorded in the data stemmed from the extra work involved in navigating other subjects through the medium of Irish. The notion of having extra work and problems relating to vocabulary also arouse in the questionnaire responses. When asked whether not knowing a word or phrase in Irish creates feelings of frustration, 50% of participants reported that they had experienced this negative emotional reaction (Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2
Participants' feelings of frustration when they do not know a word or phrase in Irish.



This idea was further emphasised by participants in the questionnaire when they were asked why they had considered leaving their IM school, as participants

noted negative feelings toward immersion education as an influence as they considered leaving their IM school:

Unnecessary extra steps in work to do through Irish, harder to find help cause [sic] no one speaks Irish outside of school. (Participant 81)

I was scared I wasn't good enough to do my leaving cert through Irish and be able to understand how to do stuff. (Participant 97)

I found difficulty in the Irish language in some subjects (Participant 108)

In these instances, the participants are having difficulty with the extra work involved with immersion learning, highlighting issues with coping behaviour and locus of control, as described by Bean and Eaton (2001) as they struggle to manage complex tasks and responsibilities. This same idea was further discussed and developed in the focus groups. In Focus Group 1, Callum acknowledged that some subjects with new and complex vocabularies can create the most challenges for him, an idea that was later supported by Cian:

It is harder definitely for some subjects like science subjects, to do that through Irish rather than English. (Callum, FG1)

I was concerned about the Irish particularly after the Junior Cert. I had a few kinds of troubles with some of my other subjects that weren't Irish but then in the end I decided to stick it out. (Callum, FG1)

It's just a bit of extra work that could have been avoided if you went to all speaking English. (Cian, FG1)

However, while the extra work “could have been avoided”, Cian, like the majority of the other participants also chose to remain in the IM school, ultimately exercising control over their education experiences. Participant 16, who left the Irish medium school noted that learning through Irish was not a negative experience;

having two siblings who have gone through the Irish system to completion it is evident this did not hinder their ability to understand topics [Participant 16],

rather, they chose to continue their education through English to enhance their future opportunities as they felt that “all colleges teach their courses through English which made me want to learn content in English” (Participant 16).

Their decision to leave the IM school was not as a result of a negative reaction to learning through Irish, but rather, as a pre-emptive move to facilitate an easier transfer into third level education, as they saw it and can be seen as the exercising of agency, as the participant showed the capacity to act within a given environment, following through on the decision to move schools (Kenny, 2018).

This was similar to Nathan in Interview 3, who found that learning subject specific vocabulary through Irish was an addition task that he found difficult, as he stated:

Understanding a lot of the terms used in some of the subjects like science and history, I have had to use dictionaries to look up and I just felt that was a bit of a hassle that I wouldn't have had to go through in an English school (Nathan, Int 3).

Like Callum and Cian, Nathan found that understanding and learning the vocabulary in additional subjects difficult, however, unlike Callum and Cian, Nathan decided to leave IME and pursue his education through English. While other factors were at play, it was clear in the interview that this additional workload was a strong influence in Nathan's decision to leave his IM school. When asked what his school could have done to make it easier for him to stay, Nathan replied;

Not be as strict when it comes to speaking Irish. I feel that would've helped me because it does relieve a lot of stress, especially in the younger years I feel like that could've helped. (Nathan, Int 3).

When asked what his school could do to help others like him, he explained that extra help understanding terminology and vocabulary in English would have helped him to feel like he was reaching his learning potential:

I think there should be the English terms for certain... or the English words for certain terms should be given in classes as well as the Irish. Just to help. Now in some classes they are given a dictionary [glossary] for some terms but I feel like it should be given in most classes and it should be explained (Nathan, Int 3).

A similar issue was raised by Jack in Interview 4. When asked what the IM school could have done to help him remain, he also referred to enhanced structure to help with the understanding of terminology and vocabulary, especially as the supports relate to the LC and examinations. He responded by saying:

I feel they [teachers] could put the notes available in English as well. For the Leaving Cert we also get the English paper so it would be good if they went through the English paper beforehand because there were some words we wouldn't understand in English that we do in Irish (Jack, Int 4).

Jack went on to qualify his ideas by explaining the difficulty he had with subject specific instruction and terminology:

sometimes it was harder to take in the knowledge because of it and to learn everything because sometimes I would be sitting there and I kind of get what he is saying but if he was to say it to me in English it would go straight into my head and I would just understand. It's just easier to understand straight away in English (Jack, Int 4).

Again, as with Nathan, Jack found the extra cognitive steps involved with learning through immersion difficult. While he enjoyed learning Irish, he saw an English medium school as offering an easier alternative to completing his education. While his decision to leave IME ultimately hung on his friends attending the English-medium school, his experience with learning through Irish in his other subjects also played a role in his decision to leave. This is consistent with the model of non-completion, where multiple factors influence the decision to leave or remain in IME.

4.2.1.3 Perceived Advantages of Immersion Education

While the general opinions in relation to learning through Irish were positive with some negative sentiments, a distinction became evident in the data between opinions towards learning through Irish and the perceived advantages of learning

through Irish. Participants in this study referred to these distinctions throughout the various data collection stages, although they were not always aware that they were making such distinctions.

Participants used specific examples from their own experiences to discuss what they felt were the positives of learning through Irish. This ranged from the very general, as with Caoimhe, who said; “I actually do find it easier in many things to learn through the Irish language.” (Caoimhe, FG1) to the more specific, like Ciara and Alison, when they said:

I think the extra points is [sic] like the biggest benefit. (Ciara, FG1)

I definitely think there are a lot of advantages about going to an Irish school as in my Irish class I get really high marks. (Alison, FG2)

In each incident where a positive was identified by a participant, they related it back to very concrete experiences rooted in their own lives and lived-experiences. This is consistent with Chandler-Olcott and Hinchmann’s interpretation of agency, where they argued that individuals have the capacity to act in a given situation based on past experience (Chandler-Olcott & Hinchmann, 2019). In this instance, both Alison and Ciara chose to remain in the IM school because of the perceived benefits.

4.2.1.4 Learning Other Languages

While participants exemplified their opinions with individualistic anecdotes, one common idea which emerged was the perception that learning through Irish was a benefit for those learning another language. This is consistent with the research in this area, which has found that immersion students perform as well, if not better in

language exams as their counterparts who study exclusively through the medium of English (Cadez, 2006; Leong, et al., 2005). This idea emerged in the questionnaire response and was further explored in the focus groups.

In general, the perception was that learning through Irish made the learning of a third or subsequent language easier:

I think obviously you will fare well through Irish but I know that if you can speak more than one language you have an easier time learning a third language. (Callum, FG1)

It helps with Irish because we speak Irish in school, and then just with English and French I think if you already have a language at a young age, it makes it easier to learn a new one and you kind of know... it's just easier to learn like different grammar and that because you can kind of just take it on a lot easier. (Áine, FG2)

The languages are a lot easier especially if you go to an Irish school Irish is going to be definitely easier compared to going to an English school. (Alex, FG2)

Of course, we have our own disadvantages but I personally think that we have advantages, especially when it comes to learning languages and all of that. (Aodán, FG2)

This notion was expanded upon by Áine, who feels that every subject benefits, not just languages. She feels that this is because of the school community which develops around teaching and learning in an IM school:

I think it [learning through Irish] helps overall with almost every subject because like it helps with the languages but also, it's just in school as well you kind of feel like you have your own community and then you are kind of different to other schools, which is kind of nice. (Áine, FG2)

In this instance, Áine is making a connection between a positive and supportive school environment and positive results from teaching and learning. These are what she sees as the main positives of learning through Irish. Áine's personal view is consistent with the findings of Cadez (2006, p. 19) who found that "the more students are exposed to the second language, the better they perform in all areas".

4.2.1.5 Perceived Disadvantages of Immersion Education: Learning Non-language Subjects and Terminology

Again, while participants were clear in projecting an overall positive disposition to learning through Irish, they were also keenly aware of the difficulties which they face as students in an IM post-primary school. A number of responses in the questionnaire referred to difficulties in learning subject specific terminology through Irish. Participants notes issues such as:

Easier to transfer knowledge from [English] grinds¹ to schoolwork.

(Participant 10)

¹ Grinds are a form of private after-school tuition in which students receive either one-to-one or small group instruction in one or more subjects. Grinds are typically privately funded and are most common with students who are in examination years.

The difficulty of certain subjects, like biology for example, is like learning a different language. (Participant 75)

Find it difficult to understand subject terminology. (Participant 102)

This same idea emerged in the focus groups. While remarking that the bonus points available for sitting the LC through Irish were a personal benefit for herself, Ciara also noted that the vocabulary and syntax in LC subjects did pose a challenge for her. She admitted:

I found it very hard especially in subjects like Home Economic and stuff, doing it through Irish. (Ciara)

This was similar to the sentiment expressed by Participant 16, who wrote:

For me learning through Irish was harder, also frustrating knowing content in English through outside school reading which could not be applied as easily to school through Irish. (Participant 16)

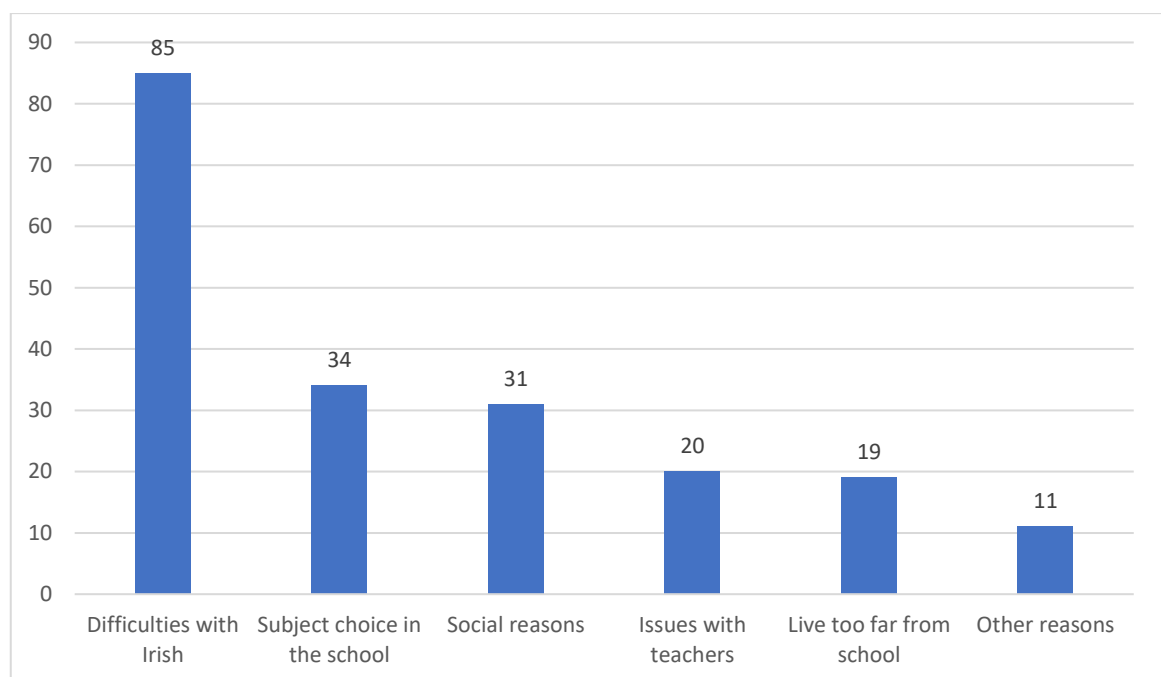
In both cases, the students have described learning through Irish as presenting an additional difficulty on top of the work of learning the subject-specific knowledge itself. This could be seen as the “bit of extra work” earlier acknowledged by Cian (Cian, FG1).

That said, the perception of Irish as causing an additional barrier cannot be ignored. Research shows that immersion education students obtain a proficiency in *some* aspects of the target language that others might not necessarily obtain, but not in all aspects, and not to native speaker proficiency (Cadez, 2006; Lindholm-Leary & Howard, 2008). When asked why they think people they know might have left an IM

school, the single biggest factor identified was *difficulty with the Irish language*, with 43% of respondents choosing this as their opinion. The next largest factor identified was subject choice, at 17%, followed by social reasons at 16% (Figure 4.3). This shows that there is a perception amongst students who attend IM schools that learning through Irish causes difficulties for some, if not for themselves.

Figure 4.3

Perceptions on Why Students Leave Irish-medium Schools.



4.2.1.6 Lack of Irish Language Resources

In addition to difficulties with learning through the Irish language, the lack of academic supports and resources available in the Irish language was also identified a number of times in the questionnaire and in the focus groups. This view reflects international evidence which suggests that immersion education suffers from a lack of supports such as teaching materials, teaching resources and learning resources in the target language (Dunmore, 2017; Hickey & de Mejía, 2014).

In the questionnaire, Participant 59 wrote that books and supports are simply not available in Irish, and that if a student wants to engage in independent study outside of the classroom, they have no choice but to do so in English:

All my books are in English, all revision books are in English, Studyclix just recently added an Irish feature for certain subjects... it is a lot more daunting when you are sitting down to study and all translation is to be done yourself. (Participant 59)

This exact idea was repeated in each of the focus groups, with participants expressing frustration at the systematic difficulties created by the lack of Irish language resources:

If I am struggling with biology there is never anything online to help me with biology through Irish. (Ciara, FG1)

Definitely making sure that there are resources, even when it comes to studying. It was brought up earlier that like there is never anything online for Irish students if they are looking for extra help. (Cathy, FG1)

Like it can just make it a lot harder in some subjects. Some subjects it doesn't make much of a difference but in like... like Alison said, in science, in geography sometimes it can be more difficult. (Áine, FG2)

Like the only subjects that I can actually find help in are English and French; the two languages. (Ciara, FG1)

In each of these examples, the participants express a desire to further their own learning through independent study, yet they feel that these efforts are

hampered by the lack of notes and supports available in Irish, impacting on motivation as the internal drive to improve is being hampered by external elements outside of the individual's control (Deci & Ryan, 1987).

Additionally, participants reported difficulties with the standard of Irish used in available resources. In the questionnaire, Participant 9 noted the complex phrasing used in official documents such as exam papers, stating that learning through Irish would be easier if authorities were:

To write the exam questions and exam material in simpler Irish. I find I spend most of my studying time trying to translate the material to grasp some idea of the content. (Participant 9)

This idea was also articulated by Participant 52, who wrote that learning through Irish could be made easier by:

Embracing (some) of the modernisation of the Irish language, especially the introduction of vocabulary for which an alternative doesn't exist natively - focusing more on fluency than strictness of grammar so that students can comfortably communicate with other Irish speakers around the country. (Participant 52)

The same notions were discussed in the focus groups, with participants expressing dissatisfaction with the lack of Irish language resources available:

Not most but some of the subjects my textbooks are all in English and... that's a big disadvantage. (Alison, FG2)

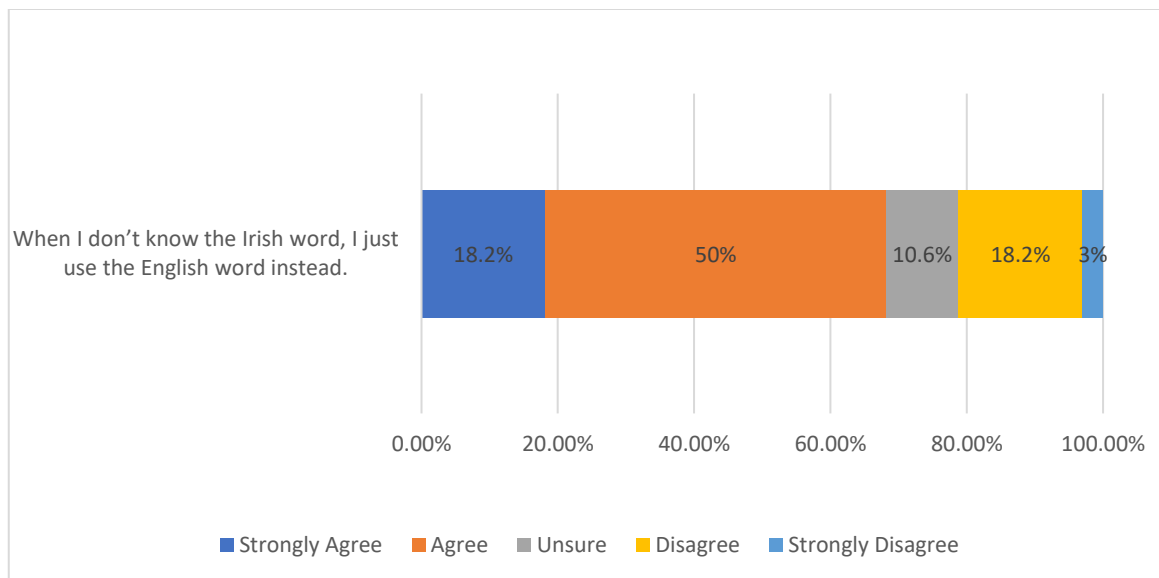
In addition to frustration, Caoimhe added a sense of exasperation to her context as she noted that this translation must also be done inside the classroom. As mentioned earlier, many textbooks are not available through Irish, leading to the situation whereby:

I tell them [her friends] I learn German with an English book through Irish. So, we have to translate the book into Irish to translate it into German and they do be shocked. (Caoimhe, FG1)

In this instance, Caoimhe describes a situation which both she and her friends see as absurd, having to include an extra step in what should be the regular learning of a third language. These frustrations can be seen in the number of questionnaire participants who admitted to using English in place of Irish whenever they do not know the Irish equivalent to the word. However, while the lack of Irish language resources is causing difficulty and frustration, when asked whether they use the English terminology whenever they do not know the Irish word or phrase, the majority of participants, 68%, revealed that they do, highlighting the impact that the lack of Irish language resources and supports is having on immersion students and the development of their language skills (Figure 4.4).

Figure 4.4

The Usage of English Terminology When the Irish Equivalent is Not Known



4.2.2 Attitudes to English-medium Education

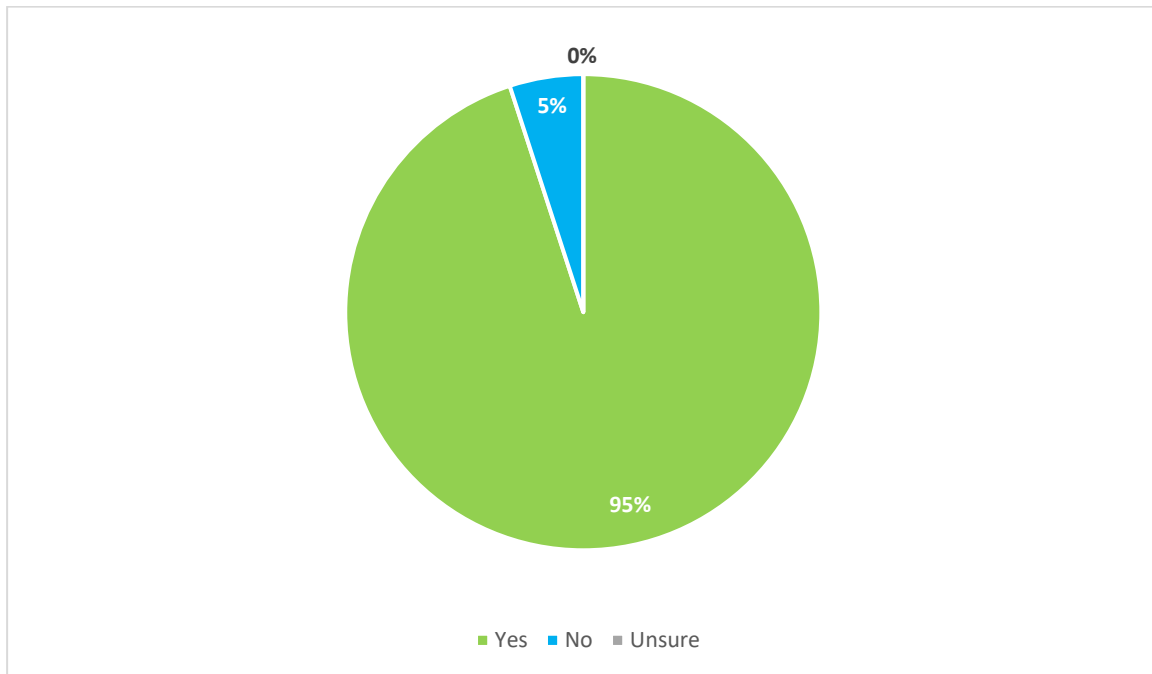
4.2.2.1 Moving to an English-medium School

All of the participants in the study were asked whether they had ever considered transferring to an English-medium school, with 69% responding that they had not actively considered moving, and 30% who had considered such a move and 1% having moved.

However, while only 30% had ever considered moving to an English-medium school, 95% of respondents felt that moving post-primary schools was a big decision (Figure 4.5). In the context of this study, the term “big decision” was used to encompass the gravity of the decision to move schools using a simple and accessible terminology for participants. Colloquially, the term refers to a decision with potentially considerable consequences, which could be positive or negative and affect multiple aspects of an individual’s life.

Figure 4.5

Participants' Responses to the Question "Do You Think That Moving from One Post-Primary School to Another Is a Big Decision?"



Subsequent to being asked whether moving from one post-primary school to another was a big decision, participants were asked to explain their responses, as discussed in the next section, Section 4.2.2.2.

4.2.2.2 General Attitude to Transfer

As seen in Figure 4.5, participants viewed the move from one school to another as a major decision. This was clarified in the responses they provided when they were asked to explain their reasoning. The majority of responses fell into two categories:

1. The academic implications
2. The social implications

In terms of a general attitude to transfer, the majority of participants offered an opinion as to why students might consider leaving IME, however, they could not

always reconcile this consideration with their own experiences. This can be seen through the 69% of participants who did not have any personal experience with considering a transfer to an English-medium school. However, they did offer their perspectives and insights into why a student might follow this option. This same notion was later reinforced in the focus groups, for example by Caoimhe, who, when asked why she had never considered moving schools responded with “I didn’t see a reason why I had to go to an English school” (Caoimhe, FG1).

For Caoimhe, the idea of moving to another school with a different language ethos seemed alien and she couldn’t justify such a decision based on her own experiences and background, similar to what was reported in the survey responses. This is consistent with the literature on motivation and agency which suggests that some decisions are made autonomously, based on an individual’s passions, curiosities and preconceptions, while other decisions are the result of more controlled situations, such as parental pressure, familial or social expectations as well as self-esteem issues (Meensa, et al., 2018). This was an idea mirrored by Meadbh in Focus Group 3. When asked why people might leave an IM school for an English-medium alternative, Meadbh responded with “I can’t really think of why to be honest” (Meadbh, FG3).

However, while the 69% of participants who did not consider transfer offered interesting speculation, the information provided by the 30% of participants who had considered transfer was of particular relevance to this study, as was the information provided by those who left the IM school. These participants offered a personal insight into their decision-making process. When asked why they chose to stay in IM education, participants offered general comments, such as:

Because it was too late to move. (Participant 6)

I already done [sic] everything through Irish. (Participant 7)

Moving permanently seemed unnecessary. (Participant 62)

These general statements from the questionnaire responses are representative of the overall tone of responses received. They also compliment the feedback given in the focus groups and the interviews.

The more general attitude prevalent in the focus groups can be summed up by Michael, who stated:

I think most people usually leave around 4th year. So, you have kind of done the first three years through Irish and then switching for the Leaving Cert. But I don't really understand the thought process behind that. (Michael, FG3)

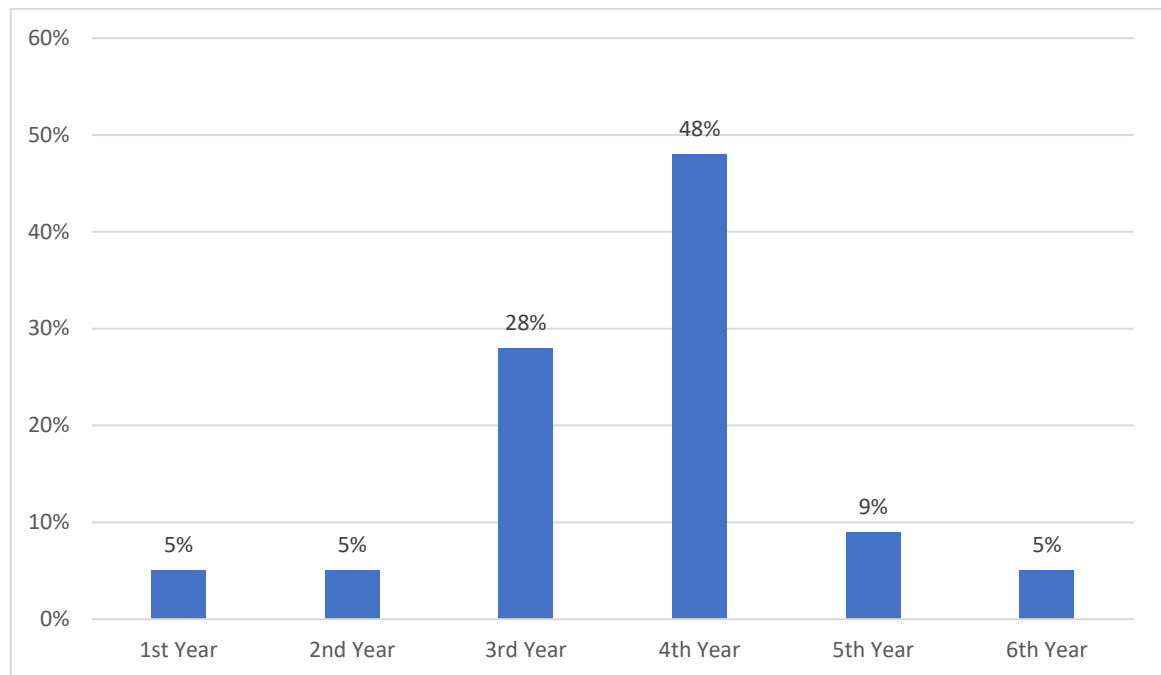
It appears from Michael's comment that the end of the Junior Cycle provides a natural departure point for some students but for him personally it would not be an option he would choose, and he could not fully understand the reasoning behind others' decision to leave. This is consistent with the attrition models discussed in Chapter 2, in particular Hirschy's model, where attitudinal outcomes play a role, where individual students subjectively evaluate the benefit of a particular course of study to their future outcomes (Hirschy, Bremer, & Castellano, 2011). This is a sentiment that is consistent with the questionnaire responses by the cohort who had never considered leaving, the 69%.

When the 30% of participants who had considered leaving were asked about what point they had considered transfer, the majority of questionnaire respondents

highlighted 4th year, the year before the start of the LC cycle, as the time they considered moving to an English-medium school. In this regard, Michael's response is consistent with the questionnaire data collected (Figure 4.6)

Figure 4.6

When Did You Consider Moving to an English-medium School? (n=40)



However, while these general statements and responses give some insights into the perspectives of the student participants, there were other factors at play as discussed below.

4.2.2.3 Perceived advantages in transferring to an English Medium school

In relation to the perceived positives of moving to an English-medium school, the study revealed that students do perceive English-medium schools as having advantages to offer. One such idea was that it was easier to attain good LC grades through English than through Irish if the student in question is unwilling or unable to

develop their Irish language skills. This was highlighted in the questionnaire and later expanded upon by Máirtín in Focus Group 3:

I always try my best and feel like I get nothing out of it [Irish-medium education] I also don't want to do my Leaving Cert in Irish. (Participant 11)

[I] couldn't see a huge benefit in having Irish moving forward. If anything, I considered it a hindrance. (Participant 18)

I definitely can understand the reason why people do leave particularly past 3rd year because the Leaving Cert... you really need to knuckle down with the Irish and you really do need a particular level of fluency. (Máirtín, FG3)

In this instance, Participant 11, felt that they “get nothing out of” the work involved in learning through Irish, a sentiment repeated by Participant 18. Therefore, for students who struggle with the Irish language, or who are discouraged by the extra work involved, the general feeling amongst some participants is that they may be better served by transferring to an English-medium school in order to do better academically. This is later addressed by Máirtín, who is articulating his experience that studying a subject in Senior Cycle required more advanced Irish language skills than were required of him during Junior Cycle. He is using his own experience to articulate his opinion, where he believes that students must “knuckle down” and develop their Irish skills in order to be as successful as possible with the LC.

Additionally, some participants mentioned additional learning needs. For example, Participant 111 wrote that they considered leaving the IM school because of their own specific learning difficulties:

Trilingual learning classes for foreign language subjects mixed with difficulties related to Autism, Dyslexia, ADHD, Mental Health issues. (Participant 111)

Participant 111 felt that students with learning difficulties might have fewer difficulties if they were to move to an English-speaking school, where some of the difficulties associated with learning a language (and through a second language) might be reduced. In such an instance, they saw moving to an English-medium school as an academic advantage which might possibly benefit them, as their Modern Foreign Language (MFL) class was being conducted through the mediums of Irish, English and the target language (Nic Aindriú, et al., 2020).

This same idea of having difficulties navigating the Senior Cycle through Irish was also raised by Máire, who mentioned learning difficulties. In the focus group, she mentioned her own difficulties with dyslexia and she discussed her own struggles with learning through Irish in school.

I am dyslexic and I thought that it would be a lot easier learning like business and science subjects in English. (Máire, FG3)

She acknowledged that she had considered moving to an English school because she felt it would remove some of the difficulties that she faced daily. However, while she ultimately decided against moving schools, she did empathise with students who considered transferring because of specific learning difficulties. She simply said:

I can understand why people would because for some people it could be easier, especially for people with learning difficulties. (Máire, FG3)

Máire states that she can “understand” why people might move, seeing the English-medium school as the easier option for people who have difficulties with learning. In this instance, Máire sees moving to an English-medium school as a valid option which would benefit some students, an idea which converges with the responses given in the questionnaire.

4.2.2.4 Perceived disadvantages in transferring to an English Medium school

Participants noted a number of perceived negatives which they associated with transferring to an English-medium school, which influenced their decision not to move from their IM school. One such point which was raised concerned the perceived notion of having to re-learn material through the medium of English. While participants noted *understanding* the concept being taught, they articulated a concern that moving to an English-medium school would require them to learn the entire English vocabulary of subject specific terminology in order to be successful in their new school. This was evident in the questionnaire responses and later in the focus groups:

Because I learned the subjects through Irish and I would then have to relearn everything in the English terms. (Participant 92)

I didn't like the idea of having to relearn everything in English, particularly for subjects like maths and biology. (Participant 103)

I'd struggle in an English school after learning the basics in Irish (Participant 120)

[I] didn't want to leave and have to start again in an English school because I feel like it would have been harder to learn everything through every subject through English again from 5th year onwards. (Ciara, FG1)

I have gone this far and it would take more time to be able to prepare myself for the Leaving Cert. (Cian, FG1)

I personally think that it was the thought of having to go and move into an English school, not just because of having to try to learn and meet new people, but because if you are in an Irish [post-primary] school for a year or two years you would still be so behind if you moved into an English school in my opinion. I feel that you just wouldn't catch up unless you studied like three times as much as everyone in the year that you are moving to. (Alison, FG2)

Going and doing all that [learning terminology and vocabulary] again in English seems really difficult and it just doesn't seem like it's doable. (Áine, FG2)

As with the questionnaire responses, in each of the focus groups, the participants articulated the idea of re-learning concepts using a new set of terminology which they envisage as being difficult and requiring extra work, in addition to the workload that they would normally expect to navigate. Both Alison and Áine note that they would expect themselves to "catch up" on English vocabulary and terminology which they do not know. This idea is reinforced more generally by Cian, who noted that a move to an English-medium school might require "more time" to facilitate such a catch up.

When his response was probed, Cian later expanded on his earlier ideas. In his subsequent contribution he noted that the extra work involved in translating English notes and texts into Irish was not his primary concern, instead he felt that:

You are in too deep. They [students in IM schools] have already done so much that another two years, in comparison to the twelve you have done before since Junior Infants, that sure you can manage a few translations and putting in a bit of extra work; because you have put in so much work up until now that extra work is just pocket change. (Cian, FG1)

He felt that having gone through the IM system for such a long time, that learning patterns and habits had already been developed which were, to him, language dependent. He has never known any other way of in-school learning other than what he has already experienced. His entire school life has been conducted through Irish, and he felt that moving to an English-medium school would require a fundamental shift in his learning style and habits. Thus, he says that “you are in too deep” by the time you reach Senior Cycle in post-primary school. When faced with shifting his entire learning paradigm, Cian says that the extra work required of students learning through Irish “is just pocket change”, making a move to an English-medium school a disadvantage in his eyes.

This is a similar idea to that raised by Alex, who also felt that the extra work involved in learning through Irish was little compared to the work that would be required to shift his established learning practices, stating:

The only like real time I considered leaving was as soon as I came in. I think as soon as you go into second level school in Irish its usually like the 1st or

2nd year you decide is this really what you want? To stay for your Leaving Cert?

And after that I was like I will double down and just stay here. (Alex, FG2)

In Alex's response he mentions making a decision regarding IME in second year. When he considered his options, he noted that continuing through Irish would require extra work, but he endeavoured to "double down" instead of transferring and having to change his learning paradigm. These opinions which were expanded upon in the focus groups were in line with the questionnaire responses, but diverged from the established literature on the topic. While this is the perception of the participants, international research shows that immersion students are at no disadvantage to their non-immersion counterparts (Cadez, 2006).

4.2.2.5 Subject Choice Availability in English-medium Schools

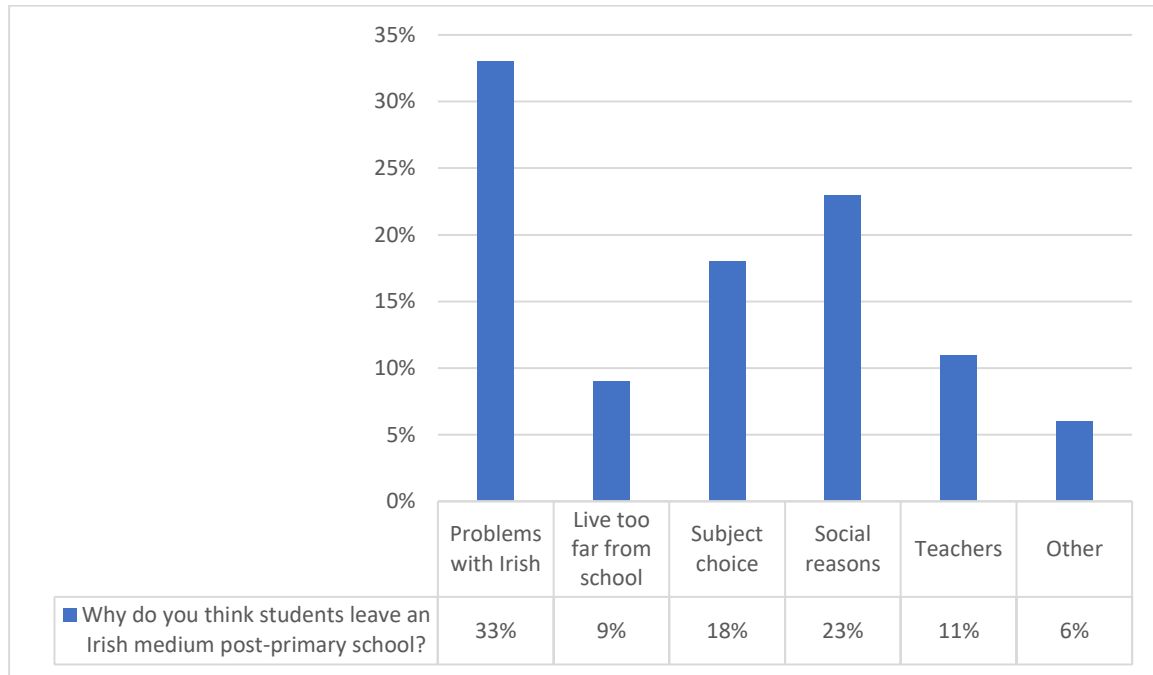
While both the academic and social impacts of transferring from an IM to an English-medium school were discussed at large throughout the study, participants also referenced their perception of the English-medium school itself, as opposed to the idea of learning and functioning through the Irish or English language. While this wasn't as commonly mentioned as the academic and social aspects of English-medium schools, interesting ideas were raised in this area, especially regarding participants who had left the IM school.

In particular, the idea of subject choice was mentioned, with participants reporting difficulties in accessing their preferred subjects through Irish and believing that the local English-medium school could offer their preferred choice of subject instead. This was reinforced more generally by the entire questionnaire cohort. When asked why they think people consider leaving an IM school, 18% responded that the

subject choice was a primary factor in the decision, the third highest factor after “difficulties with Irish” and “social reasons” (Figure 4.7).

Figure 4.7

Why do you think students leave an Irish medium post-primary school?



The idea that the local English-medium school has a greater variety of subject choice was articulated by a number of participants when they were asked why they had considered moving to an English-medium school:

Poor variety of subjects in current school. (Participant 33)

I wanted to do chemistry as well as biology but it wasn't available in my school. (Participant 74)

No Spanish and metalwork subjects to study. (Participant 75)

The school didn't have my subject choice. (Participant 79)

I was considering transferring to another school and it was mainly because we had moved and it was closer to us, and in general there were more facilities available. Like there were more subjects. (Aodán, FG2)

As a very proud Irish speaker I would have to admit that I have considered moving to an English school in the past, but it wasn't so much so that I would struggle with the Irish aspect of education and it was actually in the end the subjects themselves. (Máirtín, FG3)

Subject choice was also a key issue identified by Participant 110, who left the IM school, noting subject availability as a direct influence in their decision “[The Irish-medium] school did not offer chemistry”. While not the exclusive reason for leaving, they did specifically mention it in their response.

Both Aodán and Máirtín also discussed the idea of subject availability and their experience that the local English-medium school offered their preferred subject choices where their IM school did not, a perception also evident in the questionnaire responses.

In this instance, subject choice and availability was viewed as a key determining agent as a students considered their future in the IM school, as also evidenced by Ní Thuairisg and Ó Duibhir (2016) in their analysis of the continuum of IME. The perception exists amongst some IM students that English-medium schools can offer a greater selection of subjects at LC level.

4.3 Social Influences

This section explores the various social influences which are at play as an individual considers the question of completion or non-completion. As highlighted in the completion and non-completion model developed in Chapter 2, as well as in the other attrition and retention models, social influences play a central role in the decision-making process (Berube, 2015; Makropoulos, 2007; Beck, 2004; Quiring, 2008).

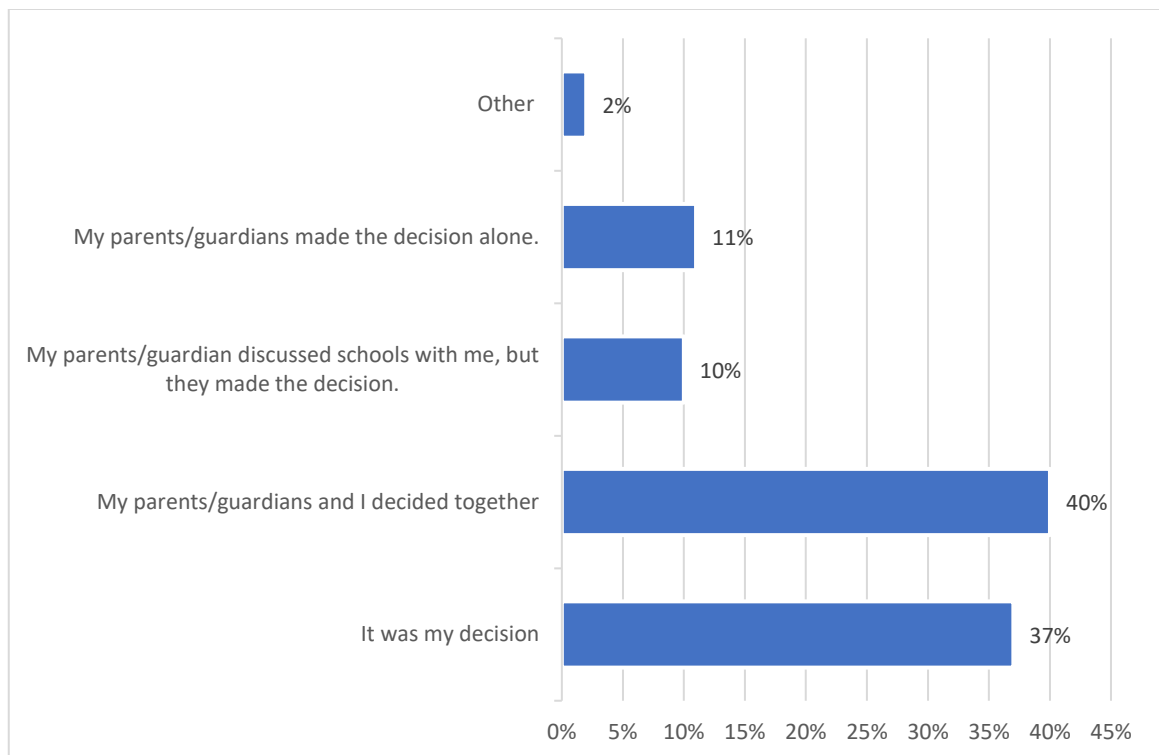
The primary influences at play have been divided into two headings: the influence of family and the influence of friends. Both of these factors are analysed in turn and their influence is discussed in relation to the research question and the literature on the topic.

4.3.1 *The Influence of Family*

The data collected reveal a range of structural and functional influences being asserted by the various participants' families. When asked who made the decision as to which post-primary school to attend, 37% of participants claimed that it was their decision alone, with 61% acknowledging that their parents were involved, to varying degrees, in reaching the final decision. A further 2% acknowledged other people as having a final say (see Figure 4.8). This shows that family, and parents in particular maintain a dominant influence over educational decisions.

Figure 4.8

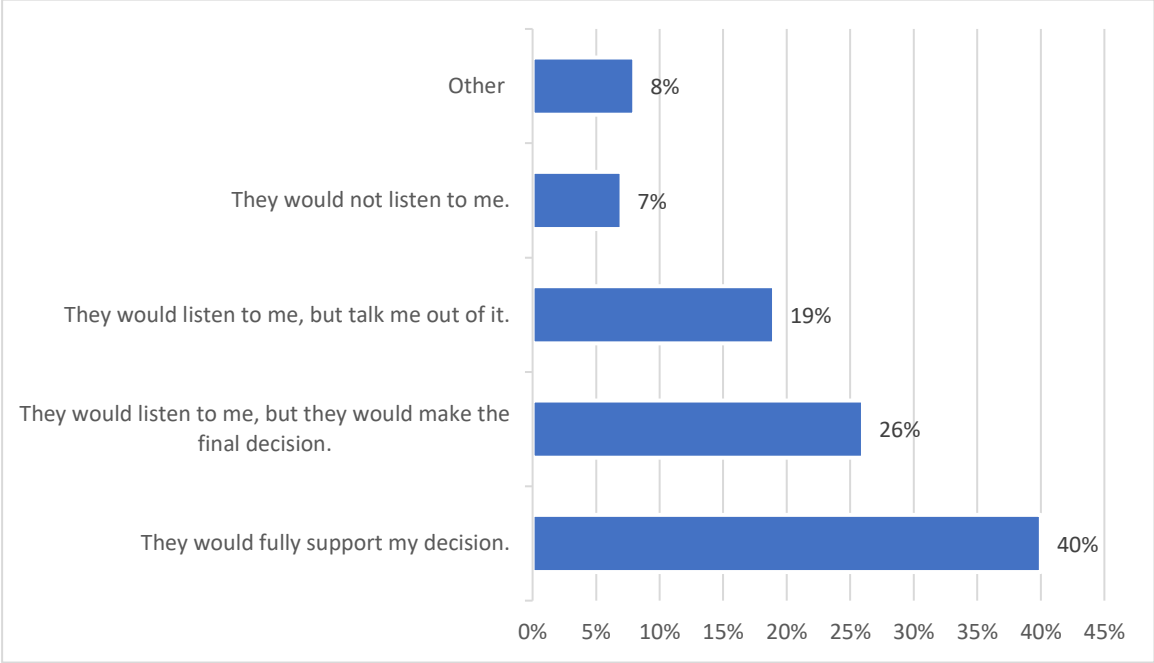
Who had the final say in what post-primary school you attended?



This level of influence was further compounded when participants were asked whether their parents would support their decision to leave IME, with 40% sure that they would receive full parental support, while the other 60% felt that their parents would not support such a decision (see Figure 4.9). Once again, the questionnaire responses showed that parents maintained a dominant influence over completion and non-completion with IME. This is consistent with international studies into post-primary attrition, which conclude that parents are a key influence on a student's likelihood to leave school early (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2016; Anguiano, 2004).

Figure 4.9

If you were to tell your parents/guardians that you wanted to move schools, how do you think they would react?



The influence of parents was expanded upon in the questionnaires as participants were encouraged to explain their situation in their own words. When asked why they had decided to stay in IME, some respondents specifically mentioned their parents as a key factor;

My mum knew it was a good school. (Participant 69)

My mother wanted me to complete in my [IME] school as I only had a year left. (Participant 82)

While parents weren't mentioned as often as friends, teachers and subject choice in response to this question, the strength of the parental influence was evident in the subsequent focus groups. When specifically asked whether their parents had an influence on their decision to remain in IME, all participants acknowledged that their

parents were influential, through their support or opposition. In Focus Group 2, Áine expressed her belief that students react to family circumstance and implied pressure from parents, as she says:

I definitely think family has an influence. Like if your family doesn't care if you stay or not then it's going to be more easy [sic] for the student to want to leave and like if your family doesn't show any interest in how you are doing in school or with the workload like then it will be just easier for them to say I just want to stay anymore. (Áine, FG2)

Áine's position here is consistent with the current literature available on the topic of early school leaving, which suggests that parental engagement with education increases motivation, attendance, participation and completion, while lack of parental interest can have the opposite effect (Fan & Williams, 2010; Simon, 2001). This is something which was noted by Amy in Focus Group 2, when she stated:

If someone in your family has left the school you just feel more likely to do it because then if you are like "My parents were okay with that so it's okay if I do it" and then if your parents are definitely... there are different degrees where parents are stricter and all and how different siblings are when it comes to school. (Amy, FG2)

Again, the idea of parental involvement is highlighted here as a key influence in a student's decision to remain in school or transfer out. In this instance Amy's observations are largely consistent with Fan's (2001) findings that a parent's expectations of their child, coupled with the parent's experiences and interactions with the school can be a key influence in a student's decision to remain in post-primary

school. This idea could be seen in Ciara's experience of discussing non-completion with her parents, where she noted:

It's not that they wouldn't let me leave. If I had a proper plan set out with what I wanted to do after, maybe they would consider it. But, if I was to just say I don't want to do school, I don't like the school, I want to leave, and I didn't have a plan, my family would tell me "Look, just at least stay there until after your Leaving Cert". (Ciara, FG1)

Here, Ciara's parents had expectations which involved her completing her education in IME. Although they would not prevent her from moving to an English-medium school, she feels that they would still encourage her to consider the impact of transfer and moving schools. In this regard, her parents were directly intervening in Ciara's future educational plans and were equipping her with the tools and experiences necessary for future independence and educational success, as outlined by Hill and Tyson (2009). By forcing her to plan ahead, they were causing her to consider multiple aspects of her decision and the possible repercussions. This in itself highlights the strong influence that parents have on such decisions, where Dadds, et al. (2019) note that providing clear and precise communication regarding parental expectations, values and aspirations can be beneficial in preventing non-completion.

These parental expectations were also cited as a reason why some participants never considered non-completion during their time in IME. In Focus Group 2, Alison described attending school as being the daily norm, something which was so familiar that she never questioned it:

My parents are really big on attendance and going to school every day. So, then I would never want to not go to school because that's just... I go to school every day; like I don't ever not go to school. So, like, not going to school is weird to me. So, like, I would never want to leave. (Alison, FG2)

With Alison, attending school is the established normal routine and it is a key expectation of her parents. As such, she has never considered disrupting that routine or her parents' expectations of her. Again, this is consistent with the literature on the topic, in particular Jeynes (2012) who noted that integrating parental involvement into educational interventions, in this case attendance, results in better and more positive educational outcomes and successes.

However, as this study concerns itself with IME, the Irish language must also be analysed as a possible influencing factor within the parental dynamic. Within the literature, parents' language use and attitudes to language can be seen as a dynamic factor, although, language is only one of a myriad of factors which influence their child's language attitude (Caldaz & Caron-Caldaz, 2002). The regard in which parents hold the Irish language and their child learning through Irish is a further influencing factor in the impact that parents have on their children. While the survey revealed that the majority of parents do not speak Irish (see Figure 4.10), it also revealed that those who did speak Irish do not speak Irish with their child most of the time (see Figure 4.11).

Figure 4.10

Do your parents / guardian(s) speak Irish?

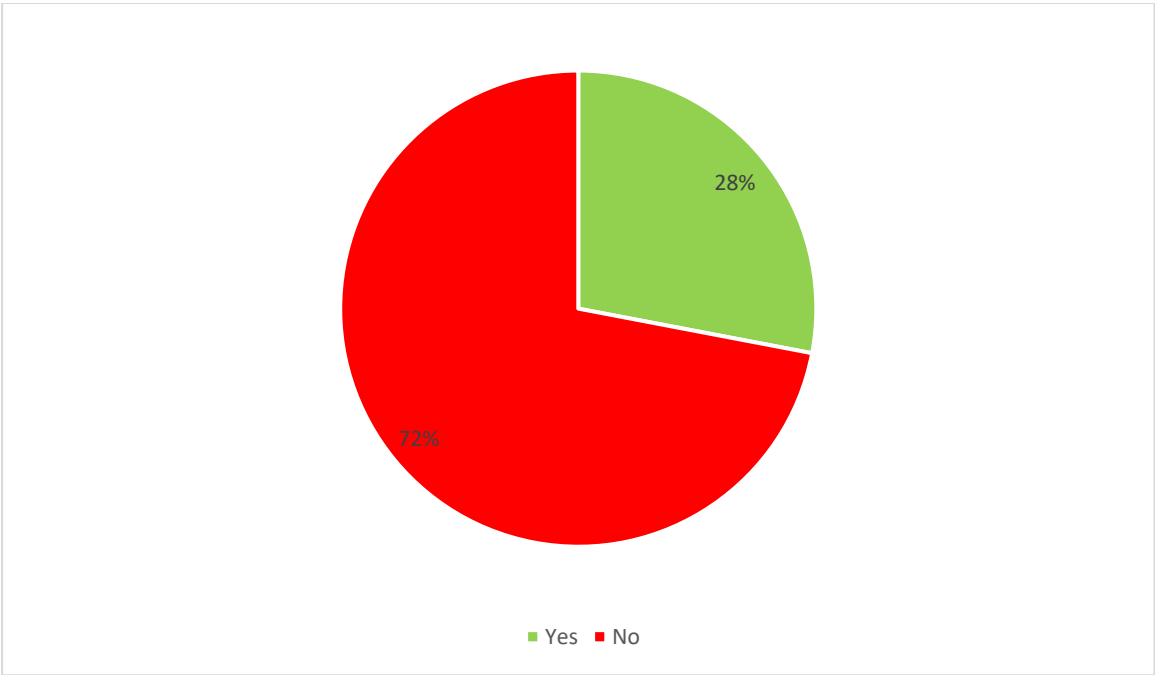
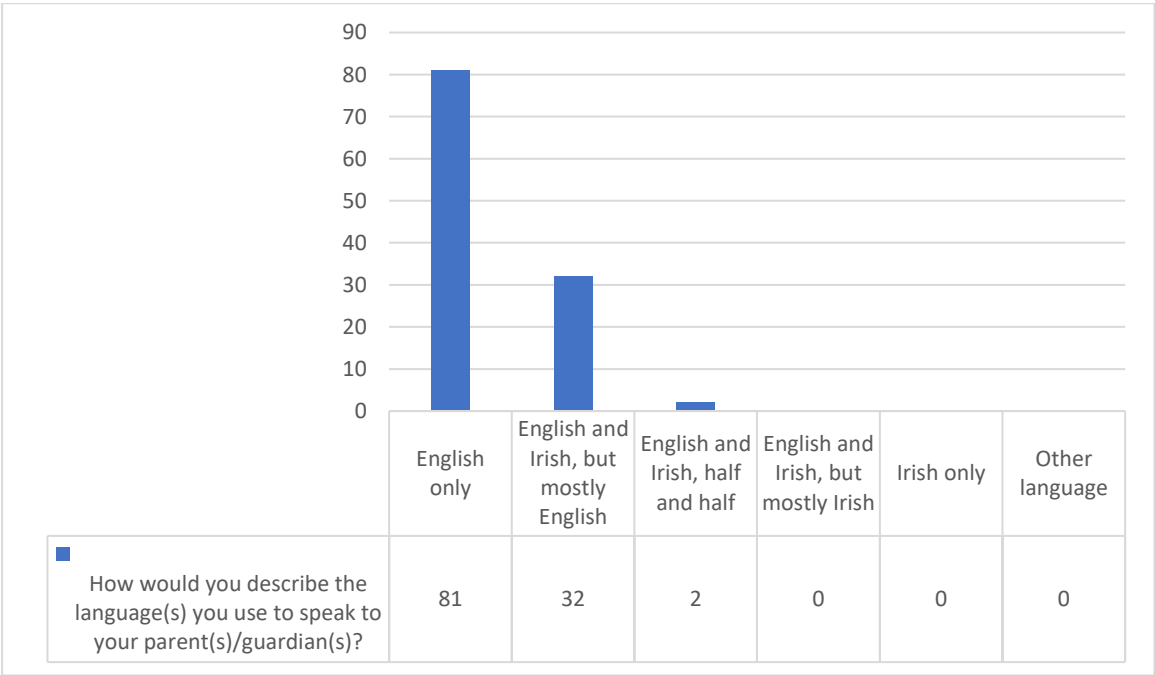


Figure 4.11

How would you describe the language(s) you use to speak to your parent(s)/guardian(s)?



While the questionnaire revealed that most parents do not speak Irish in the home with their child, the focus groups expanded on this idea and revealed that while parents might not speak Irish, their children still understand the importance that the parent places on the child's ability to use the language. This idea appeared and was discussed in more detail in the focus groups:

My mother is very big into Irish. So, I think she would be heartbroken if I left the Irish school. So that alone is kind of pushing me on a bit because I wouldn't want to disappoint her. (Cian, FG1)

Maybe if no one in my family did Irish and they didn't look at it as if I were doing something great going to an Irish school, it might be easier then to leave. They would say fair enough like. (Amy, FG2)

In Cian's case it is clear that although his mother does not speak Irish with him, it is her wish that he can speak the language fluently. He specifically states that he has remained in IME so as not to disappoint his mother, drawing the link between parental influence, parental expectation and completing IME. This is similar to Amy's experience, where her family values her participation in IME, making it more difficult for her to consider non-completion. These links are borne out in international studies, which found that parents of immersion students generally recognise the benefits of bilingualism, particularly in countries which are officially bilingual, and that parents also recognise the future economic advantages that this bilingualism may bring. Therefore, these parents encourage their children to remain in immersion education programmes to completion (O'Brien, 2017; Canadian Parents for French, 2017; Cummins, 2014).

In the case of parents who do speak Irish, it was also evident that the parent's own experience of the language and ability (or willingness) to use the language with their child also reinforced the influence that parents had over completion and non-completion. Again, this is consistent with Fan & Williams (2010) as noted by Ross (2016) who noted that:

It appears that parents' educational expectations for their children also play a significant role in whether students from all backgrounds persist toward completion of high school (Ross, 2016, p. 23).

These expectations were articulated in the focus groups by participants who had parents who could either speak Irish or who had completed IME themselves. When asked about the influence her parents had on her decision to remain in IME, Caoimhe discussed her father's experience, and the influence that this experience has on her decisions:

I mean especially with me having my father going through the Irish language, he is really like... of course I haven't had the desire to leave but if I did, he would be like "If I did it you can do it" ... I look at my dad and his brothers now and there is not a bother on them and they went through the Irish [medium] education [system]. (Caoimhe, FG1)

Similarly, when asked why she never considered leaving IME, Alison noted the influence of her father and his experiences of speaking the language:

I listened to Irish every day in school, my dad speaks Irish; like it's something that I actually really enjoy. (Alison, FG2)

Alison's positive experience of learning through Irish and of using the language with her father fits well with Rumberger's (1995) study which found that positive parental interventions and involvements, including showing interest in singular aspects of school life, result in lower rates of non-completion and attrition.

4.3.2 The Influence of Friends

Aside from the academic aspects that a transfer would entail, many of the participants articulated a social element when discussing the idea of leaving the IM post-primary school. Beck (2004) found that learners chose to leave the immersion programme to relocate to a school with their friends. The idea of leaving friends and having to make new friends surfaced repeatedly in the questionnaire responses. When asked why they had chosen to remain in their IM school after considering transfer, the idea of friends repeatedly emerged in the questionnaire responses:

Because of friends. (Participant 10)

My friends are here. (Participant 26)

Because of my friends being in the school. (Participant 96)

I didn't feel the need to try move to a new school and make new friends. (Participant 97)

I love my friends in this school. (Participant 100)

Tá go leor cairde agam anseo. (I have a lot of friends here) (Participant 110)

It was where my friends were and I was more comfortable staying in the school. (Participant 123)

The idea of friends also emerged in the focus groups, where participants expanded on the questionnaire results which saw friends as an influencing factor in the decision to remain in an IM school, or leave for an English-medium school. These discussions provided a rich yet complex insight into the importance of friends. In the case of Alex, the stakes were not too high socially, as he had friends in both his IM school and in his perspective English-medium school also. He remembered asking himself:

Will I stay here or will I consider moving to where my other friends are and like go and study in an English secondary school? (Alex, FG2)

However, he ultimately decided to remain in his IM s school, noting that while he had a solid friend group in both choices, his wider reputation and social status might cause him difficulties in a new environment. He said:

So just moving to an English school I think it is just building that reputation again and like trying to fit in with the social groups, that would be like the biggest problem if I were to move to an English school. (Alex, FG2)

In this instance, language did not play as much of a role as social status and the idea of having to re-build his reputation. He allowed his familiarity and his social status to win out in his decision regarding transfer.

The idea of staying in the school because of pre-existing social status was echoed by other respondents. When asked why they chose not to move schools, Participant 26 simply replied with “my friends are here” (Participant 26), while Participant 10 wrote “because of friends” (Participant 10).

The perception that English-medium schools are larger establishments also had a bearing on students' decisions, with this emerging in the questionnaire and in the focus groups, as respondents equated larger schools with more difficulties in making new friends. Participant 13 believed that "Irish-medium schools have smaller class sizes" while Participant 74 stated that "it would have been a big change to go from a small Irish school to a much bigger English school". The same perception that English-medium schools appeared in the questionnaire responses of other participants:

The small size of the school is a big bonus, my friend's year alone is bigger than our entire school. (Participant 14)

I stayed in Irish-medium education because I couldn't imagine going anywhere else that would have the school's community especially because I go to such a small school. (Participant 104)

I enjoy the atmosphere of the school and the small size (Participant 120)

Ní raibh mé ag iarraidh freastal ar na scoileanna móra eile i mo cheantar. [I didn't want to attend the other big schools in my area.] (Participant 121)

This perception that English-medium schools are larger also emerged in the focus groups, with Michael noting:

Just driving past [English-medium] schools, even just the buildings, there are whole floods of kids coming in and out. There are just too many of them. You wouldn't know everyone in the year. (Michael, FG3)

Michael notes the unfamiliarity of the English-medium school and the intimidation that he felt at the prospect of joining a different school culture and community at this later stage in his academic life, an idea also evident in the questionnaire responses. He compares the prospective school and its size to the familiar size of his own IM school. He values knowing everyone in his school and sees the English-medium alternative in his area as too large for his comfort, making it more difficult to establish new friendships and relationships with his peers. The perception that English-medium schools are large was also reflected in the questionnaire responses, with Participant 4 noting that they “found it [moving to an English-medium school] a very overwhelming idea” because of the local English school’s size.

However, for participants who struggled socially, moving to an English-medium school was considered a viable option for a time. Participant 66, who had considered leaving the IM school that “All the people that caused me anxiety left and there were only my good friends left in the school.” Similarly, in Focus Group 2, Alison noted that she didn’t have many friends in her IM school, and considered transfer in order to improve the social side of her education:

I wanted to move because I didn’t really have a group of friends that I got along with very well. (Alison, FG2)

While she decided to stay in her IM school after developing new friendships, she did consider leaving to make new friends in an environment which she felt it would be easier to navigate socially through English. A similar idea was also mentioned by questionnaire participants, such as Participant 12, who said “I didn’t have many friends” and Participant 13 stating that they “wanted a fresh start with new people”. In

both of these instances, they saw the local English-medium school as a viable social alternative and their primary concern when they considered transferring was social as opposed to academic.

4.4 Perceptions of Post-primary Education

This section explores the perceptions which exist amongst participants around post-primary education. Participants were asked questions relating to IM and English-medium education, and were encouraged to expand upon and explain their point of view. The importance of community and relationships was described by participants throughout the study. Participants noted the school community, the size of the school and the relationships within the school as key influences on their decision to remain or leave a school.

Participant perceptions are discussed in tandem with facts in each situation. The perception of the participant was not always in line with the facts, however, as Warren (2002) and Thomas (2002) point out, the student's perception of a situation and context influences their decision to remain or leave, and a positive perception, whether factually substantiated or not, leads to higher completion rates.

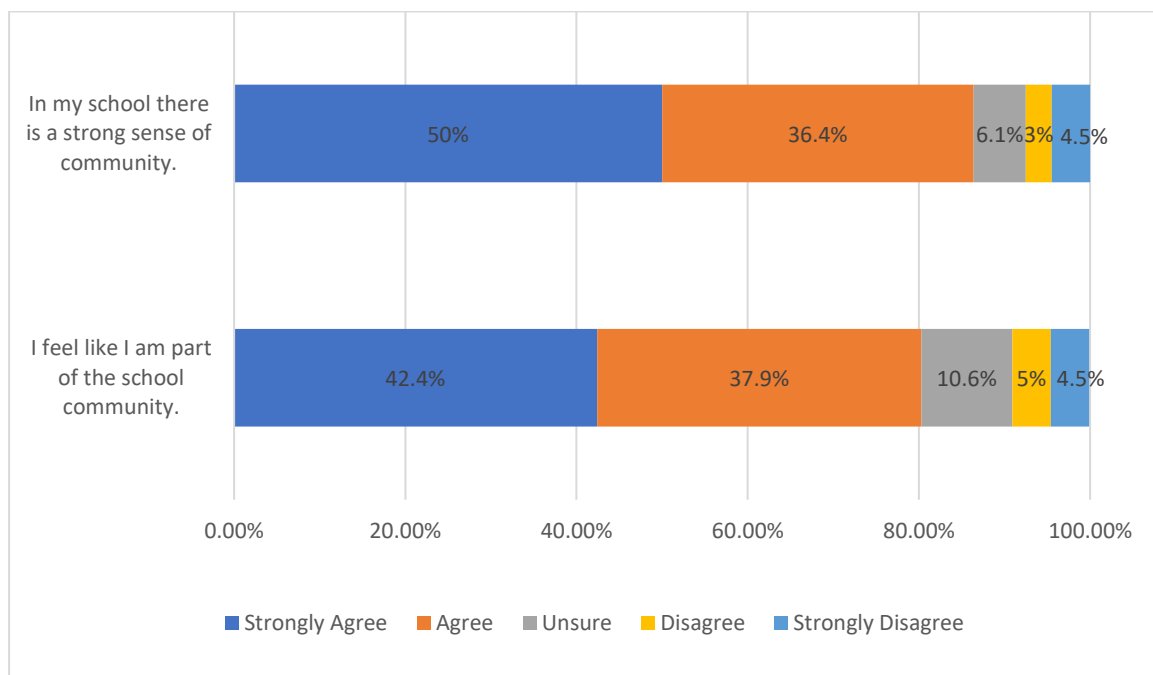
As such, this section first explores the idea of community and belonging within a school community, before looking at inter-personal relationships amongst students. The second section looks at the student-teacher relationship and the intra-personal relationships which exist within the IM educational community, as well as the external factors which impact on these relationships.

4.4.1 The Irish-medium School Community

Overall, the findings across all data sources revealed that the school community, as defined by Bean, (1980) and by Bean & Eaton (2001) is an influencing factor in a student's decision to remain within or leave an IM post-primary school. When asked whether they were part of the school community, 42% of respondents strongly agreed that they were, with a further 38% agreeing that they felt like they belonged (Figure 4.12).

Figure 4.12

Perceptions of community within Irish-medium post-primary schools



This was complimented by the overall sense of community that participants had of their IM school. When asked whether there was a strong sense of community within their school, 50% strongly agreed that there was, while a further 38% agreed that that there was (Figure 4.12). These statistics were borne out in the responses in the survey. This is consistent with the literature on the topic, with Dołowy-Rybińska

(2016) finding that students who remained in immersion contexts “feel connected to each other” (Dołowy-Rybińska, 2016, p. 290) within their school communities. When asked why they had chosen to remain in an IM school, a number of participants mentioned school community and the atmosphere created in this community as an influencing factor:

Culture, sport, friends and the atmosphere around the school.

(Participant 42)

I like the school and the people. (Participant 44).

I enjoy the atmosphere and culture in the school (Participant 54)

I like the school community. (Participant 70)

The atmosphere of the school is great. (Participant 118)

The importance of school community has been noted internationally, particularly with regards to completion and non-completion as the relationship between the school community and imagined identity provides a motivational situation for the language learner as they seek to develop and further their individual sense of belonging (Norton & Toohey, 2011). As such, the notion of community and the atmosphere which this community creates was developed and expanded upon in the focus groups and the interviews. This idea of community and belonging plays a central role in many of the established attrition and retention models.

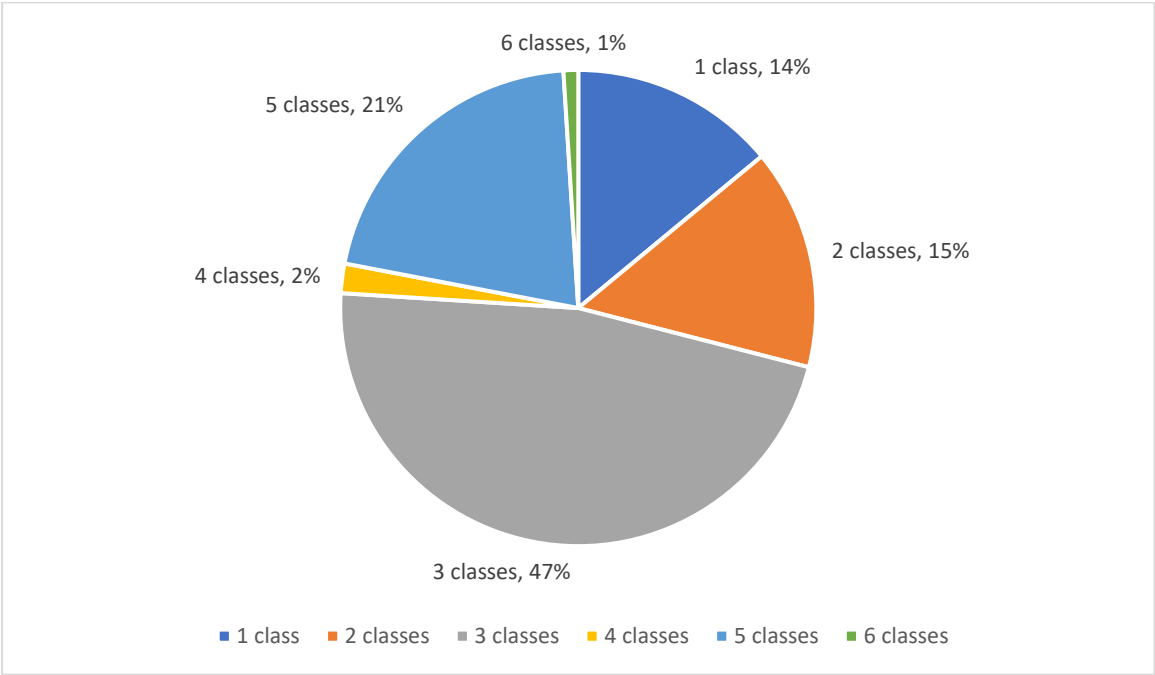
4.4.1.1 Smaller School Communities

In a number of cases, the size of the school community was referenced by participants as a reason for them staying in the IM school instead of transferring out to

a larger English-medium school. When asked how many classes their year group contained, 47% of participants stated that there were 3 classes in their year, with 21% stating that there were 5 classes and 15% stating that there were 2. As such, 76% of participants reported being in a school with 3 or fewer class grouping in their year group (Figure 4.13), indicating that the majority of participants in this study attended small-to-medium sized post-primary schools, which is consistent with national figures on the size of IM schools (Department of Education, 2021), (see Table 4.4).

Figure 4.13

Number of classes in the 2021 6th year group



As of 2021, there were 29 IM post-primary schools outside of the Gaeltacht catering for 10,283 students, giving an average of 354 students per school (Department of Education, 2021) as opposed to the English-medium sector which had 701 post-primary schools 368,901 (excluding the 29 IM non-Gaeltacht schools and their students), meaning that English-medium schools had an average of 526 students

per school (Department of Education, 2021). As a result, IM schools are, on average, 33% smaller than their English-medium counterparts.

Table 4.4

Enrolment in the Gaelcholáistí outside the Gaeltacht from 2017 to 2020 used in the DoE report into IME.

Number of students	0-100	101-200	201-300	301-400	>400	Total
Number of schools	1	1	8	5	9	24
Percentage of schools	4%	4%	33%	21%	38%	100%

(Department of Education, 2021)

When discussing the size of classes and year groups, participants in the questionnaire and in the focus groups mentioned the smaller size of their school as a positive contributing factor to their staying in the IM system. International research has consistently drawn links between smaller class sizes and positive student achievement, with Jepson (2015) stating that “in general, smaller classes are associated with increased student achievement, usually measured by standardized tests in multiple subjects such as mathematics and reading” (Jepson, 2015, p. 1). This is also noted by the European commission, whose 2022 report stated that:

Reducing class size is a costly policy, but it seems to be effective in schools/areas with a high percentage of students from lower socio-economic background or with special education needs (European Commission, 2022, p. 10).

The idea of more positive achievement in a smaller school was noted in comments such as:

The small size of the school is a big bonus, my friend's year alone is bigger than our entire school. (Participant 5)

I like Irish and it would have been a big change to go from a small Irish school to a much bigger English school. (Participant 16)

I couldn't imagine going anywhere else that would have the school's community especially because I go to such a small school. (Participant 104)

I enjoy the atmosphere of the school and the small size. (Participant 120)

I feel like with your friends you form more of a bond and it's just kind of nice because generally Irish schools are smaller as well which I personally like better because you get more help from teachers, you are closer with your friends and the whole year just gets along better. (Caoimhe, FG1)

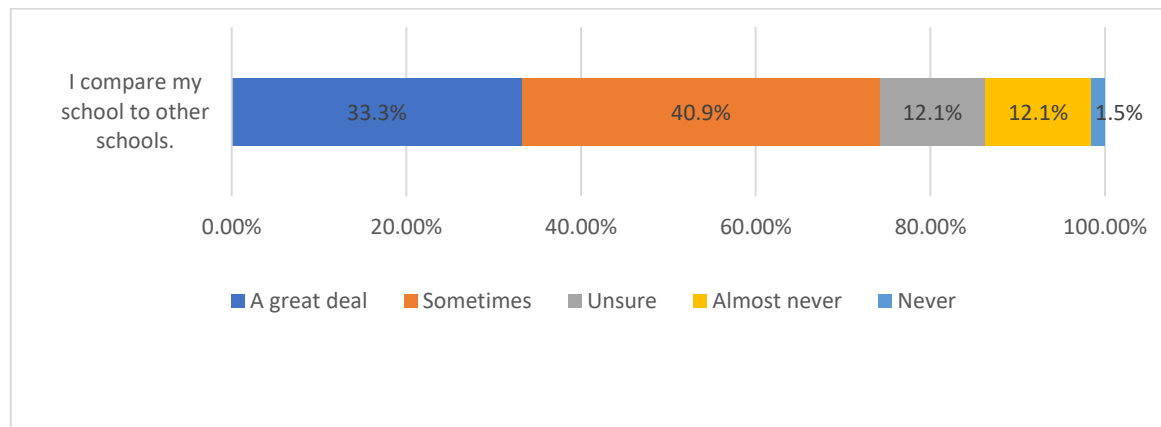
You feel free to say whatever you want to a teacher when there is maybe like 10 to 15 in a classroom. (Cathy, FG1)

Both of the responses by Participant 5 and Participant 16 contain a comparison to other schools which they have heard about and/or experienced. The general perception in the questionnaire responses and the focus groups was that English-medium schools were larger than IM ones. While this might not always be the case, the perception still existed amongst the majority of participants in this study. In the survey, when asked whether they compared their IM school with the English-medium

school(s) of their friends, 74% of participants stated that they had compared their school to another, with 14% stating that they hadn't (Figure 4.14).

Figure 4.14

Comparing the Irish-medium school to other schools



4.4.1.2 Inter-personal Relationships in the Irish-medium School

The size of the school was also directly referenced as having a direct impact on the sense of community in the questionnaire and in the focus groups. When asked what they saw as being an advantage of attending an IM school, Aodán responded by saying:

...an advantage? Although it's not really the best thing that there are [sic] such a small community of Irish speakers and people who attend Irish schools, the community... because the schools are so small it's brilliant, in my opinion, and in our school its very obvious as well. (Aodán, FG2)

Aodán noted that while there is not, to his knowledge or experience, a very large Irish speaking community outside of the school community, the advantage of learning through Irish exists in the smallness of the school community. While he laments the small language community in a wider sense, saying "it's really not the best

thing”, he also notes that the minority status of the Irish language and of *Gaeloideachas* in general has resulted in a smaller school and smaller class sizes for him, which he sees as an advantage. This is consistent with the findings of Little et. al, who noted that there is a lack of any meaningful need to engage with the Irish language on a day-to-day basis outside of the education sector which has had an impact on perceptions of Irish (Little, Ó Meadhra, & Singleton, 1986).

Similar ideas were noted by both Megan and Cathy in both of their focus groups:

It’s like a small group as well so you feel like you are together in the school with everyone because you know everyone. It’s like a small group.

(Megan, FG3)

The positivity of having like a small group of students; even like choice of subjects because classes would be quite small. (Cathy, FG1)

Both of these participants described the smaller nature of their schools as being conducive to a stronger sense of community and belonging, something that research notes as key to completion as a sense of belonging has a profound impact on resilience, persistence and motivation (Bean & Eaton, 2001). Both Megan and Cathy noted the size of the classes and the year groups. While Megan mentioned knowing everybody, and thus developing a sense of belonging, Cathy mentions the small classes within subject choice, something she saw as an advantage as she progressed towards the LC, an idea reinforced by Ehrenberg et. al (2001) who wrote that:

If having smaller classes fosters more individual attention for students who are struggling, this may explain both the benefits for disadvantaged students and the modest effects on average achievement in later elementary and secondary grades. (Ehrenberg, Brewer, Gamoran, & Willms, 2001).

However, some negative aspects of smaller schools and classes were also mentioned. With fewer students in a class and/or group, some participants felt that it was harder to miss or ignore negative behaviour, with Alison noting that:

It can kind of be a little bit negative then because there is a bit of jealousy and people want to do better in that subject particularly. (Alison, FG2)

In this statement, Alison is referring to the difficulties that can exist when there is a small year group where students are with much the same people all day in a number of their subjects. She discusses the feeling of “jealousy” and the negativity that this can create when a small year group becomes incohesive and problems begin to emerge.

This idea was also supported in the questionnaire results, where some participants referred to difficulties in settling into a small year group. When asked why they had considered leaving their IM post-primary school, Participant 109 described their issue by saying that:

I wasn't enjoying the social aspect of my school and I was given the opportunity to go to [larger local English-medium school] and therefore it would help me to achieve my fullest potential. (Participant 13)

Similarly, Participant 10 stated that they “didn’t settle in well at first and struggled [to make new friends].” Both of these responses came from participants in schools with 3 or fewer base classes in the year group.

4.4.1.3 Shared Community Vision and Direction

The size of the IM school also led to the feeling of a shared vision and a sense of common direction amongst participants. The majority of participants discussed experiences and opinions which show the Irish language as a unifying factor within the school community, giving students a common sense of connection amongst themselves. This is articulated by Cian, who described a sense of community that he felt as he continued learning through the Irish language. When asked what he saw as the benefits of attending an IM school, he responded by saying:

I think that [Irish-medium education] just breeds people that are more willing and more determined to study and also to pick up a language and support the culture of Ireland. So, I think, it creates a nice community of people that are really willing to go the extra mile. (Cian, FG1)

In Cian’s statement, we can see a sense of pride in his belonging to his school community. He sees the school community as a preserver of Irish language and culture, something which he values. As a result of this common drive within his school community, he feels that people are more committed to their education, they are “willing to go the extra mile”, as they have a shared purpose in succeeding in their education through Irish.

This strong sense of community experienced by Cian was also discussed by Alex, who enjoyed the sense of direction and the common goals and challenges he experienced with his classroom colleagues. He said:

I think it [experiencing the Irish school community] could really push people to consider going to an Irish school. Like, imagine, like, an Irish school with, like, loads of things to do outside of school. It could just breed, like, a really great culture and to spread Irish through... not the country, but, like, through like the local area. (Alex, FG2)

He goes on to later expand upon this idea when he stated:

Whether it's going into the school and a teacher giving you a nod and saying "Dia duit" [Hello] or whether it's just going outside with your friends, eating food, and just, like, enjoying the moment. Just, like, the community and, like, the people you have around you. I think it's, like, the small things that you unconsciously think of. You feel safe. (Alex, FG2)

In these instances, Alex described his sense of belonging within the school community because of a shared vision and direction. He described activities outside of the classroom, and he focused on the interactions with friends and teachers. He included the statement "you feel safe" when he was expressing his opinion, showing just how comfortable he was in his school community and how purposeful his feelings of belonging were to him in helping him to remain in an IM school after considering transfer.

4.4.1.4 Building a Strong Sense of Belonging

A sense of belonging was a thread which appeared in each focus group and throughout the questionnaire responses. Pavlenko and Norton (2007) argue that a sense of belonging is essential to developing resilience and persistence which stems from a positive relationship with and a loyalty to the post-primary school, and its community (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). Respondents returned to the idea of community and belonging at multiple stages throughout the process. As such, the idea of belonging and building upon a sense of belonging was prevalent in each of the focus groups and in the questionnaire results. The general feeling conveyed is perhaps best articulated by participant 5, who wrote:

Compared to how my friends speak of their school it [learning through Irish] is a completely different way of education. There is a sense of community and a friendly environment which you wouldn't get in other schools.

(Participant 5)

When asked why she had considered moving schools, Áine explained that she had the option of moving schools because her family moved house:

In my case I was considering transferring to another school and it was mainly because we had moved and it was closer to us, and in general there were more facilities available [in the new school]. Like there were more subjects. One of my siblings [was] going in there [to the new school] in their first year. So, it was recommended that I would have transferred there but I ultimately decided to stay here [in the Irish-medium school]. (Áine, FG2)

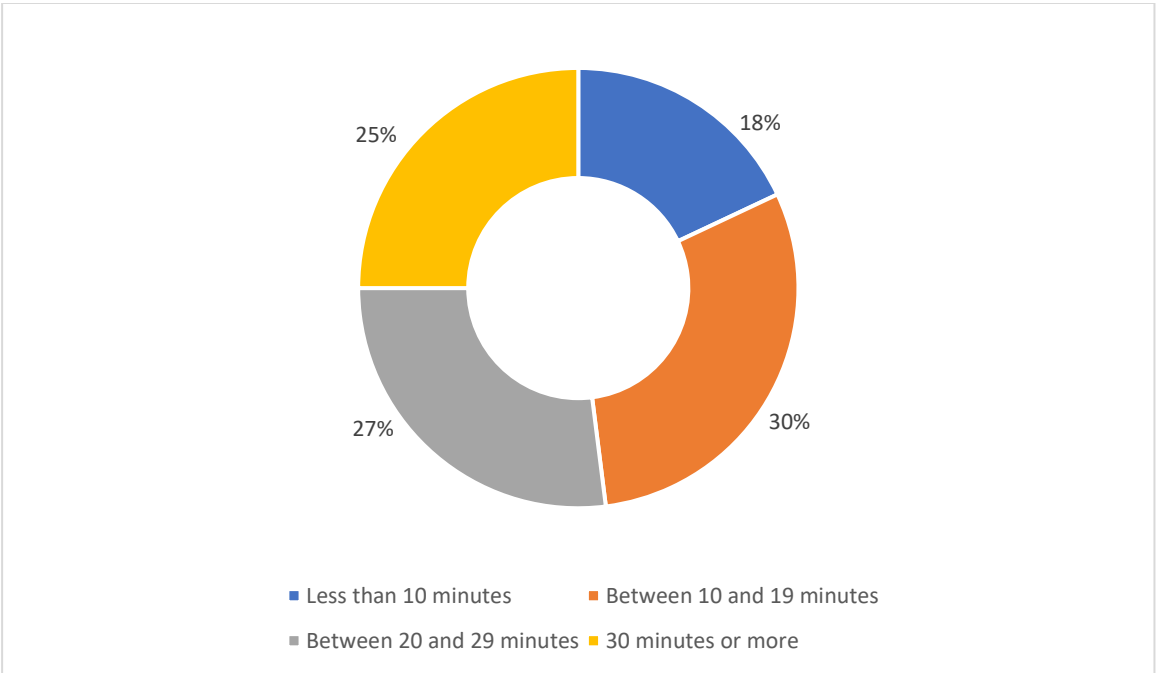
Áine's family had moved to a different location within the same county. The new area had a newly built English-medium school and Áine's younger sibling had already been enrolled to begin in this local school the following year. However, Áine decided not to move school to the local English-medium option. When asked why she chose not to move schools, she described her decision, saying:

Ultimately it was the community really; the teachers and the students. I had been in the school for so long and I honestly love everyone there. Everyone is so nice and everything. So, I didn't want to have to start afresh in another school and I would really miss everyone here. (Áine, FG2)

Áine chose to stay in the school despite the logistical problems it would create for her to continue to attend. The feeling that she belonged to a community was more important to her than commuting to school for her final years. This is consistent with the social feelings of belonging, or integration as described by Tinto (1987; 1993) as being an integral part of the completion puzzle. This commitment displayed by Áine is replicated in the questionnaire responses, where 41% of respondents travel over 20 minutes to get to school, with a further 38% travelling between 10 and 20 minutes (Figure 4.15).

Figure 4.15

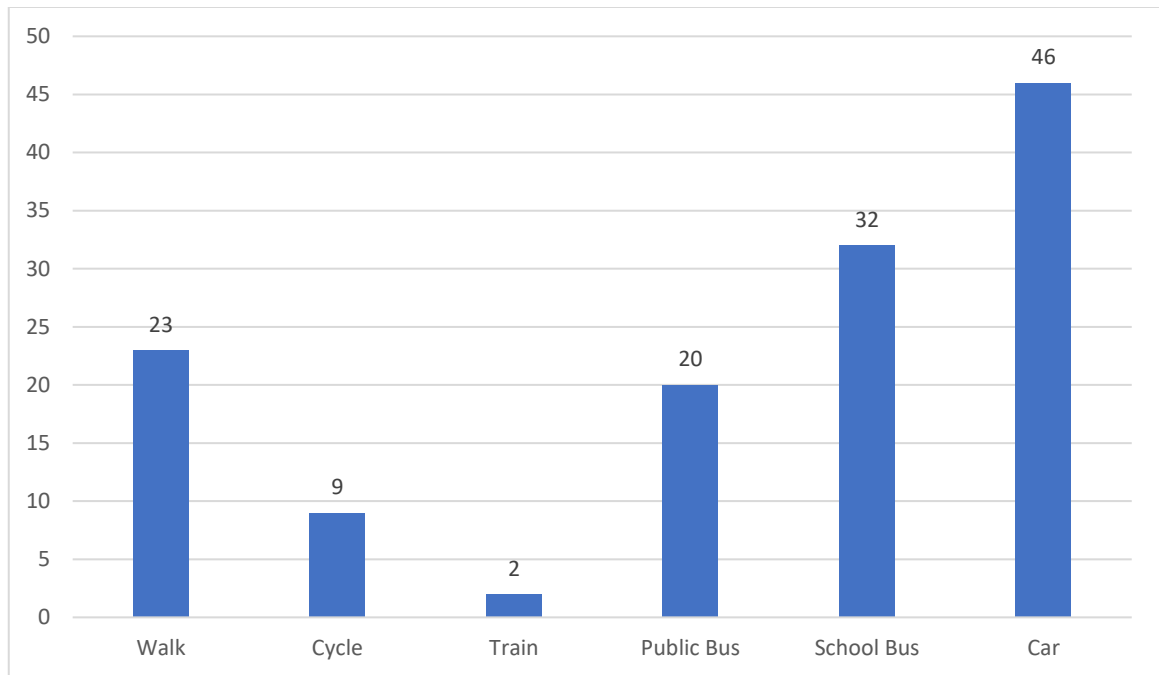
Daily School Commute in Minutes



Only 24% of participants walked or cycled to school, more than the 21% of participants who said they travel less than 10 minutes to reach the school (Figure 4.15). This suggests that quite a number of participants live outside of walking distance to their IM school, matching Áine’s experience of choosing to commute longer distances in order to attend an IM school.

Figure 4.16

Main Method of Transport for Daily Commute



The sense of belonging to a community was also discussed by Alex when asked why he ultimately decided not to leave the IM school. He said:

I think it's the community. When you are in the school for so long you build, like, a reputation with the community. You see the people. Everyone here in the school that I go to I really like and I really have a lot of respect for. So just moving to an English school I think it is just building that reputation again and, like, trying to fit in with the social groups, that would be, like, the biggest problem if I were to move to an English school. (Alex, FG2)

Alex already feels a sense of belonging in his current school. He had established himself and built up his "reputation". He feels that he is a member of the community and changing schools would disrupt that stability and sense of belonging. He sees moving to an English school as difficult socially, not academically. He discusses the fear

of not being able to “fit in” in the new and alien environment, having always attended school through Irish. This idea fits well with Bean and Eaton’s (2001) idea that feelings of belonging can be linguistic as well as social and academic (Bean & Eaton, 2001), helping to rationalise Alex’s decision to remain in his IM school.

When asked what they feel would encourage students to remain in IM post-primary schools until the end of their secondary education, participants in each focus group returned to the notion of building a sense of belonging through the development of the school community. Aodán proposed that schools use their community to build upon a feeling of belonging:

One of the main things that would keep people in the school would be a sense of community and knowing people and being close to each other.

(Aodán, FG2)

He went on to expand his idea with the support of the other members of his focus group, explaining:

I feel like if students are enabled to connect more with other students and they sort of build a sort of connection with more than just maybe people in their class or people in their year; I am not saying that that is not enough to keep someone in school; but just getting people to be closer to each other and get to know each other better and sort of accept each other. I feel like that would really go a long way in keeping people in schools until their Leaving Cert.

(Aodán, FG2)

This idea was also raised in Focus Group 3, where Máire proposed similar strategies to those articulated by Aodán – building and emphasising connections. When asked what she feels that the student council in her school could do to encourage students to stay in the school, she felt that they should build upon and emphasise the feelings of community and belonging, saying:

[Student council representatives should be] emphasising the connection that is built through the Irish education system in a small community and pushing the point that if you go to a bigger school, it will be harder for you to fit in due to the sheer amount of people there. (Máire, FG3)

4.4.2 *The Student-Teacher Relationship*

A total of 91% of the survey respondents and all of the focus groups and interview participants had attended an IM primary school. As such, the majority of participants in this study had been learning through Irish from a young age, with IME being the only form of formal education that they have ever known.

Each of the focus groups and interviews referenced relationships and interactions with teachers. A similar thread was also seen in the responses to some of the survey questions. It became clear from the findings of each data collection method that students had mixed feelings about the nature of student-teacher relationships which were, at times, contradictory in nature. However, despite contradiction, what did become evident was that the teachers exerted a very powerful influence over how students perceive themselves, their place in the school community and their decision to continue in the IM post-primary school.

When asked why they considered leaving the IM school, teachers were mentioned by a number of participants:

I don't want to attend this school anymore because I don't like the teachers. (Participant 6)

[The Teachers'] teaching styles do not suit me for the most part. (Participant 68)

Teachers are old school and stuck in their old Irish ways and can't adapt. (Participant 81)

However, each of the Participants 6, 68 and 81 ultimately remained in the Irish mediums school, with Participant 6 choosing to stay because it was "it was too late to move" after the issues with teacher arose, while Participant 68 prioritised "the bonus Gaeilge marks" and Participant 81 remarking that the "other school didn't accept me they were two [sic] full".

In general, however, teachers were viewed in a positive light, with participant reporting positive relationships with their teachers and school staff. Thomas (2007) argues that contact between students and teachers should be viewed as a key strategy in reducing non-completion rates (Thomas N. , 2007), while Pascarella et. al. (2004) note that positive relationships between student and teachers have been shown to improve academic integration, as such interactions can influence attitude, behaviour and values (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2004). These ideas were evident in the data collected. In Focus Group 2, Áine stated that she "felt like the teachers actually cared about me". She went on to note that "You can actually form a connection [with the

teachers], whether that is good or bad, I don't know" (Áine, FG2). This provided a hint of contradiction, as she later described how teachers simultaneously encouraged her to both leave and remain in the school.

This same feeling of a connection with teachers was mentioned in the survey results. When participants were asked why they had never considered leaving their IM school, Participant 108 wrote that while considering leaving, they "spoke with teachers and [they] seemed [to] help in subjects that I was having difficulty with", while Participant 72 simply said "I like the school and the people". Participant 19 remarked that they never considered leaving the school because of the "quality of education" while Participant 53 joked that their "Irish teacher would hunt me down and kneecap me with a hurl" if he ever thought about leaving. This final note in particular sums up a casual and cordial relationship that Participant 53 had with their teacher.

Similar sentiments are summed up by Micháel, who remarked that;

I think the teachers were always really... they put themselves on the same level as the students. Like you would be happy to go up and talk to any of the teachers at the end of class. They would never kind of give off the impression that they were too good for the students or whatever. (Micháel, FG3)

Michael's remarks encapsulate the general mood of the focus groups and survey responses. A similar positive outlook was recorded in the interviews, with Sorcha, who left the Irish medium post-primary school after 4th year. She explained the impact that the positive relationships she developed with her teachers had on her:

I didn't want to leave because I felt they [the teachers] actually had the best intentions for the students as well... like the teachers just know the students. (Sorcha, Int 1)

Sorcha mentioned the relationships that she developed with her teachers as a block to her leaving the Irish medium school. This positive relationship was assistive with her academic progress, as she said that "in the Irish school I feel like I would have been happy to go up to any of my teachers and ask if I had a problem." This is noteworthy, as Sorcha ultimately decided to leave the IM school in order to maximise her academic potential, as she saw it. However, this positive relationship with teacher was not enough to encourage her to remain in the IM school, instead she prioritised her family's wishes when making her final decision, highlighting the power of family influences (Hirschy, Bremer, & Castellano, 2011).

On the other hand, participants noted negative student-teacher relationships as being an influence on them considering leaving the Irish medium school. In the questionnaire, Participant 10 wrote that they were "not learning well from some teachers". While they didn't expand upon this, participants in the focus groups did reference similar experiences. Callum made strong reference to teacher behaviour which he felt had a negative impact on the student-teacher relationship:

Some of the teachers are bit too controlling in the class and that it is so unbelievably strict that the slightest deviation will... they will stop the class, they will have a word with you and then they will blame you for stopping the class. So, I think if teachers were a bit more relaxed it would... the students would be less stressed out, and then if they are less stressed out, they would

maybe pay more attention and do more work in their own time, because they get on that well with them and they don't want them to have a bad reputation. (Callum, FG1)

Here Callum raises a number of issues with classroom management strategies and the feeling of unfairness. He makes a direct connection between negative teacher behaviours and increased stress levels for students. He specifically notes that positive relationships between students and teachers encourage students to work harder and to take more responsibility for their own learning as they might "do more work in their own time". However, he went on to qualify his remarks by explaining that "the amount of teachers who are that type of strict is an unbelievably small amount". While this might be the case, the few teachers who evoked such a strong reaction from Callum have made an impact upon him. This is noteworthy as Callum had earlier admitted to considering leaving IME, stating that

I considered it [leaving the Irish-medium school] but then I rationalized it [staying] ... by saying I have gone this far and it would take more time to be able to prepare myself for the Leaving Cert because I am already prepared for it in Irish so it would be easier to just stick it out. (Callum, FG1)

As Callum mentions this negative experience with a teacher, he shows the powerful impact that the student-teacher relationship can have on a student as a factor which influences their willingness to remain in or leave the school, even if this might not be the determining factor which causes them to leave or remain. Unlike Sorcha, Callum chose to remain in the IM s school, suggesting that other factors had a

greater effect on him than his negative interactions with a small number of teachers, which is consistent with most of the attention and attrition models.

Amongst students who considered leaving and those who left, the majority viewed teachers as a factor which caused them to consider staying within the IM school. When asked why they ultimately decided to stay in the IM environment, survey participants responded with examples such as the “high standard of teaching” (Participant 61) and “the teachers are very friendly and [the school] is more like a community” (Participant 75). A similar reason for staying was articulated by Cathy, as she said “the teachers are really good and even though I struggled, all the teachers were really helpful” (Cathy, FG1).

Participants were therefore aware of the student-teacher relationship as an important dynamic in their educational journey. Áine described her experience of this dynamic influence as she summarized her experience with positive and negative interactions with teachers:

If the teachers are helpful and, like, talk to the students more, it really does keep them in [school] because, like, I know for me when I have difficulties with spelling and stuff and, like, teachers that would help me would motivate me more to try and be better at the subject and stuff and not want to just leave and just give up on it. Because I know when you have a teacher that is not nice or that doesn't like you, it kind of demotivates you and if you have that... if you have a kid that it is *dána* (bold) and all the teachers don't like them, they are not going to want to stay in school because everyone is giving out to them all the time. (Áine, FG2)

Here, Áine articulates experiences similar to Callum's from his focus group. She notes the didactic that can exist in relationships but also realizes that the positive experiences have been of benefit to her. Her experience, like Callum's, also warns of the lasting negative impact that a poor student-teacher relationship can have, as she notes the potential to demotivate students and for students to grow a poor reputation within the school which might not be deserved, but is actually the result of negative interactions with teachers.

All of this shows that students are cognisant of the role that student-teacher relationships play in a student's decision to remain in or leave an IM post-primary school. They are aware of both the positive and negative aspects of this relationship and of the potential of the student-teacher relationship to encourage or discourage students. This is in line with the literature on the subject, which concludes that positive student-teacher relationships encourage greater feelings of student integration and support, leading to more positive perceptions from students, resulting in higher completion rates (Warren, 2002; Thomas, 2002).

4.4.2.1 Shared Educational Goals and Vision with Teachers

The idea of a shared community vision which encompasses the student-teacher relationship was mentioned by participants in the focus groups. Such shared goals and visions between students and teachers encourage greater integration of student support and in effect lead to more positive perceptions from students, resulting in higher completion rates (Warren, 2002; Thomas L. , 2002). As with previous descriptions of wider communities and a community of friends, students recognised their teachers as part of the school community to which they belong. Alison discussed

the developing relationships with teachers as another strand within the shared vision and direction. When asked about influences which encouraged her to stay in the school, she discussed the positive atmosphere created within the school. She said:

But the fact that they [teachers] kind of create an atmosphere where we can have fun in school and then get our work done and improve with school as well, I think that's helpful, and once you go into the older years also your relationship with the teachers changes. They kind of start seeing you more as an adult and they converse with you differently, which helps a lot because you feel more, like, just, seen and it's just easier then and it's just a better atmosphere then for everyone in school. (Alison, FG2)

Here Alison mentions the idea of being "seen" more as you progress through the school. She articulates developing a feeling of belonging, one which was encouraged by her improving social relationship with the teachers.

This idea of being recognised and acknowledged was also discussed by Megan, who felt that being acknowledged in a school went a long way to creating a sense of belonging and feelings of comfort within the community. When asked what her school does to encourage students, she revealed that her teachers are quite informal in their everyday interactions, which builds upon her feelings of school community:

[When] they see students going by having conversations or when they are introducing them to the school when they come into the school. Just taking special care of them and making sure that any needs ... if their family were to come in and say something; that you can just get that done for them. [They] just make sure that the relationship is good. (Megan, FG3)

Megan articulates a shared desire to create a pleasant and positive learning environment within her school, something which she respects and admires. This shared vision and direction is one of the reasons why she chose to stay in the school, and is why she feels that other students choose to stay in the school instead of moving to an English-medium alternative.

4.4.2.2 Staffing Issues and Teacher Availability

One issue highlighted as regards teachers was the lack of suitably qualified teachers available to teach through Irish. A 2022 report into teacher recruitment and staffing found that Irish and maths are the subjects with most recruitment difficulties (ASTI, 2022). Participants noted this recruitment difficulty and expressed frustration with the situation.

Participant 123 noted the “lack of teachers who teach through Irish fluently” as one reason why they considered leaving the IM school, as did Participant 69 who wrote “my school does not have enough teachers”. Participant 116 noted the Irish ability as a key concern, writing “most teachers have weak Irish and or do not have Irish which makes learning the subject extremely difficult”, and idea support by Participant 68, who wrote “the majority of my teachers cannot speak Irish fluently”.

This issue was also mentioned by Sorcha, who left her IM school. One negative comment she had about teachers did not relate directly to the student-teacher relationship, but rather, to the difficulties that some teachers had conducting their classes and interactions through Irish, an idea supported by the questionnaire responses. In this instance, Sorcha opined that:

I think it was just so hard to get Irish teachers. (Sorcha, IW1)

This difficulty with Irish caused issues with effective communication and academic progress, compounded by the lack of physical resources such as books available in Irish:

[In] some of the subjects my textbooks are all in English. (Sorcha, IW1)

This sentiment and frustration with the lack of teachers with fluent Irish was also mentioned in the focus groups with Máirtín saying “in some classes some of the teachers can’t speak Irish at the moment because it’s very hard to find Irish teachers”.

Teacher recruitment is currently a major issue in the post-primary sector, with 93% of principals reporting difficulties recruiting teachers 2021-22 school year, and 84% stating that they have advertised teaching posts to which no teachers have applied, and 55% stating that in March 2022 they still had unfilled teaching vacancies in their school (ASTI, 2022). This is an issue that has filtered down to student level as students note the added difficulty of learning through Irish without the support of a teacher confident in using the Irish language:

I am in a Geography class and we are doing an essay sometimes the teacher would read the whole essay in English, which kind of breaks like the immersion of learning in an Irish school (Aodán, FG2)

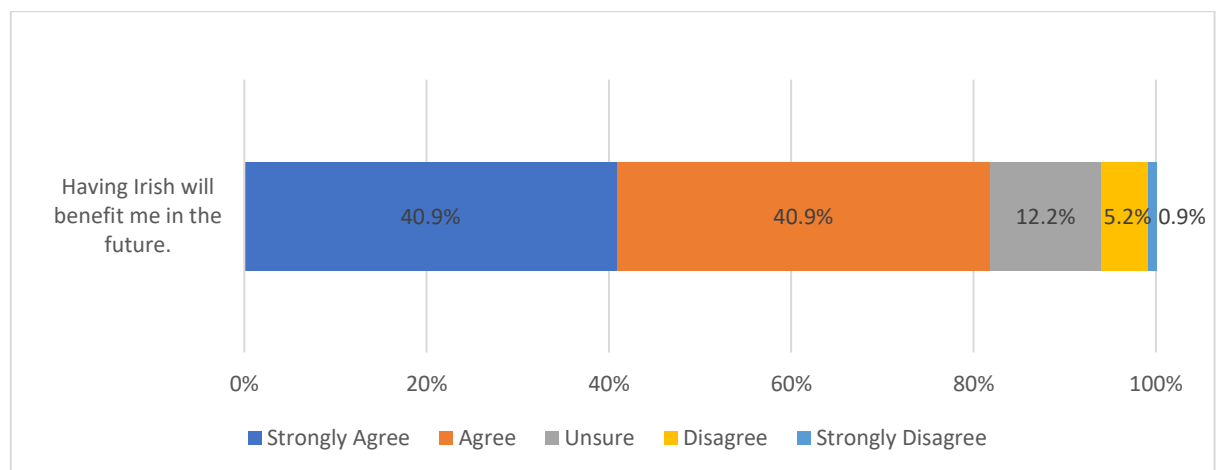
4.5 Perceived Future Prospects

When asked whether having the ability to speak Irish fluently will benefit them in the future, 82% of participants in the questionnaire either strongly agreed or agreed that this was their belief (see Figure 4.17). This perception is in line with the literature

on the subject, including Le Menestrel’s (2020) recent study which concluded that bilingualism is an “asset” which is proven to enhance “educational outcomes and work skills in a global economy” (Le Menestrel, 2020, p. 56), as well as in the 2019 analysis published by Fox et al. (2019, p. 719), which found that bilingualism gives a worker an “edge” in an increasingly digital and global society (Fox, Corretjer, & Webb, 2019, p. 719).

Figure 4.17

Future Benefits of Irish



This idea that bilingualism will be of benefit in the future was also raised by participants in the focus groups. When asked whether they had considered leaving IME for an English alternative, Callum referenced the future benefits of speaking Irish as a justification which he used to remain in IME, stating:

I considered it [leaving IME] but then I rationalised it with the fact that... like I always thought through the entirety of secondary school that it would probably be easier for me if I wanted to get into the workforce easier. (Callum, FG1)

This was an idea also supported by Máirtín, who noted that having Irish was of benefit in certain economic situations, remarking “it’s good for some jobs” (Máirtín, FG3). Similarly, Cathy mentioned her ability to speak Irish as possibly giving her an advantage in future job markets. When asked whether speaking Irish fluently has any advantages, she replied with:

If Irish does happen to explode in the next few years and everyone is talking it, I am prepared. (Cathy, FG1)

This idea of a possible growth of Irish in popularity is supported by recent developments in the Irish speaking community, with Nic Giolla Mhichíl, et al. (2018) reporting on the ever-increasing presence of the Irish language on the social media micro-blogging website Twitter as being an indicator of the increasing usage of the Irish language in social spheres, as well as the growth of a digitally literate Irish speaking community (Nic Giolla Mhichíl, Lynn, & Rosati, 2018).

However, while competency in the Irish language was mentioned in general terms within the focus groups, it was in discussion surrounding the LC and college entry that participants expanded on their ideas and beliefs regarding the benefits which IME added to their education.

4.5.1 Perceived Benefits in the Leaving Certificate Examinations

When asked why they had chosen to remain in IME after considering leaving, a number of respondents referred to the bonus points² in the LC examination as an influencing factor. Currently, candidates who sit their LC examinations through the medium of Irish, are awarded additional marks in their percentage grade. These additional marks are more commonly known as bonus marks and were instituted to encourage candidates to undertake their terminal examinations through the medium of Irish, as part of the national strategic goal to maintain and revive the use of Irish (Mac Aogáin, Millar, & Kellaghan, 2010).

In the questionnaire, the bonus marks for Irish were specifically mentioned as a contributing factor in explaining why students had decided to remain in IME when they had already considered leaving. When asked why they had ultimately chosen to remain in their IM school, respondents made comments such as:

For the bonus Gaeilge marks (Participant 14)

The Irish points. (Participant 18)

I can get extra points and just try even harder for even more points.

(Participant 26)

² In the Irish system, examination candidates are marked using a percentage grade. The Central Application Office (CAO) is tasked with converting these grades into points, which are allocated based on a scale. Universities and Colleges then offer places to students based on the points they accumulated. For example, 90-100% at higher level is awarded 100 points, whereas 80-89% is awarded 88 points. [CAO Points Information | CareersPortal.ie](http://www.cao.ie/PointsInformation)

The extra points from doing the exams through Irish were also an incentive. (Participant 34)

In each of these examples, the participants showed an awareness of the additional marks available for sitting their examinations through Irish and were intending to use those points to their advantage by remaining in IME. This perception of the bonus marks as an advantage is consistent with research on the topic. Mac Aogáin et al. (2010) noted that “the bonus for Irish has a [CAO] points value that is much smaller than the face values of 10% and 5% suggest” (Mac Aogáin, et al., 2010, p. 40), suggesting that the advantage may not be as pronounced as some examination candidates may think, however, the same paper does note that candidates who do not perform as well academically in their examinations benefit more due to the “sliding scale” nature of the additional points application (Mac Aogáin, Millar, & Kellaghan, 2010, p. 27).

The same ideas were discussed in the focus groups, where participants also spoke about the bonus points available in the LC as an important factor in their decision to complete their second level education in IME. In these instances, participants said much the same as their peers in the questionnaire. When asked what they considered the biggest benefit of IME, they responded with comments such as:

The extra points in the Leaving Cert I suppose. (Meadbh, FG3)

The extra points obviously, and you kind of naturally just make it easier to get Irish done as a language. (Callum, FG1)

I think the extra points is like the biggest benefit. (Caoimhe, FG1)

In each of these instances, the student showed full awareness of the advantage that the Irish language bonus would afford them in their examinations, as well as the additional advantage this bonus would give them in the college application process. Mac Aogáin (2005) notes that students select subjects, levels and pathways in the LC in order to maximise their points in the CAO system (Mac Aogáin, 2005), meaning that the situation in IME where students use the bonus points to their advantage is largely consistent with national trends in the ROI.

4.5.2 *Third-level Education*

While participants articulated perceived advantages to IME, they also noted some perceived difficulties. In particular, participants worried about their success at third level after they have completed IME at post-primary level, similar to issue raised when discussing attitudes to English-medium schools (see Section 4.2.2). This is consistent with literature on the topic, with a recent study by Ní Thuairisg & Ó Duibhir (2021) finding that this is a common issue with IME students as they move to English-medium third level education.

In the questionnaire, participants who had considered leaving IME specifically mentioned a fear that they would have difficulty with English-medium courses at third level, having completed their post-primary education through Irish. Participants made comments such as:

I worry that if I go to college, I will find it difficult to understand subject terminology. (Participant 101)

[I was] afraid that [after] learning everything through Irish that in college I will [sic] struggle. (Participant 123)

These ideas from the questionnaire were also discussed in the focus groups, where participants expanded upon their answers. In each of the focus groups, participants discussed their anxieties about starting an English-medium course in college or university, having initially studied the subject, or similar subjects, in Irish in their post-primary school. Some participants, such as Cathy expressed this as a minor issue, saying:

I want to do a science-based subject and all the terminology we know is through Irish. So, it might make it a bit harder in college. (Cathy, FG1)

On the other hand, some participants expressed their concern as a more pressing issue to them, for example, Áine was worried that her experience of IME would prove a disadvantage when she got to third level studies, saying:

I thought it would definitely be a disadvantage if I go to college and I won't know anything in English. (Áine, FG2)

When probed on this perception of her IME having led to a disadvantage, Áine expanded on her reasonings, stating:

But the most [sic] disadvantage is, like, for going into college you can see definitely now as we are picking our CAO choices there are a lot of people struggling because they are thinking if they want to do a science [subject] then they are not going to know anything [in English terminology], or in maths they are not going to know anything [in English terminology], and I know people that are... before college they are starting to learn all the terms in English now as

well as doing it through Irish so then they won't be behind when they get to college. (Áine, FG2)

This idea raised by Áine was supported by Alex, who also spoke about his anxieties and worried, as he perceived himself at a possible future disadvantage, explaining:

I would have to agree with the university thing. Like even looking at my own CAO list I am looking at courses that I would have wanted to do. There aren't many courses available in that sort of area that are offered in Irish and it sort of reaches the point where you have your Irish education and unless you are doing a course that is somehow related to Irish you will never really speak it again. So, then you are kind of thinking should I have not done this in English, because even then you will have to go back and maybe learn some stuff in maths, learn some stuff in certain sciences, all over again in English, and then you are thinking to yourself that maybe I should have done my Leaving Cert in English and then I would never have to go through this hassle. (Alex, FG2)

The idea of being disadvantaged at third level because of English terminology was also mentioned by Sarah in her interview. When asked what advice she would give to a student who was considering leaving IME because they were afraid that lacking English terminology would disadvantage them at university, she responded by saying:

I thought the same when I was moving to the English school. I thought it would give me a head start in college but to be honest it is not hard at all to grasp what they are saying. Like you think you don't know anything in English but then once you are there it's not really rocket science. Some words yeah,

you probably have to look it up when you go home or whatever, but I don't think it should... like I don't there is really any downside to learning through Irish. (Sarah, Int 1)

When asked the same question in her interview, Orla had similar advice for students. Having left IME for an English-medium alternative, she advised:

There is a bunch of online information that is the same in Irish as there is in English. So, you can see the terms that you, maybe, learnt in Irish and you can also see what they would be in English. They are actually not that difficult to understand. I think the hardest subject for all of that would be maths. It is just because the terminology is quite different, but it is honestly still understandable because it is more numbers. (Orla, Int 2)

Paul, who left IME because he was offered a scholarship in a private English-medium school, had similar advice regarding understanding vocabulary after moving from Irish- to English -medium education. He said:

I personally feel that learning through Irish is an advantage and if need be, you can always learn through English simultaneously through websites and dictionaries if there are any key words that you don't understand. (Paul, Int 5)

In Paul's experience, the worries about not understanding English terminology can be overcome by actively learning the English alternative as the regular classroom learning is ongoing.

However, research on the same topic shows that terminology issues do exist and do affect students who have moved onto English-medium courses after

completing IME. Ní Thuairisg & Ó Duibhir (2021) found that 53% of such students had experienced short-term difficulties with English terminology in third level education, and they recommended that third level institutes provide a formal support to students in such a situation (Ní Thuairisg & Ó Duibhir, 2021).

4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, the findings from the research phase of this study were presented in relation to the research question presented in Chapter One:

What are the factors which influence completion and non-completion in Irish medium post-primary education from the student perspective?

Thematic analysis of the data collected resulted in four interlinking themes being generated:

- Theme 1: Attitudes to Post-primary Education and IME
- Theme 2: Social Influences
- Theme 3: Perceptions of Post-primary Education
- Theme 4: Perceived Future Prospects

The data were presented and discussed through analysis of these four themes. It is important to note that participants did not always agree on every issue. A wide range of comments were made by all participants in each of the research stages. Overall, however, a common view emerged, supported by these diverse perspectives. In this section, a general conclusion is drawn from the analysis of the data on each of the themes.

In relation to the first theme of Attitudes to Post-primary Education, and in particular to Irish and Immersion education, participants showed a high level of commitment to Irish language education and to promoting their learning through Irish. Even those who left the IME system remained positive towards the language and the level of Irish proficiency which they attained up until the point where they left IME. This idea is consistent with the literature on the subject, which notes that Irish immersion learners have an overall positive attitude towards Irish language learning. Participants articulated positive and negative experiences as they reflected on their educational journeys, however, each participant was proud of their ability to effectively use and communicate in and through the Irish language, to the best of their ability. While it was evident that IME presents challenges, the majority of participants were able to identify benefits to IME. For those who did not see IME as a positive experience, they identified various issues which led them to consider leaving IME. One particular issue which was raised amongst this cohort was the perception that learning through Irish involved extra work that students in English-medium schools do not have to undertake. They viewed IME as creating extra work for them. While this group considered leaving IME at various stages of their post-primary journey, other factors within the school environment and community negated their negative disposition to IME and caused them to remain in their IM school. However, for all participants who remained in IME, the benefits outweighed the challenges which otherwise presented themselves.

The second theme within the study identified the influence of parents and friends on a student's decision to remain in or leave IME. The data showed that parents and friends were key stakeholders in the completion and non-completion

puzzle. It is clear that parents are the dominant influence in the student's ability to leave IME, with the majority of participants revealing that their parents would have the final say in their decision. The study also revealed that parental engagement was also a key factor in student motivation and resilience. The notion of parental expectations was raised by participants, with many participants simply trusting the educational path chosen for them by their parents. It was also evident that where a parent was invested in the Irish language, the student had a greater determination to complete their education through Irish, in spite of their own feelings or views towards IME. Additionally, friends were identified as a central consideration with regards to completion and non-completion, with the majority of participants reluctant to leave their friends behind in the event of transfer. Social status within peer groups and the supports available through friendships and already established wider social connections, like that of a school class, were features which emerged in the data.

The third theme which was discussed was that of Perceptions of Post-primary Education. When asked about their experiences of post-primary education, participants described the importance of community and relationships, identifying the school community, the school size, and the relationships within the school as key factors as they considered completion or non-completion. Participants reported a positive sense of community within their school, with those who left IME also reflecting positively on the school community which they had left behind. The atmosphere and culture which this community supports were also viewed as a key strength of the IME school as the students experienced it. This community is also important in establishing a sense of belonging, with the majority of participants feeling like they belong in their school. The size of the school was also referenced, with the

majority of participants feeling that their school benefits from having fewer students than other schools with larger student populations. Additionally, the student-teacher relationship was identified by participants, although, responses regarding this relationship were often contradictory in nature. Despite this, it is evident that the student-teacher relationship has a key influence on completion and non-completion. The data show that teachers have a powerful influence over how students perceive themselves, their place in the school community and their resilience. In general, teachers were perceived in a positive light, however, examples did emerge of negative student-teacher interactions which caused students to consider leaving IME. Contradictions emerged as it became clear that teachers caused students to both contemplate leaving and staying. However, those who left IME reported positive experiences in their interactions with teachers and remarked that the same dynamic exists in English-medium schools. Ultimately, however, the data reveal that the majority of teachers and students share a common education goal and work towards that outcome. Students feel supported by their teachers despite the difficulties that exist in the IME sector, in particular with regard to teacher recruitment, resources, and IM supports.

The fourth and final theme was that of Perceived Future Benefits. Participants notes in each of the previous themes the impact of IME on their future lives. Within this theme, participants noted their perceptions and expectations of life after post-primary education. Most participants feel that their ability to speak Irish will benefit them in the future, either directly by speaking the language or indirectly by being bilingual. Participants identified a possible economic benefit of their bilingualism, and, while they recognize that they might not necessarily use the Irish language, they do not

see being competent in the language as being deductive to their future prospects. In a more immediate concern, participants recognize the bonus points structure in the LC as being a direct benefit to their completion of IME. They identified these bonus points as a direct perceived advantage which will benefit them as they sit their exams. Participants also articulated an apprehension that they might experience difficulties as they transition to third level education, with the main worry being that they might not understand all of the relevant terminology in their chosen course. However, those who left IME noted that, while an adjustment period does occur, it was relatively short and simple to navigate with some conscious effort and application.

While each of these themes contributed to the overall understanding of the research question in their own individual right, they are also interwoven and interdependent; each theme contributes to and supports the others. These themes have helped to create an understanding of the factors which influence completion and non-completion and are explored further in the next chapter which provides a reflective discussion of the findings as well as recommendations for future research, policy and action.

Chapter 5 Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

The aim of the current research was to investigate the factors which influence completion and non-completion in IM post-primary schools in Ireland. In this concluding chapter the researcher identifies the key findings of the research and presents a series of recommendations based on the data gathered through a mixed methods approach. In essence, the researcher recapitulates the findings of the research and clarifies why they are important, and how they can be used to contribute to both educational theory and practice.

The current research examined completion and non-completion from the perspective of students who had engaged with IME during their post-primary education. The experiences and beliefs of these students have considerable implications for the IME sector in Ireland and for immersion education internationally. Research on why students consider leaving post-primary immersion education settings is limited internationally and has not been previously investigated in an Irish context. Thus, the findings from this study contribute substantially to current knowledge and understanding on the topic. The data generated in the focus groups and interviews are of particular relevance and interest given the current absence of similar qualitative data in comparative studies.

This chapter is subdivided into three sections so that the findings can be discussed in a reasonable, considered and comprehensive manner. Firstly, the chapter considers the contribution that the study has made to current understanding and knowledge, whilst also reflecting upon the limitations of the research. Subsequently,

the main conclusions of the study are explored in relation to existing research and theory, as presented in previous chapters. Finally, the chapter presents recommendations and proposals for key stakeholders before suggesting possibilities for future research.

5.2 Contribution of the Current Research

This section outlines the contribution of the research study to current knowledge and understanding. Throughout the various stages, this study has been led by the research question:

What are the factors which influence completion and non-completion in Irish medium post-primary education from the student perspective?

In summary, to the best of the author's knowledge, this study presents: i) the first study to investigate the factors which influence completion and non-completion in post-primary IME; ii) the first study to create and present a model specifically designed to explain completion and non-completion in a post-primary immersion education context, and; iii) the first study to offer an insight into *why* students consider leaving IME, from their own perspectives. This research aims to complement previous national research, such as Comerford, et al. (2015), O'Riain and O'Connell (2000), Byrne and McCoy (2017) and Cummins (2011) as well as international research, such as Kelly, et al. (2010). Smyth (2018), the European Commission (2011) and the OECD (2015) concerning student retention and attrition, as well as student agency, motivation and identity.

5.2.1 *First Study to Investigate the Factors Which Influence Completion and Non-Completion in Post-Primary IME*

This study represents the first study to specifically investigate the factors which influence completion and non-completion in IM post-primary schools in Ireland. It records background data concerning the students' age, experience with the Irish language, experience with IME and their experience with education in general. Additionally, this study recorded the perceived ability of parents/guardians to speak and communicate in Irish, as well as the frequency of communication through Irish in the home with parents/guardians in order to establish whether Irish was the language of communication in the home as well as in the school, similar to research carried out by Cladaz and Caron-Caldaz (2002). Respondents were invited to describe their experience of learning through Irish and to share their experiences of IME. Students' reasons for remaining within, considering leaving and/or leaving IME were then analysed and compared to existing literature on retention and attrition within the context of IME and immersion language learning.

5.2.2 *First Study to Create and Present a Model Specifically Designed to Explain Completion and Non-Completion in a Post-Primary Immersion Education Context*

This is the first study to create and develop a model (see Figure 2.1) which attempts to understand and explain completion and non-completion in a post-primary immersion education context. While there are currently a number of retention and attrition models, the majority exist to analyse third level education (Tinto, 1987; Bean & Eaton, 2001; Hirschy, et al., 2011). Those that are appropriate at post-primary level are exclusive to majority language schools as opposed to minority language immersion education (Fleming & Harford, 2021; Traag & van der Velden, 2011; O'Connell &

Freeney, 2011). Extensive research has been conducted nationally and internationally into post-primary retention and attrition (Metz, 2002; Tinto, 1987; Tinto, 1993; Hirschy, et al., 2011; Bean & Eaton, 2001; van Alphen, 2009), however, comparatively little exists which aims to understand retention and attrition in immersion contexts and even less exists which explores transfer between minority language and majority language schools (Ó Duibhir, 2018; Ní Thuairisg & Ó Duibhir, 2021; Murtagh, 2007). The results of this study, as well as the model developed within this study, will make a useful contribution to national and international understanding of immersion education, minority language education and student retention and attrition.

5.2.3 First Study to Offer an Insight into Why Students Consider Leaving IME, from their Own Perspectives

This study provides an insight into why students consider, and sometimes follow through with, non-completion in IME. While there is a substantial body of literature to explain regular attrition from post-primary education (European Commission, 2011; OECD, 2015; Smyth, 2018), there is less which takes the student perspective into account, an issue identified by Kenny (2018). This research purposively involved a targeted population of IME students, past and present, in an effort to understand the “why” from the perspective of the students themselves. Through a questionnaire, focus groups and interviews, students were invited to share their thoughts, opinions and beliefs and these were subsequently analysed in relation to the existing facts and literature on the same topics. This offered a unique insight into how students perceive their educational context, as well as IME, even though these perceptions might not always align with established facts and research. These

insights therefore provide important data for stakeholders in IME and in immersion education more generally.

5.3 Limitations of the Research Study

This study sought to minimise the challenges and limitations associated with specific research design, in this case mixed methods, including; sample size, access to data, lack of time, financial constraints, data collection, generalisability, validity and reliability. However, despite best efforts, limitations do exist within this study. This section considers and acknowledges the various limitations of this study, some of which have been previously established in earlier chapters.

Firstly, it is necessary to acknowledge the sample of IME post-primary schools who facilitated this research. The researcher endeavoured to include as representative a sample of post-primary IME students as possible, and all IME post-primary schools outside of the Gaeltacht were contacted and asked to facilitate this research. Of the 29 schools contacted, 7 agreed to cooperate with the study, representing 24% of IME schools eligible to participate. This study could have been enhanced by more schools facilitating the research.

Secondly, the sample and size of the student participants must be acknowledged. This study initially aimed to have a higher number of participants, however national and international circumstances resulted in a lower-than-expected participation rate. The information gathering stages of this research were conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 and during the subsequent national lockdowns and restrictions on movement. As a result, accessing participants was difficult and was conducted digitally. All participants had to be 18 years of age or older, which further

limited the ability of volunteers to participate. This decision was taken to ensure that the research was conducted ethically, as otherwise the researcher could not ensure that genuine parental consent had been obtained by participants, as the questionnaire was online and was shared via digital media. If participation had been school based, consent forms could have been gathered ahead of participation and greater numbers of participants could have been facilitated. This would have resulted in a more representative sample of participants.

While every effort was made to ensure that a random sample of volunteers was included in the qualitative phase of this study, the researcher is aware and acknowledges that those who volunteered for the focus groups and interviews may have been motivated to participate in order to express their own strongly held views and possibly to air their perceived grievances. These views might not necessarily represent those of their peers. Similarly, Alexander (2008) has argued that people often struggle to identify the motives which subsequently drive their actions. Therefore, it is important to note that this study examines perceptions and beliefs reported by individuals who are biased and are participating as a result of their lived experience within the study field. However, the research employed specific research design in an effort to analyse the provided data in a way that limits bias and provides more accurate conclusions, thus limiting some of the restrictions associated with mixed methods approaches (Creswell, 2003).

Thirdly, this study was limited in scope due to the lack of data contextualising the participants and their wider educational and social experiences. Data describing participants' educational attainments, specific educational needs, subject choice,

socio-economic background, ethnic or cultural background would have enhanced the analysis and discussion within this study. Additionally, details such as school behaviour, previous incidents of being “in trouble” and data concerning previous examination results or educational indicators in core subjects such as Irish, English and Maths would have further enhanced the analysis within the study.

Additionally, although this study focused exclusively on students’ perspectives, perspectives from other stakeholders are worthy of investigation, in particular, the insights of parents and teachers could yield further useful data. While these cohorts were outside the scope of this study, future research in this area could yield interesting and complementary information.

Finally, this study used a mixed-methods design, which in itself presents limitations. One such issue is the tendency for the researcher to quantify qualitative data, which often results in the data losing depth and nuance (Tashakkori & Teddie, 2010). Another difficulty presented by mixed-methods is the limitation placed on sample size and research design, as larger samples can impose unreasonable time demands. This can pose a severe challenge to the researcher as they may not have the statistical power or logistical support necessary for a larger qualitative sample (Robson, 2011).

The next section presents the main conclusions of the study within the context of the review of literature reported in in Chapter Two and the presentation of findings in Chapter Four.

5.4 Conclusions arising from the Research

This section presents the conclusions arising from the main findings from this study. This research confirmed that completion and non-completion in IME is just as complex and nuanced as it is in non-immersion education contexts. However, this research also establishes that factors exist within IME which do not exist in other contexts and that these factors are generally related to language and language-based resourcing.

This study also confirmed that, in a general sense, IME is meeting the needs of its learners in their deliberate journey to complete their post-primary education, with 98% of study participants completing their post-primary education in the IME school. Participants in the study verified that IME schools are providing satisfactorily for their academic and personal development, their acquisition of key skills and essential knowledge, and their future prospects, academically and economically. This is exemplified by the 32% of participants who considered leaving IME at some point, but, of whom, 30% ultimately remained in their immersion school to complete their post-primary education. However, the study also highlighted the need for IME schools to be more adaptive in their approach to IME in order to maximise the positive school experience for all learners, and in doing so, minimise the potential for non-completion.

5.4.1 *The Influence of Motivation*

One important finding to emerge from this study is that the motivation of IME students is complex and dependent on multiple variables, including; ability and self-perception of ability in the Irish language, the ability to progress and develop independently, feelings of belonging within the school community, parental

engagement with the school and with Irish language learning more generally, and the ability to exercise agency and make autonomous decisions. One unanticipated finding was that students have a keen perception of wider educational issues, including teacher supply, and the availability of Irish language resources, which directly impacts upon their motivation. It can therefore be asserted that students in IME are active participants in their own educational journeys, rather than passive recipients of educational instruction, as their insights and perceptions of their learning are not just individualistic, but rather are contextual and nuanced.

Interestingly, motivation was found to be as heavily weighted socially as it was academically, and both social and academic factors were considered when a student contemplated leaving IME. The majority of participants noted both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors when they discussed their education and IME. Within IME, there was a sense of pride, belonging and community associated with learning through Irish, whilst also an acknowledgement of the difficulties involved in immersion education, in particular the extra workload and time pressures involved. This was balanced by the perceived advantages involved, in particular the extra marks available for completing state examinations through Irish and the perceived advantage afforded in the learning of third and subsequent languages. It can therefore be asserted that IME learners develop a distinct sense of self-motivation with a readiness to engage with the challenges of education in order to navigate their real-world expectations.

5.4.2 The Influence of Identity

This study also supports and develops the existing knowledge about identity, and in particular language-based identity. Previous research such as that by Tamimi

(2017) and Edwards (2009) is very clear in the assertion that language plays a pivotal role in the development of a student's cognition, self-development and in the construction of personal and social identities. This idea was borne out through this study, with evidence suggesting that students value their identity over other considerations. When students feel their identities under threat in IME, they consider leaving, however, the opposite is also evidenced, an individual's language identity is also a key motivator in them choosing to remain in IME (Norton & Toohey, 2011; Norton, 2010; Dornyei & Ushioda, 2009). In either instance, identity is a factor which influences completion or non-completion; however, it is the complex inter-mingling of other factors which helps a student to make a decision one way or another (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007).

The results of this research also indicate that identity-based motivation was evident with regard to a student's consideration of non-completion. When a dominant identity is challenged, a negative experience is created (Oyserman, et al., 2017). If this challenge comes through Irish, while challenging a student's perception of their Irish ability, the result can have negative consequence (Smyth, 2017). The evidence gathered in this study suggests that such a series of events can create potential barriers to a student's self-perceptions and result in the loss of motivation as a result of the challenge to their identity. This would suggest that where the possibility exists that language-based identity could come into question, that responses and reactions should be flexible, responsible and reasonable, so as not to impact too greatly on the identity-based motivation of the individual.

Although this idea might suggest otherwise, the primacy of identity is a positive and affirmative factor in the completion and non-completion puzzle (Lee & Burkam, 2003). While the potential exists for identity to become a barrier to completion, as one of a number of factors, identity is, in actuality, a key factor in completion. Where multiple identities converge in each individual student, their language identity is supported and protected by other identities, such as their individualism, their sense of belonging in their social group and their acceptance into the wider school community (Kanagawa, et al., 2001). This same idea is evident in Smyth's (2017) study which also found that identity-based motivation was a key influence in non-completion.

5.4.3 *The Influence of Agency*

This research also demonstrated that students are well placed to exercise identity in a considered and thoughtful manner, where IME is concerned. With 66% of participants reporting that their parents would support them if they were to leave IME, the study shows that students have a generally strong baseline of support as they make major decisions which influence their education. Amongst the cohort who left IME, it is clear that this exercising of agency was done in their own educational best interest, and it was supported fully by their familial support base. In this way, the level of agency afforded to each student can be said to be appropriate to their age and experience (Chandler-Olcott & Hinchmann, 2019). This was evidenced in the responses received.

This study also showed that where agency is being exercised in such an important area such as that of school choice, students do not exercise such agency in a vacuum. The study has shown that students seek the thoughts, opinions, experiences

and support of a wide community of family, friends and colleagues, in line with the model created in this study (see Figure 2.1) and in other attention and attrition models (Tinto, 1993; Bean & Eaton, 2001; Hirschy, et al., 2011). Although the majority of students who considered non-completion reported that they struggled with this question, they ultimately made their decision to remain or leave after consultation with others about the impact of their decision, and after considering other influential factors. This result is consistent with the literature on agency which indicates that while some decisions are made autonomously, other decisions are the result of more controlled situations, such as parental pressure, familial or social expectations as well as self-esteem issues (Meensa, et al., 2018; Burkitt, 2016; Archer, 2003). This idea is evident within the data collected in this study.

5.4.4 *The Influence of Family and Friends*

Although the majority of participants discussed their experience of IME in individual terms, they also made repeated reference to the influence of social groups such as family and friends. In every case of those who left IME, the support of their parents, family and friends was the final and concluding factor in their decision to leave, that is, without the support of these groups, they would have remained in IME despite the other factors pushing them to leave. The support provided by family and friends can be seen as a key factor in completion and non-completion (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2016; Anguiano, 2004). Other studies have found a similar link between the influence of family, friends and role-models and the successful educational outcomes and progress of students, in particular in their choice to continue in full-time education (Gore, et al., 2015).

With regard to parents, it was clear from the data that completion and non-completion is jointly constructed between students and their parents through shared ideologies and negotiated approaches (Fan & Chen, 2001). While parents, as the adult and legal actors in this relationship usually have the final say on completion and non-completion, the capacity of each student to act upon their own individualism and agency was evident from this study.

The majority of participants reported that their parents had little to no Irish, and in the rare cases where their parents did speak Irish (n=32), it was still rare for them to speak Irish more than 50% of the time in the family home. This highlights the ability of each student to self-manage their language learning and their language identity outside of the family home in the IME school. Thus, this reinforces the motivation and agency that each student is afforded and exercises in terms of their participation, language development and their language practices.

With regard to friends, some participants reported negative experiences of using and learning through Irish, however, the majority reported positive experiences. In the former, the students reported that the friends in question did not attend an IME school, for the latter, they reported that their friends either attended or had attended IME. In some positive encounters with non-IME friends, a number of participants shared their experiences of acting as a language tutor or study aide by helping their friends to advance their level of Irish. For these students, this reinforced the IME experience as one which has given them certain academic advantages over their peers, increasing the sense of positivity in their perception of IME, and influencing their attitudes to completion and non-completion (Beck, 2004).

However, that said, a significant number of participants reported speaking English in social situations where Irish was a viable alternative. This idea combines with the prevalence of English as the primary language of communication in the family home (n=100), showing that the majority of students display a preference for English outside of the IME setting. The idea of multiple identities (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2009) once again plays a role here, with the student's group of friends being the primary driver of the language preference in social settings. This in turn highlights the importance of social cohesion as participants are willing to suppress their language identity in order to give preference to their social identity in social situations (Norton & Toohey, 2011; Norton, 2010; Dornyei & Ushioda, 2009).

5.4.5 The Influence of Academic Considerations

Finally, this research reflected a number of academic considerations as factors in the completion and non-completion puzzle (Mac Aogáin, et al., 2010). One of the strengths of this study is that it provided a platform for students to discuss the diverse variety of their experiences with IME. Many participants commented on a wide range of factors within the IME which influenced their positive or negative disposition to immersion education. Within IME, factors such as: the school community, the size of the school community, the student-teacher relationship and shared goals and visions, all contributed to their attitude to completion and non-completion.

Coming through the responses, it was also evident that the majority of students enjoyed their time in their IME, despite occasional negative experiences. These students believe that their ability in the Irish language and the time they spent in IME will be of benefit to them in their future lives and careers. They feel that they have an

advantage over their peers academically and that this will assist them in the future, in further study and in access to educational programmes or in the world of work (Mac Aogáin, 2005).

Furthermore, students who have left the IME school also feel that they have benefitted from their time there. They reported a distinct advantage in Irish classes over their class peers for the LC examination and none reported feeling disadvantaged for having received some of their post-primary education through Irish.

5.4.6 Summary of Conclusions

In summary, the findings of this study have revealed that 32% of students have considered leaving their IME school before they had completed post-primary school, with 2% of those actually leaving and moving to an English-medium school. The most common time for students to consider leaving is at the end of 3rd or 4th year, which is a natural transition point in the Irish system, between the Junior and Senior cycles of study.

For the students who considered leaving and for those who have left, there are a variety of factors interacting with one another as they contemplate this decision. No single factor has primacy over another, although some factors are weighted differently, depending on the individual student and their own background and context.

From the research findings, this thesis proposes that there are five primary categories of influencing factors, each of which has a number of sub-categories:

1. The influence of motivation,
2. The influence of identity,
3. The influence of agency,
4. The influence of social groupings,
5. The influence of academic considerations.

The findings in this study confront the current lack of dedicated research into IME at post-primary level and in particular in relation to retention, attrition and transfer, or completion and non-completion as they are framed in this study.

Furthermore, this research offers an insight into the students' perspectives, examining their motivations and perceptions of IME. The research findings have implications for all IME post-primary schools in Ireland, as well as for other institutions which have an intake of students who have left IME, either after completion or during a course of study. The next section sets out some clear recommendations arising from this study before offering some suggestions for future research.

5.5 Recommendations Arising from the Study

The findings of this study build a picture of students who are generally happy and positive towards the Irish language and IME, but who are also acutely aware of the shortcomings of the system within which they learn. This suggests that, in contrast to Article 8 of the Irish Constitution (Government of Ireland, 1937), which recognises Irish as the first official language of the state, as well as in contrast to the ideals of the 1998 Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) and the 2000 Education (Welfare) Act (Government of Ireland, 2000) which guarantees equality of access, participation and benefit for all students, students completing their post-primary education through

Irish are not accessing a curriculum and resources appropriate to their needs nor are they benefitting from the education system in the same way as their peers in non-IME settings. Based on this study, the following are a series of recommendations relevant for key stakeholders – the DoE school leadership and parents.

5.5.1 Recommendations for the DoE

- As participants in this study have identified issues related to teacher proficiency in Irish, it is essential that teachers proficient and confident in teaching through the medium of Irish are made available to all IME schools for the benefit of teaching and learning.
- Teaching methodologies relevant to immersion education should feature in programmes of initial teacher education in order to maximise the potential benefits of immersion education.
- As a lack of Irish language resources and supports was identified by participants, these should be made available to IME schools. This could include enhanced allocations of support staff, translation services and funding for Irish language training and digital technologies (such as word processors and grammar checkers). This would aid teaching and learning through Irish and help to compensate for the lack of such resources available external to the school.
- The DoE should ensure that equality of access is available to all students in IME. This includes ensuring that each subject has the option of at least one Irish language textbook for every curricular subject, as participants specifically identified the lack of Irish language textbooks available as a barrier to effective teaching and learning.

5.5.2 Recommendations for Schools

- Schools should develop and implement systems to support the linguistic abilities and development of students at all levels of Irish learning. This includes those students who are exceptionally able as well as those who are struggling significantly with their ability to understand and communicate through Irish.
- The Irish language ability of new students should not be assumed based on previous school experience. Post-entry interviews could be used appropriately and strategically in order to obtain an insight into each student's specific language ability and need as they begin a course of study in the school.
- Schools should conduct an exit interview with all students and their parents or guardians prior to them permanently leaving the school before to the student's final exit. This would allow schools to identify the cognitive and social factors at play where a student chooses to leave the school and develop support structures and interventions where possible.
- Schools should develop and implement a plan for teaching essential subject terminology bilingually. This does not necessarily have to impact on the language of instruction in the classroom, however, glossaries and key word charts could be developed and distributed as part of the introduction and/or conclusion to topics and subject areas.

5.5.3 Recommendations for Parents

- All parents, regardless of Irish ability, should show an interest in learning Irish and learning through Irish. Parents should make a positive and determined

effort to encourage Irish in social and familial settings outside of the school, to maximise completion rates and student motivation.

- Parents should collaborate and lobby to ensure that their children are being offered equal access to the curriculum and to guarantee that their children are not being disadvantaged due to lack of academic or financial resources, an issue identified by participants in this study.

5.6 Recommendations for Future Research

This research aimed to understand the factors which influence completion and non-completion in IME post-primary schools, from the student perspective. Further research should be conducted with a larger sample across a more diverse age range so as to provide for generalisation in the interpretation and analysis of the responses. Increasing the sample and age range may provide additional findings and take account of the flexible nature of motivation based on a student's age and on their stage of development.

Further research should also be conducted on those students who leave the IME post-primary school before completing their final year. This should be done on a national level to enhance the opportunity to collect as large a sample as possible. Additionally, students who leave post-primary education entirely from IME should also factor into future research. While the national attrition level in Ireland is comparatively low (European Commission, 2011), research concerning these young people could yield interesting additional information in the field of early school leavers.

This research found that the vast majority of students who attended IME viewed IME and the Irish language favourably, despite any difficulties which may have

emerged for them within IME. Additional research into the factors which influence this positive disposition is recommended. Insight into this sphere could yield information which could be used to develop and improve the teaching and learning of the Irish language across all schools in the ROI.

This research focussed on the perspective of the students themselves as they traverse their educational journey. A natural progression of this research would be to investigate the perspectives of parents and guardians who have children in IME, as well as to investigate the perspectives of teachers and non-teaching staff in IME post-primary settings. Information from such varied and diverse points of view could eventually be cross-analysed and compared for the benefit of IME and the IME experience of all those associated with immersion education at post-primary level.

A longitudinal study that includes entry and exit interviews could usefully explore the development of the student perspective and the changing nature of the student experience over the duration of the post-primary six-year cycle.

Additionally, the advantages of bilingualism and immersion education for students in IME were reinforced in this study. The conclusions of this study would benefit from future cross-jurisdictional and international studies on completion and non-completion in post-primary immersion contexts. A comparison should be undertaken on the perspectives and experiences of students outside the ROI who learn in immersion settings.

Finally, the revision and development of the composite model (Figure 2.2) created in this study would benefit IME and agents within the IME sector. The inclusion of language competency into the model is an area which was highlighted in the data

analysis stage and is an area where the model would benefit from some revision. As this model was developed based on existing models and in tandem with the literature, but without the benefit of studies similar to this current one, the model would benefit by being informed by similar studies in comparative contexts. This would serve to strengthen the robustness and effectiveness of the composite model and would, in turn, aid our understanding of completion and non-completion in IME. The model would then be even better placed to act as a critical predictor or mediator in the relationship between established variables and school completion and non-completion in an IM setting.

5.7 Conclusion

This research study contributes significantly to the body of knowledge in the field of completion and non-completion and in the fields of IME and immersion education. With its mixed-methods approach, it builds upon existing research to include a questionnaire, focus groups and interviews. The results of this research support previous studies in a variety of fields, both directly and indirectly related to the research question. However, this study adds significantly to the discussion on IME and completion and non-completion by contributing rich qualitative data gathered throughout the various research stages. The focus groups and interviews brought out the nuances of the different students' perspectives and allowed them to voice their opinion and reflect on their experience in a way that will contribute to the experiences of others.

The findings of this research study offer a picture of a system of learning with which students are generally satisfied. However, students also recognise acute

problems and systematic failures. While some of these issues are local in nature and are dependent on the school and its agents, other issues are national in nature and would require the intervention of national authorities. That said, many of the factors which influence completion and non-completion are outside of the direct influence of the school and the DoE. These factors are cognitive and social and rely on the perception of the individual. While outside agents can influence these cognitive factors, they are ultimately individual and unique to each person.

Evidence in the study has made it clear that students are pragmatic in their approach to making decisions of the magnitude of completion or non-completion. They are systematic and consider a multitude of factors as they reach a decision. While the findings from this study indicate that students have increasing levels of freedom and agency which accompany growing maturity and experience, the study also shows that the same students seek and value advice and guidance. Additionally, the participants, those who remained and those who left IME, expressed a strong regard for the Irish language and for their ability with that language. They appreciate the perceived benefits and advantages that IME has afforded them up until the point of exit.

However, to ensure that these benefits and advantages are real as opposed to perceived, there are significant issues that need to be addresses as a matter of priority. This must be done on multiple levels to maintain and grow the IME sector. Various actors, from the DoE, to the schools, to the parents, to the students themselves need to be proactive in their approaches to IME to ensure that the associated advantages

are enhanced and that the potential disadvantages are identified, and appropriate interventions and supports are implemented.

For this to happen there needs to be systematic change put in place and schools need clear and defined guidelines, supports, professional training and resources; financial and otherwise. Strong leadership on a national level, as well as locally at school level is required. Schools should work collaboratively, with each other as well as with educational agencies, parents, local communities and pupils, current and past, in order to systematically address the complex needs of their students.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Informed Consent Forms for Schools

The factors which influence completion and non-completion in Irish medium post-primary education from the student perspective.

Purpose of the Research

This study aims to:

1. Identify the factors which cause students to remain in Irish medium post-primary education.
2. Identify the factors which cause students to consider leaving Irish medium post-primary education.
3. Identify the factors which cause students to leave Irish medium post-primary education and transfer to an English medium school.
4. Analyse the students' perspectives with regards to completion and non-completion.
5. Construct recommendations based on the analysis of the students' perspectives to facilitate Irish medium post-primary schools in maximising completion in their own settings.

Requirements of participation in this research study

Participation in this research requires students to have reached the age of 18 years and to be in 6th year in the 2020/21 academic year. Schools will be asked to facilitate this research by forwarding information, by hard copy or digitally, to students who meet with these requirements.

The study consists of three stages: A questionnaire, focus groups and interviews. Each of these stages will be conducted using secure digital platforms, outside of normal school hours. It is not envisaged that participation in this study will interfere with a student's normal daily schooling in any way.

The completion of the questionnaire will take approximately 20 minutes and will be completed online using a link provided to the participants. The questionnaire will be anonymous and neither participants nor schools will be identified in this questionnaire.

At the end of the online questionnaire, participants will be invited to take part in the next stage of the research, which will involve focus groups and interviews where they will discuss their experiences and opinions of completion and non-completion. The focus groups will take approximately 40 minutes while the interviews will take approximately 30 minutes. Both focus groups and interviews will take place digitally at a time and date which is convenient to the participants. Those who have completed the questionnaire will be under no obligation to commit to these stages of the research.

Participants who agree to take part in this research, have the right to withdraw at any stage without query or prejudice.

Confirmation that involvement in the research study is voluntary

I am aware that if my school agrees to facilitate this study that it can withdraw cooperation at any stage. There will be no penalty for withdrawal of cooperation before all stages of the research have been completed.

Please complete the following (Circle Yes or No for each question).

I have read (or had read to me) the Plain Language Statement Yes/No

I understand the information provided Yes/No

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study Yes/No

I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions Yes/No

I have read and understood the information in this form. The researchers have answered my questions and concerns, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to facilitate this research project.

Principal's / Chairperson's Signature: _____

Name in Block Capitals: _____

Date: _____

Appendix B – Plain Language Statement for Schools

The factors which influence completion and non-completion in Irish medium post-primary education from the student perspective.

Dear Principal / Chairperson,

My name is Ciarán Kavanagh (Ó Caomhánaigh) I am a qualified post-primary teacher with many years teaching experience in Irish-medium education. I am currently a PhD research student in the Institute of Education, Dublin City University under the supervision of Professor Pádraig Ó Duibhir and Dr. Laoise Ní Thuairisg. I am undertaking important research into: *the factors which influence completion and non-completion in Irish medium post-primary education from the student perspective.*

This research has three stages, Stage 1, involves the completion of online questionnaires, Stage 2 involves facilitating focus groups and Stage 3, involves interviews with students to discuss their opinions of and experiences with completion and non-completion in Irish medium post-primary settings.

The aims of this research project are to:

1. Identify the factors which cause students to remain in Irish medium post-primary education.
2. Identify the factors which cause students to consider leaving Irish medium post-primary education.
3. Identify the factors which cause students to leave Irish medium post-primary education and transfer to an English medium school.
4. Analyse the students' perspectives with regards to completion and non-completion.
5. Construct recommendations based on the analysis of the students' perspectives to facilitate Irish medium post-primary schools in maximising completion in their own settings.

I would like to invite your school to facilitate Stage 1 of this research. If your school decides to facilitate this stage of the research, you will be asked to forward an email/information to your 6th year students where they will be invited to participate in this research. Participating students will complete the questionnaire online in their own time at a time and date that is convenient to them. Your school has the right to withdraw their cooperation with the research at any stage without query. At the end of Stage 1, participants will be asked whether they are interested in participating in the Stages 2 and 3 of the research. There will be no burden placed on any student who participates in Stage 1, to participate in Stage 2 or 3.

In Stage 1 of the research, students will be invited to undertake an anonymous online questionnaire to obtain their responses and opinions regarding completion and non-completion. They will not be asked to identify themselves or the school which they attend. The completion of these questionnaires should take approximately 20 minutes. Yet again, all participants will have the right to withdraw from the research at any stage without query. At the end of the questionnaire stage of research, participants will be asked whether they are willing to take part in focus group and interviews on the same topics to help provide a context for and develop questionnaire findings.

Confidentiality will be maintained as far as possible within the legal limits of data protection. Responses will be kept in a secure, locked location. Electronic data will be held on a password encrypted computer. All records and data will be disposed of appropriately within five years, in accordance with DCU Data Protection Policy.

I understand that you may have facilitated surveys on similar topics in your school previously however, the benefit of this research is that it will address the gaps in previous research findings in this area.

Also, it is hoped that it will offer recommendations which will generate supports for students at risk of non-completion in Irish-medium schools in the future. When the results are compiled a list of recommendations will be made as which identify what factors cause student to consider leaving an Irish medium post-primary school, as well as what factors cause them to stay. You will be more than welcome to obtain a copy of the results and recommendations, at that time, if you so wish.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me at any stage. Alternatively, you may wish to contact my Supervisors if so, please do not hesitate to do so using the contact details at the bottom of the page.

I sincerely thank you for taking the time to read this information letter and for considering your participation in this study.

Le dea-ghuí,

Ciarán Ó Caomhánaigh

ciaran.kavanagh52@mail.dcu.ie

0871234567

If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, you can contact:

REC Administration,

Research Office,

Dublin City University,

Glasnevin

Dublin 9.

Tel: (01) 7007816

Appendix C – Plain Language Statement for Students

The factors which influence completion and non-completion in Irish medium post-primary education from the student perspective.

Dear Student,

My name is Ciarán Kavanagh (Ó Caomhánaigh) I am a qualified post-primary teacher with many years teaching experience in Irish-medium education. I am currently a PhD research student in the Institute of Education, Dublin City University under the supervision of Professor Pádraig Ó Duibhir and Dr. Laoise Ní Thuairisg. I am undertaking important research into: *the factors which influence completion and non-completion in Irish medium post-primary education from the student perspective.*

This research has three stages, Stage 1, involves the completion of online questionnaires, Stage 2 involves participating in focus groups and Stage 3, involves interviews with students to discuss their opinions of and experiences with completion and non-completion in Irish medium post-primary settings.

The aims of this research project are to:

1. Identify the factors which cause students to remain in Irish medium post-primary education.
2. Identify the factors which cause students to consider leaving Irish medium post-primary education.
3. Identify the factors which cause students to leave Irish medium post-primary education and transfer to an English medium school.
4. Analyse the students' perspectives with regards to completion and non-completion.
5. Construct recommendations based on the analysis of the students' perspectives to facilitate Irish medium post-primary schools in maximising completion in their own settings.

I would like to invite you to take part in this study. If you decide to take part in this research, you will be invited to give 20 minutes of your time to complete an anonymous online questionnaire on your experiences and opinions of completion and non-completion in Irish medium post-primary school.

All responses are anonymous and cannot be traced. Confidentiality will be maintained as far as possible within the legal limits of data protection. Responses will be kept in a secure, locked location. Electronic data will be held on a password encrypted computer. All records and data will be disposed of appropriately within five years, in accordance with DCU Data Protection Policy and GDPR guidelines.

At the end of the questionnaire stage, you will be asked whether you are willing to take part in focus group and/or interview on the same topics to help provide a context for and develop survey findings. These focus groups and interviews will be recorded so that they can be transcribed. Once transcribed, the recordings will be destroyed. Any mention of names, schools or locations which could identify an individual or school will be removed from the transcript to ensure anonymity. If you agree to take part in this research, you can withdraw from the study at any time, and your decision will be respected without question.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me at any stage. Alternatively, you may wish to contact my Supervisors if so, please do not hesitate to do so using the contact details at the bottom of the page.

I sincerely thank you for taking the time to read this information letter and for considering your participation in this study.

Le dea-ghuí,

Ciarán Ó Caomhánaigh

ciaran.kavanagh52@mail.dcu.ie

0871234567

If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, you can contact:

REC Administration,

Research Office,

Dublin City University,

Glasnevin

Dublin 9.

Tel: (01) 7007816

Appendix D – Informed Consent Forms for Participating Students

The factors which influence completion and non-completion in Irish medium post-primary education from the student perspective.

Purpose of the Research

This study aims to:

1. Identify the factors which cause students to remain in Irish medium post-primary education.
2. Identify the factors which cause students to consider leaving Irish medium post-primary education.
3. Identify the factors which cause students to leave Irish medium post-primary education and transfer to an English medium school.
4. Analyse the students' perspectives with regards to completion and non-completion.
5. Construct recommendations based on the analysis of the students' perspectives to facilitate Irish medium post-primary schools in maximising completion in their own settings.

Requirements of participation in this research study

Participation in this research requires you to have reached the age of 18 years and are in 6th year in the 2020/21 academic year.

The study consists of three stages: A questionnaire, focus groups and interviews. Each of these stages will be conducted using secure digital platforms, outside of normal school hours. It is not envisaged that participation in this study will interfere with your normal daily routine.

The completion of the questionnaire will take approximately 20 minutes and will be completed online using a link provided to the participants. The questionnaire will be anonymous and neither participants nor schools will be identified in this questionnaire.

At the end of the online questionnaire, you will be invited to take part in the next stage of the research, which will involve focus groups and interviews where you will have the opportunity to discuss your experiences and opinions of completion and non-completion. You do not have to participate in these later stages if you do not want to.

The focus groups will take approximately 40 minutes while the interviews will take approximately 30 minutes. Both focus groups and interviews will take place digitally at a time and date which is convenient for you. The focus groups and interviews will be recorded so that they can be transcribed. These recordings will be destroyed once the transcription is complete.

If you have completed the questionnaire, you will be under no obligation to commit to the other stages of the research.

If you agree to take part in this research, you have the right to withdraw at any stage without query or prejudice.

Confirmation that involvement in the research study is voluntary

I am aware that if I agree to take part in this study that I can withdraw from participation at any stage. There will be no penalty for withdrawal from the study before all stages of the research have been completed.

Please complete the following (Mark Yes or No for each question).

I have read (or had read to me) the Plain Language Statement Yes/No

I understand the information provided Yes/No

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study Yes/No

I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions Yes/No

I have read and understood the information in this form. The researchers have answered my questions and concerns, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project.

Participant's Signature: _____

Name in Block Capitals: _____

Date: _____

Appendix E – Email to Principals

Dear Principal,

My name is Ciarán Ó Caomhanaigh and I am a post-primary teacher with many years teaching experience in Irish medium education. I am currently a PhD research student in the Institute of Education, Dublin City University under the supervision of Professor Pádraig Ó Duibhir and Dr. Laoise Ní Thuairisg. I am undertaking important research which looks at the factors with affect completion and non-completion in Irish medium post-primary schools.

I would like to ask you to facilitate this research with your students. This research consists of three parts; questionnaires, focus groups and interviews. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, each stage of the research will happen digitally, outside of normal school hours.

The initial stage of the research will involve sixth year students filling out anonymous questionnaires online. This questionnaire should take about 20 minutes to complete. If you agree to facilitate this research, you will be asked to forward an email to your sixth-year students which invites them to participate in the research and complete the questionnaire.

Further on, some participants who indicate willingness may be invited to participate in a focus group and/or an interview. This will be done on a voluntary basis, at a time and place suitable to the participant.

I would be extremely grateful if your school would be willing to facilitate this research.

Le gach dea-ghuí,

Ciarán Ó Caomhánaigh.

Appendix F – Email to students

Dear Student,

My name is Ciarán Ó Caomhanaigh and I am a post-primary teacher with many years teaching experience in Irish medium education. I am currently a PhD research student in the Institute of Education, Dublin City University under the supervision of Professor Pádraig Ó Duibhir and Dr. Laoise Ní Thuarisg. I am undertaking important research which looks at the factors with affect completion and non-completion in Irish medium post-primary schools - in simple terms, I want to find out why some people stay in a *Gaelcholáiste* and why some people leave before they finish their Leaving Certificate.

I would like to ask you to participate in this research. This research consists of three parts; questionnaires, focus groups and interviews. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, each stage of the research will happen digitally, outside of normal school hours. To take part in this research, you need to be 18 years old and you should be in 6th year.

The initial stage of the research will involve you filling out an anonymous questionnaire online. This questionnaire should take about 20 minutes to complete. If you agree to participate in this research, you can access the questionnaire using the following link: (LINK)

When you have finished the questionnaire, you will be invited to participate in a focus group and/or an interview. This will be done on a voluntary basis, at a time and date which suits you. You do not have to participate in the focus group or the interview after you have completed the questionnaire – it is up to you.

I am also looking to speak with students who have left an Irish medium post-primary school after they had already started going to school there. If you have a friend who started post-primary school with you, but left before 6th year, I would appreciate it if you would forward this email to them and ask them to participate.

Thank you for taking the time to read this email and I hope that you are happy to take part in this research. If you have any questions, you can contact me by email at: ciaran.kavanagh52@mail.dcu.ie

Le meas,

Ciarán Ó Caomhánaigh.

Appendix G – Questionnaire

(Note: this questionnaire was designed to be delivered digitally. Therefore some answers automatically moved a respondent onto the next relevant questions as it relates to their answer.)

Section 1 – Personal Information

1. What is your Gender?
Male Female Other (Specify)
2. What is your age?
18 19 20
3. How many brothers and sisters do you have?
0 1 2 3 4 5 (other- Specify)
4. Among the children in the family, where do you rank in age? (1st is the oldest)
1st 2nd 3rd 4th 5th Only child (Other- Specify)
5. Do you speak Irish at home?
Yes No Sometimes
6. Do your parents / guardian(s) speak Irish?
Yes No
7. Do you speak Irish with your friends, outside of school and school activities?
Yes No Sometimes

Section 2 – Your School

1. In which province is your school located?
Ulster Munster Connacht Leinster
2. How do you travel to school?
Walk Cycle Train Public Bus School Bus Car Other (Specify)
3. How long is your journey to school each morning (On average)
Less than 10 minutes Between 10 and 20 minutes Between 20 and 30 minutes
More than 30 minutes
4. What time do you normally get up at for school?
(free text box)
5. What time do you normally get home from school?
(free text box)
6. How big is your year group in school?
1 class 2 classes 3classes 4 classes 5 classes 6 or more classes
8. Do you take part in extra-curricular activities with the school? (Sports, clubs etc.)
Yes No
If “yes” please state what you do: [Free text box]
If “no” please explain why: [Free text box]

Section 3 – Completion and Non-completion

1. Have you ever considered moving out of your Irish medium post-primary school?
Yes No I moved to a different school
If you answered “yes” to Question 1:
(a) When did you consider moving?
1st year 2nd year 3rd year 4th year 5th year
6th
(b) In your own words, why did you consider moving schools?
[Free text box]

(c) In your own words, why did you stay in Irish medium education?

[Free text box]

If you answered “no” to Question 1:

Why do you think that you have never considered leaving your current Irish medium school?

[Free text box]

If you answered “I moved to a different school” to question 1:

(a) When did you move schools (during or at the end of which year)?

1st year 2nd year 3rd year 4th year 5th year
6th

(b) In your own words, why did you move schools?

[Free text box]

(c) In your own words, what would have helped you to stay in Irish medium education?

[Free text box]

(d) If you could go back to your original Irish-medium school, would you?

Yes No

Why / Why not? [Free text box]

2. Thinking about other people you might know, why do you think that they might leave an Irish medium post-primary school?

- Difficulties with Irish
- Live too far away from the school
- Subject choice in the school
- Social reasons (friends or family attend another school)
- Other [Specify]

3. What do you think that Irish medium schools could do to encourage everyone to stay until the end of 6th year? Please explain your reasons.

[Free text box]

4. Thinking back to when you started in 1st year, how many people have left your year group between then and now?

[Free text box]

Section 4 – General Information

1. Please read the statements below carefully and indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
In my school there is a strong sense of community.					
I feel like I am part of the school community.					
My school listens to my opinion.					
My school values my opinion.					
I have a good relationship with most of my teachers.					
I find it difficult to follow lessons through Irish.					
I sometimes speak English with my friends while I am at school.					

I get frustrated when I don't know an Irish word.					
When I don't know the Irish word, I just use the English word instead.					
I am proud that I can speak as much Irish as I can.					
Having Irish will benefit me in the future.					
Learning through Irish is the same as learning through English.					
I talk about school and subjects with friends from other schools.					
I compare my school to other schools.					

2. Who had the final say in what post-primary school you attended?

- It was my decision
- My parents/guardians and I decided together
- My parents/guardian discussed schools with me, but they made the decision.
- My parents/guardians made the decision alone.
- Other [Explain]

3. If you were to tell your parents/guardians that you wanted to move schools, how do you think they would react?

- They would fully support my decision.
- They would listen to me, but they would make the final decision.
- They would listen to me, but talk me out of it.
- They would not listen to me.
- Other [Free text box]

4. Do you think that moving from one post-primary school to another is a big decision?

Yes No

Please explain why you think this: [Free text box]

Appendix H – Focus Group Questions

Warm-up:

Explain the nature of the project to participants, to ensure they understood the plain language statement, informed consent form, and their right to withdraw at any stage.

Questions

1. Have you ever considered transferring out of the Irish medium school you attend?
2. For those who considered it, what made you feel like this would be a good decision for you?
3. For those who didn't consider it, why do you think it never occurred to you as an option? (Would it ever have been an option?)
4. For those who did transfer, what led you to make that decision? (What was the final factor in that decision making process?)
5. Why do you think some students choose to leave an Irish medium school after they have already started there?
6. Why do you think some students choose to stay even though they have considered moving schools?
7. Do you have friends who attend English medium schools?
 - a. Do you ever discuss school with those friends, and compare their experience to your own?
 - b. Does that make you think your school is better or worse?
8. If you compare schools, do you ever exaggerate about your school to make things appear better or worse to your friends? Do you think they might do the same thing?
9. What do you think your school does well to keep students in the school? (To stop them from leaving.)
10. What could your school do better to make sure that as many students as possible stay and do their Leaving Certificate in the school?
11. How important do you think that social groups are when it comes to deciding to remain or leave?
12. How important do you think that student-teacher relationships are when it comes to deciding to remain or leave?

[I'm going to pose three hypothetical scenarios; I want you to imagine you are the person I mention and to tell me what you would do with that amount of power and influence.]

13. Imagine you were the principal, what would you do to make sure that everyone wants to stay in your school until they finish their leaving certificate?
14. Imagine you were a teacher, what would you do to make sure that everyone wants to stay in your school until they finish their leaving certificate?
15. Imagine you were the head of the student council, what would you do to make sure that everyone wants to stay in your school until they finish their leaving certificate?

Appendix I – Interview questions

Warm-up:

Explain the nature of the project to participants, to ensure they understood the plain language statement, informed consent form, and their right to withdraw at any stage.

Questions:

1. In the focus group, you mentioned that you:
 - Have never considered leaving the Irish medium school.
 - Have considered leaving the Irish medium school.
 - Left the Irish medium school.Tell me about that. Tell me about your experiences in school that you feel influenced that.
2. From your experience in an Irish medium school, are there any supports that schools could put in place to help students who might feel that leaving the school is their only option?
 - Is there anything your school is already doing well that could be enhanced?
 - Is there anything that your school is missing that needs to be done?
3. Imagine I am a student in your school and I tell you that I am thinking of moving to another school because of [Factor highlighted in the questionnaire]. What advice would you give me before I make the decision to move? Are there any supports you could recommend for me?
4. Do you know anybody who has left the Irish medium school for a while but then returned? Why do you think some people do this?
5. What do you think are the biggest benefits of attending an Irish medium school?
6. What do you think are the biggest disadvantages of attending an Irish medium school?
 - How can Irish medium school account for these disadvantages? What can be done to fix them?
7. In the focus groups, [factor from focus group] was mentioned as a key factor in the decision to remain or to leave. Why do you think this is?
8. Another factor mentioned was [Factor from focus group]. Why do you think this might have been mentioned as an issue?
9. What social factors do you think have the greatest influence on a student's decision to remain or leave: [Prompt: Parents, teachers, friends, family, siblings etc.] Why do you think this?

Appendix J – Focus Group Sample Transcript

I = Interviewer

P = Participant

I: Okay, so good morning, everybody. I just want to thank you all for taking the time this morning to participate in this study. I know that you are all really busy with the Leaving Cert coming up and with the predicted grades and study. So, I really do appreciate that you are giving me this half an hour of your time this morning to help me out with this study. So, all of you here have participated in the online survey and I thank you for doing that. Again, I know that you have so much to do, but just to remind you this is a study that is looking at completion and non-completion in Irish medium post-primary schools. So, the point of this research is to analyse what schools are doing right and what they are doing wrong, in keeping students in the schools until the end of sixth year. So, you should have an idea of what the study is about from the survey that you completed, but if there are any questions about any aspect of it, just feel free to stop me at any point and we can try and answer those questions. So, I just want to make sure that everybody has had a chance, through the online survey, to read the plain language statement, which explains in detail what this study is about, and I just want to make sure that you all know that all have the right to withdraw from this study at any point in the process without prejudice. What does that mean? It means that if you are uncomfortable participating in the study, you can just drop out at any time. I won't ask you why and I won't chase you about it. If at any point you are unhappy with your contribution you have the right to get in touch with me and ask me to remove your contribution. So, while I can't do that with the survey piece, because it was anonymous and I don't have your name associated with it, I can do it with this piece. At the end of this session, I will make the different supports that are available to you available. So, if anything comes up in the session that worries you or that upsets you, I will let you know where you can turn for support. Just to let you know that this session will be recorded and then transcribed. That means that there is a video recording going on for the online session but once that is over it will be converted to an mp3 format and the video will be destroyed. Once the sound recording is written out; that's the transcription; the sound recording will then be destroyed. So, the only record that will last will be a written record and in that record none of your real names will be used and that record will be stored securely for five years and then those transcriptions will also be destroyed. Just so that you know, any identifying information... so your name or the name of the school or the name of a teacher or the name of a friend that comes up in the session will be redacted from the written transcription. That means that if you, by mistake, use your schools name, when I am typing up the transcription, I will take that name out. I

will substitute it with School Name. If you use somebody's name, I will use fake names and they usually follow the alphabet. So, I will start with [Name] and I will move to [Name] and I will move to [Name], but it will be names of people who didn't participate in the study so that nobody can be identified, and those pseudonyms will be used throughout the transcription process. So, to start off, I just want each of you to give me a name or the name that you are comfortable in giving, and just one detail about yourself which will make the transcription easier as I am writing it out. So maybe the name of the town that you live in or the county that you live in. So, if we start off in the top there with my friend with his headphones on. Could you give me your name and an identifying marker please?

P: [Name], living in [Name].

I: So [Name] from [Name]. Then if we rotate around to our friend here with the wardrobe in the background.

P: [Name] from [Name].

I: Very good, thank you [Name]. Then if we move across to our other female participant.

P: [Name] from [Name].

I: Thank you [Name], and then next.

P: I'm [Name] from [Name].

I: Very good, and then finally young gentleman.

P: [Name] from [Name].

I: Excellent. Right, so we will get started, we will run through this as quickly as possible and I do encourage you to express your opinion and to be as open and honest as possible in this session. So just generally first of all, how do you feel about Irish medium education in general?

P: Personally, I think I found it super beneficial. I mean I think I would be struggling a lot with the Irish language if I weren't. So, I think just from the get-go, from being so young and put into it I think it has benefited me a lot through the education because now coming up to the Leaving it's a subject that I don't have to worry about and I actually do find it easier in many things to learn through the Irish language.

P: For me, I found it very hard especially in subjects like Home Ec and stuff, doing it through Irish, and if I would have been going to an English school, I probably could have got an exemption for Irish so I wouldn't have had to worry about it. But I am really glad I went to an Irish school because I am really happy to have like our national language and stuff.

- I: How do you two feel?
- P: I think it's a good thing to learn through Irish just kind of from an historical point of view with the way Irish is gone away a good bit recently but it is harder definitely for some subjects like science subjects, to do that through Irish rather than English.
- I: Then [Name]?
- P: I think that it is definitely a useful skill to have but the fact that most jobs don't employ the Irish language makes it more difficult because you have to relearn everything. So, it's just a bit of extra work that could have been avoided if you went to all speaking English...
- I: Yeah. Actually... well thanks for those contributions. It's very interesting to see the range of opinions that are there. So, I think that this is going to be a very good session if you all stay as honest and open as you have just shown that you are willing to be. So, thanks for that. So, we will jump into the more specific questions, and again I encourage you to be as honest as you are comfortable in being. Have any of you ever considered transferring out of your Irish medium school at any point in the past six years? Anyone...
- P: Yeah, I considered moving to an English school just about halfway through transition year. I was concerned about the Irish particularly after the Junior Cert. I had a few kind of troubles with some of my other subjects that weren't Irish but then in the end I decided to stick it out.
- I: Very good. Did anybody else consider it?
- P: I considered it but then I rationalised it with the fact that... like I always thought through the entirety of secondary school that it would probably be easier for me if I wanted to get into the workforce easier, to go to an all English school, but I rationalised it by saying I have gone this far and it would take more time to be able to prepare myself for the Leaving Cert; because I am already prepared for it in Irish so it would be easier to just stick it out until I do the Leaving Cert and then I can forget whatever I need to.
- I: Very good. So, then ladies it appears that neither of you considered it. So why do you think that you never considered it?
- P: I mean I think I have been led by example. Like my father and his brothers went through their education through all Irish, and even the few that weren't the brightest bulbs, they managed to get on fine. So, I have kind of... I have looked up to that. So, I have always had that positive view of Irish schools and being able to get through it fine and I look at my dad and his brothers now and there is not a bother on them and they went through the Irish education. So, I was like if they can do it then I can. I didn't see a reason why I had to go to an English school.

- I: Very good. What about you [Name]? Have you ever considered it or if not, why do you think you never considered it?
- P: I didn't consider it because I really like our school and I think that the people are lovely and the teachers are really good and even though I struggled that all the teachers were really helpful. So, I didn't feel the need to move; and as well my sister goes to an English school and my cousin moved from my school to an all-English school because they found it hard, but I knew if I could stick it out like I really like the school and I wouldn't want to move.
- I: Very good. Again, it's great to see such a diverse range of ideas and opinions there lads. So, I will move on to the next question. Do any of you know anybody personally who has left an Irish medium school?
- P: Yes.
- I: And if so... I will frame this question and I will explain to you why I am asking this question; this study isn't just about completion and non-completion, it's about your perspective of it. So, I am trying to gather your opinions on why you think things happen. So, I will ask you if you know somebody that left, why do you think that they left the Irish medium school?
- P: I think it was definitely the risk of what it's going to be like coming into college with the Irish language, like they didn't want to make the transition of having to kind of relearn everything going in, and like especially this person wants a more scientific route in life. So, there are big words in science and having to go straight into college knowing that all in Irish they didn't want to take that risk.
- I: Then what do you think [Name]?
- P: For me, my cousin who left, she had ADHD and dyslexia and she found Irish very hard. She wasn't able to concentrate in school and stuff because she didn't know what was going on. So, she left because she didn't understand; whereas I have a friend who left because they just had no interest in school and it wasn't to do with Irish or English, they just didn't want to be there.
- I: Okay. So, very interesting. So, you are talking about a natural attrition there. Just sometimes people just leave school. It's interesting because sometimes we don't think about that. What about you lads, do you know anybody who left an Irish medium school or not?
- P: I know a few people who done it and I think maybe a factor in that is that people think that if they do the Irish maybe until after the Junior Cert or after transition year, they have a H1 or a high mark in Irish kind of wrapped up at that stage, and then a lot of people do think it's easier to learn through English; just even grinds and online resources, they are all through English. So, I think people kind of think you can get the most points out of that.

- I: Good point. The points race is an interesting idea as well, yeah. Then [Name] do you have anything to add or will I move on?
- P: I only knew one person and I didn't really know her that well. I think she just left school because school didn't really suit her; it wasn't necessarily because it was an Irish speaking school.
- I: Again, you feel that it was nothing to do with the language, it was more to do with just the system?
- P: Yeah.
- I: Very good. So, to move on... so that is taking it from your perceptions of what happened into your actual opinions as you are in Irish medium schools... you are on the floor of the factory, so to speak. You see what happens on a daily basis. So, I will ask you, are there any benefits or advantages to attending an Irish medium school? Don't be afraid to have a conversation about this. It doesn't have to be just one on one.
- P: I think the extra points is like the biggest benefit. Like the few extra points you get, and just knowing the language is amazing. Just to be able to speak it, because I know all my friends that are in English schools that can speak Irish as well just think it's so cool that I am fluent in Irish. Yeah, definitely, that obviously the points but also I think when you are in an Irish school you definitely have much more of a *grá* for the language and then you just become like emersed in this culture and that's what makes you want you to kind of go forth and be proud of the language, whereas when people are in English schools there is the typical like "I didn't even want to do Irish" and it's like there is so much more to that and you definitely do almost form a bond with a language because like...
- P: Like even I was talking to my friends in an English school and the stuff where we do *céilís* and stuff when we were in 4th year and stuff like that, they just didn't even know what that meant. And you are like what it was and its... like they would laugh at it whereas we would just think it's fun because it's something we have done since we were kids and it's just...
- I: What about you lads? Do you think there are any advantages or benefits to an Irish medium school?
- P: Yeah, I think obviously you will fare well through Irish but I know that if you can speak more than one language you have an easier time learning a third language. So, I think by that maybe French is a little bit easier for people who do Irish. But I can't really attest to that because I don't know the exact facts and I have heard that; and I think also what [Name] said about... or what was said about the love of the language, I think that's a really good point and especially as you get older you do start to appreciate the Irish and learning through Irish, which is something that people in English schools don't really get the chance to appreciate.

- I: What do you think [Name], are there any advantages at all?
- P: The extra points obviously, and you kind of naturally just make it easier to get Irish done as a language. And if Irish does happen to explode in the next few years and everyone is talking it, I am prepared.
- I: Very good. So those are advantages. Do you think there are any disadvantages to attending an Irish medium school?
- P: It's going to be harder to go into college. Like I want to do a science-based subject and all the terminology we know is through Irish. So, it might make it a bit harder in college.
- P: Yeah, like exactly that. You are going to... I can't really think of many disadvantages. Like I think really it's just that; it's that having to do that translation for instance. Irish is nowhere to be seen really outside of our school premises. You see it going through the shops and you will leave see it for biscuits and stuff, but like people aren't speaking it. So, when you have to go into that workforce with having to do translation between different things, I think it will definitely be difficult.
- I: Actually, I have just a sub-question there. So, did any of you think about those ideas when you were at a transition point maybe, from 3rd year to 4th year or 4th year to 5th year? Did those ideas weigh on your mind?
- P: Yeah, like a good bit but as I said earlier, I really liked my school and didn't want to leave and have to start again in an English school because I feel like it would have been harder to learn everything through every subject through English again from 5th year onwards. So, I said... my dad was telling me about a study that was done about how it is harder on all Irish students to go into college and like learn through English in college after doing Irish their whole lives. But I just think it would have been harder to go to an English school in 5th year and just started again.
- I: What about you lads? Have you any ideas of disadvantages or things that could be slanted that way?
- P: Nothing anyone else has already said.
- I: Then if you are happy then I will move onto the next one. So, again, this brings it back into perception. So, I just wanted to see what you feel about other people. So, if you know somebody who considered leaving an Irish medium school, but then didn't leave... so if you know somebody. So, you don't have to speak if you don't. Why do you think they decided to stay?
- P: I mean the person I know literally went through the whole rigmarole of like going to the interview and got the interview and they had the acceptance into the school, but at the end of the day it wasn't 5th year, it was at a later point and it was "Look, its two years, I am able to do this". It wasn't ever really about... I think

for this person it wasn't really about the language and having to do that transition of Irish to English. I think it was for a newer atmosphere. I don't think it was actually the language that impacted it at all. I mean obviously I am sure it was a thought that came to mind but it was definitely more of they needed a change, but at the end they thought its two years, what is it going to do?

I: A valid point. I am getting the view from looking at you that none of you know or could go into this detail. So, we will just move on, its fine. Here is an interesting one. If you were to talk to your friends in an English medium school about your school, what are the positive things you would say and also what are the negative things you would say? So, talking to friends in English medium schools, what are the positive and negatives that you would say about your Irish medium school and schooling through Irish? You have already mentioned it a little bit.

P: They always do be shocked. I tell them I learn German with an English book through Irish. So, we have to translate the book into Irish to translate it into German and they do be shocked.

I: It's a bit of a dance, isn't it?

P: Yeah.

I: Anybody else there?

P: Yeah, I think like such a big like difference is talking about maths and all the different... like I have never really known it as one plus one... it was never one minus one, it's always one *dealaigh a haon*. Like little things. I can never remember the names of things in English. I will never ever... whenever I am having a conversation, I will be like you know the stretched-out square. Like it's just... and we would have a laugh about it but it's just that change... you know one thing your whole life through that and I know my thing in one way, and it's just having to make that change.

I: Would you say that's a positive thing or a negative thing?

P: I think it's positive because it's like... I guess we are expanding each other's minds in a way. Like I would never see it as a negative way. Like it's not going to impact us too much. It's something that if anything we just have a laugh about. I don't think its negative.

I: What about you lads? Are there any positive or negative things you would say to your friends in English medium schools?

P: I think it's kind of... it's a cool skill to have; to be able to talk in Irish. Sometimes I am in a shop with my friend who might know Irish and someone in front of you might be giving out to the shop clerk or whatever, and you could kind of give out about her in Irish and like they wouldn't be... they would be none the wiser. It can come up handy especially the orals were a couple of weeks ago and I had

people messaging me looking for grids over zoom for the whole weekend. Like seven or eight people at the one go.

I: You were kept busy?

P: Very busy.

I: I hope you have a good tax reporting system! Make sure you are paying the appropriate commission to Revenue. So, in talking to other people about English medium and Irish medium schools, do you feel that there is ever exaggeration at play, when comparing schools? Like if you discuss your school with others, do ever exaggerate or play down your school?

P: I can't really say I did. I mean I think the feedback is definitely exaggerated. I have literally been given the phrase that they think learning through Irish would be hell on earth. Like they just can't imagine it. But then at the same time I had someone beside me saying I would have loved it. It's really like there are two completely different sides that are always given but I don't think I would ever personally... I think I literally tell it just as it to their face.

I: Yeah.

P: Definitely with people when you tell them you are in all Irish school and they are asking are you doing maths through Irish and all, and then when you say yeah they... it's like it's a really mad thing and they are like "Oh my god, I can't believe that, that would be so hard" When it's just the same as it is in English, just because we have been doing Irish so long it's not like a big thing to us; where for them it would be a huge thing.

I: Yeah.

P: So definitely, it does do be exaggerated. The answers and stuff we get when we say...

I: Okay. So, we will jump on because we are almost there actually, thanks very much. So, to your knowledge...this is just checking what you see on a daily basis; do you think that your school does anything to keep students in the school? So, to make sure that they don't leave before 6th year.

P: I don't think so. I mean like I have a handful of friends that have gone and wanted to change and other friends that literally went for the interview and was about to change and from their point of view they are just free to do whatever. They actually never saw the school have an input and they never reported back to me that the school were doing anything. I think it was just like free to do whatever they wanted.

P: I know with my friend who left just because they didn't like school. It wasn't like... the school didn't stop her from not coming in, she just wasn't coming in and leaving and when she got there and just... it was just kind of like "Okay, if you

don't want to be here, don't be here" So I think nothing really stopped her from going. She felt like there was nothing to kind of keep her there. No one was kind of trying to get her to stay or from my view I didn't see anything that was trying to keep her there.

I: What about you lads? Do you have any opinions? If you don't, its fine. Does your school do anything to actively keep students in the school?

P: I don't think there is anything they can do other than saying... like threatening some sort of action. Well because at the end of the day if you are just going to sit there and not do anything, there is no point. Rather than having you take up a seat. There is no harm in sending them somewhere else.

I: Do you think then that maybe friends and family have an influence on a person's decision to remain or to leave?

P: Definitely. I know in my family... like it's not that they wouldn't let me leave. If I had a proper plan set out with what I wanted to do after, maybe they would consider it. But if I was to just say I don't want to do school, I don't like school, I want to leave, and I didn't have a plan, my family would tell me "Look, just at least stay until after your Leaving Cert" and they wouldn't let me leave and I know with my friends as well, my friends would be trying to convince me to stay because they know that its best to get your Leaving Cert out the way so you have like options when you are older.

I: What about the other folks? Do you think that friends and family have an influence on a person's decision to remain or to leave an Irish medium school?

P: Yeah, I mean especially with me having my father going through the Irish language, that like he is really like... of course I haven't had the desire to leave but if I did, he would be like "If I did it you can do it". So, I think I also have a very different point of view because I have that family that has been emersed in it and have gone through it and no issues with them. So, it's like well if they can I can. So, I definitely am pushed on by family.

I: What about you lads?

P: My mother is very big into Irish. So, I think she would be heartbroken if I left the Irish school. So that alone is kind of pushing me on a bit because I wouldn't want to disappoint her, and as well my brother is big into Irish. So that kind of culture, it wouldn't really be an option. But maybe if no one in my family did Irish and they looked at it as if I were doing something great going to an Irish school, it might be easier then to leave. They would say fair enough like...

I: Then taking on from the friends and family, do you think that the student/teacher relationships have an influence on a person's decision to remain or to leave an Irish medium school? So, that kind of interaction between students and teachers, does that have an influence?

- P: I think definitely like if the teachers are helpful and like talk to the students more, that it really does keep them in because like I know for me when I have difficulties with spelling and stuff and like teachers that would help me would motivate me more to try and be better at the subject and stuff and not want to just leave and just give up on it. Because I know when you have a teacher that is not nice or that doesn't like you, it kind of demotivates you and if you have that... if you have a kid that it is *dána* [bold] and all the teachers don't like them, they are not going to want to stay in school because everyone is giving out to them all the time.
- I: Yeah. What do you think [Name]? Do you think that the student/teacher relationship is important in a student's decision to stay or to leave?
- P: Yeah, I do. I am going to go out on a limb here and say that the student/teacher relationship is almost as important as the teacher's ability to teach the subject. Because if you get on well with a teacher it doesn't matter if the teacher is not the best teacher with their ability to teach the subject, but if they can... if they are friendly enough with you to inspire an interest you will do the work by yourself. So, I think it does play a huge role.
- I: A very valid point. So, we are coming to the end here folks and thanks for your time. We will try and wrap it up soon. So, just thinking back to the start of the session, we have already touched on this a few times as we have gone through but I just want to formally ask the question to you. So, for those of you who considered leaving but didn't, why did you ultimately, after listening to everything, decide to stay?
- P: Convenience. I think it's a lot more convenient to stay in the school where you have your teachers, you have your friends, you know the school, you know where all the room are; rather than go to a different school where you don't know anything and the reason I would have been going wasn't as big as the upheaval it would have caused. So, I just said I would stay here and stick it out.
- I: It's a very big decision, isn't it? What about anybody else? Why do you think that ultimately people would decide to stay?
- P: You are in too deep. They have already done so much that another two years, in comparison to the twelve you have done before since Junior Infants, that sure you can manage a few translations and putting in a bit of extra work; because you have put in so much work up until now that extra work is just pocket change.
- I: I suppose one of you mentioned earlier on the idea that it's just... there are just two years left. Do you think that that might be part of the influence?
- P: Yeah, big time. Exactly as [Name] said at the end of the day it's just convenience. Like its two years. In the grand scheme of things, it seems a lot now but it's easier to stick it out if you do have that... obviously people want those extra points for Irish so I think that that is a big thing that people aren't willing to lose. Because if someone knows if they can just about get there those few marks are going to

make the world of difference for them at the end of the day. So, if you are willing then to just do those two years if you want those marks and just want that ease of not having to do a big change.

- I: Perfect. This is the last part of the whole session. I am going to pose three hypothetical scenarios to you all and I want you to just come in when an idea hits you. So, I want you to imagine that you are the person I am about to mention and tell me what you would do with that amount of power and influence. So, I want you to imagine that you are the Principal of the Irish medium school and that your goal is to keep all of the students in your school until the end of 6th year. What do you think that you could do to make sure that everyone stays in your school until they finish the Leaving Cert?
- P: I would put on extra resource classes and stuff for people who have difficulties with Irish definitely, because that's a really important part of being in an Irish school; being able to actually like speak the language. So, I would definitely make sure there are resources for everyone who is having troubles and as well as that I think it's important... like as was said earlier about the relationships with the teachers and the students, and I would make sure the teachers would put in an extra effort with the people who are messing and don't want to be there clearly. Because if they have a good relationship with them, they would behave better in school.
- I: Anybody else the? Even to build on those points raised by [Name] there.
- P: Definitely making sure that there are resources, even when it comes to studying. It was brought up earlier that like there is never anything online for Irish students if they are looking for extra help. Like the only subjects that I can actually find help in are English and French; the two languages. If I am struggling with biology there is never anything online to help me with biology through Irish. So, I think if a principal was able to promote different resources that don't involve your average teacher notes from outside school, that can help us students when we are studying through Irish.
- I: I think you have touched on the point that [Name] raised earlier about the absurdity of learning German through an English book to answer through Irish because the publishers won't make an Irish version of the book available. So, it doubles [Name] work. I suppose is that something if you were the principal that you would be looking at.
- P: Yeah.
- I: What about you lads? Is there anything if you were the principal that you would do to make sure that everyone is able to stay, if they want to, but is able to stay until they do their Leaving Cert?
- P: If I were Principal, I think I would focus on kind of building a community. Like where people are helped and if people find it tough that there are people there

who can help them to do okay and if people are flying at it that there are people who can help them to excel even more. Like rather than just like doing normal school through Irish, like having people who can help people when they are struggling with the Irish and other things in school as well.

I: Then that is the principal. The second imaginary scenario is imagining that you were just a regular teacher; a subject teacher; but again, your goal is to keep all of the students that you teach in the school until the end of 6th year, because we have mentioned the student/teacher relationship. What do you think that that teacher could do to make sure that students want to stay in the Irish medium school until they finish their Leaving Cert?

P: For me, I know with the teachers. Like I have a few teachers in my school that even the students who would mess a lot would get along really well with, and all the teachers are doing is they are just more understanding with them and if they are going to mess, they don't really... like they wouldn't mess in their class because of how well the teachers get along with them. So, I feel like if a teacher was a tiny bit more understanding with the kids who are messing, they might build a better relationship with them or have a bit more fun in their class so the students who are messing get along better with them and they can kind of teach better because they are not messing in the class.

I: Yeah. Anybody else? If you were a teacher, what would you make sure to do to make sure everyone wants to stay?

P: I was just going to say that I rarely hear... like the motivator for a lot of people is those extra few points and not a lot of teachers remind us of that and I think like if we... let's say in a class exam where I think it would be good if teachers were able to say like... because at the end of the day we are working towards the Leaving Cert, that's it. So, I would love at the big exams like the Christmas and summer exams, that they would give us our face... like result would then be like "But this is what you would get with those extra points for Irish" because that's why we are here for a good reason, we want to see what we can get with this benefit. So, I think if we are just reminded of that, that we do get this benefit for being in the Irish school, I think that would be worthwhile.

P: Definitely because people forget about that a lot as well. Like I forgot you even got that in like biology and stuff, and I remember a few weeks ago our biology teacher was like "This is what you got but you would have got higher if you had the Irish bonus" and all that. So, like you definitely do need to be reminded of it because a lot of them you forget like.

I: You were going to come in there [Name]. What were you going to say?

P: I was going to say [Name] nailed it perfectly. I have a feeling that some of the teachers are bit too controlling in the class and that it is so unbelievably strict that the slightest deviation will... they will stop the class, they will have a word

with you and then they will blame you for stopping the class. So, I think if teachers were a bit more relaxed it would... the students would be less stressed out, and then if they are less stressed out, they would maybe pay more attention and do more work in their own time, because they get on that well with them and they don't want them to have a bad reputation. Then I suppose that even after that they wouldn't need grinds because the school is enough, and even with the grinds like... I am doing grinds at home and I am looking at it and I am thinking "You know what? Biology isn't that hard in English" So I think maybe that kind of encourages students to go to English schools because if they see in the grind that it's not difficult, it's fairly intuitive that it would encourage them to leave almost. So, [Name] said it with the principal, that they could put on extra resources for Irish, so if they manage that then you are basically guaranteed that every student is going to want to go to an Irish school and every student is going to want to stay.

I: So am I right in summing up that you are kind of saying its almost circular. If the resources were there to support Irish and if the teachers changed their classroom management strategies, then that would keep everything within that Irish circle and then force students to look beyond that where they can see that perhaps the grass is greener on the other side.

P: Yeah, exactly. The amount of teachers who are that type of strict is an unbelievably small amount.

I: So, you are saying most of them aren't strict enough, is that what you are saying?

P: No...

I: I am putting words in your mouth; I am messing with you! So, look we will run onto just the final scenario. Imagine that you were the Head of the Student Council and that the Council want to do something to encourage as many students as possible to stay until the end of 6th year, what do you think is within the power of the students within the framework of the school to do to make sure everyone stays? What could the Student Council do?

P: Maybe like study groups or something where people who have difficulties with a subject... so like if someone is finding biology hard, a few people who are good at biology and a few people who aren't good, will sit around and do their homework together or study together. So that the people who are good can help the people who are not so good and it would help the people who are better because like you learn by teaching. So, if they are helping them, it will help the people who are already good.

I: Brilliant idea. Anybody else?

P: Exactly that. Our school has the great resource which is after school study that lets students finish their work within the school. But I think if that were to be extended further and like there to be a room that students could float in and out

of and they can “Can you help me with this?” but I think that would even support that further is the resources; that there are extra notes and things like that there that students that can’t quite grasp it... like those that you get online in English, but through Irish. To support the extra study that you would be doing with friends. I just think that that is a big thing, having those external resources in Irish that the Student Council can push for teachers to find or make or just having that extra push.

- I: Have you any ideas lads or will we move on? Something the Student Council could do. Okay. So, lads that’s the end of this session. So, I want to sincerely thank you for taking the time and for being as honest and as brutally honest as you could have been. So, I just want to remind you if any of you have been affected by any of the issues or memories or ideas that have been raised in this session, that there are many supports available to you. You will find them on the website that I created just for this study; that’s Seomra22.com. If you have trouble accessing them of course you can send an email to me and I can make sure that the relevant people are contacted. Just to remind you that all of your schools have support systems in place so they will all definitely have some sort of a class tutor into a year head and into a guidance counsellor. So, make sure if there are any problems or if you are thinking or feeling anxious after anything we discussed today that you talk to those people and if you are not able to talk to those remember to talk to somebody that you are comfortable with at home; be it a parent or an older brother or sister or aunt or uncle. I will just remind you that this recording is going to be transcribed; that’s written out. It will be anonymised so all of your names will be taken out of it. You will be called Student A, B, C... or we will give you fake names... sorry [Name], I mentioned your name at the start so we won’t be using the name [Name], and the written transcription will be stored securely and all digital recordings will be deleted. If you have any questions or complaints to make about anything that happened today, about me or the way I conducted this meeting, you can contact the DCU ethics committee and you can contact them by email or by phone, and again those details are available on the website. So other than that, I will just thank you for your participation again and I hope that you have a very successful Leaving Cert and final experience in school.

Appendix K – Interview Sample Transcript

I = Interviewer

R = Respondent

- I: Good afternoon [Name]. I want to thank you for taking the time this evening to participate in this study. I know you are really busy and I do appreciate that you are giving me your time to help me out. This study is looking at completion and non-completion in Irish medium post-primary schools. The point of the research is to analyse what schools are doing right and what they are doing wrong in keeping students in schools until the end of 6th Year. So, if you have any questions about any aspect of the study, just feel free to stop me at any point and I can try and answer those questions. I just want to remind you to read the Plain Language Statement which is available on the website. This explains in great detail what the study is about and I want to make sure that you know that you have the right to withdraw from this study at any point in the process without prejudice. What does this mean? It means that if you are uncomfortable participating in the study, you can just drop out at any time. I won't ask you why and I won't chase you about it. If any point you are unhappy with your contribution you have the right to get in touch with me and to ask me to remove your contribution. At the end of the session, I will make sure that you know the different supports that are available to you. So, if anything comes up in the session that worries you or upsets you, I will let to you know where you can turn for support. Just to let you know that this session will be recorded and then transcribed. This means that there is a video recording going for the online session, but once this is over it will be converted to an mp3 format and then that video will be destroyed. Once the sound recording is written out; that is the transcription; the sound recording will then be destroyed. So, the only record that will last will be a written record and, in that record, your real name will not be used and that record will be securely stored for five years. Then those transcriptions will also be destroyed. Just so you know, any identifying information; so, your name or the name of your school or the name of a teacher or the name of a friend that comes up in the session; will be redacted from the written transcription. That means that if you, by mistake, use your schools name, when I am typing up the transcription, I will take that name and I will substitute it with a random name. If you use somebody's name, I will use fake names and I will usually follow the alphabet for that. So, if all of that is clear I will move on with the first question if that is alright with you?
- R: Yeah, perfect.
- I: So [Name], in previous conversations you let me know that you decided to move schools from an Irish medium to an English medium one, so can you tell me anything about the decision and in particular can you take me about your

experiences in the Irish medium school that you feel influenced your move to an English speaking one?

R: Well to be honest, it is kind of a family tradition. So, my dad went and then my sister went, but when I moved to [School] ... like I know I wasn't meant to say that but you can leave that in...

I: I will take the names out, don't worry.

R: I was reluctant to move, even though it had always been a thing "Like [Name], you are going to be moving to the [Name]" and I was like grand. But then when I moved to [School], I was like I love this school, I don't want to go. But then I think by the time the Junior Cert came I was so stressed and my family was just kind of like why are you stressing so much. Like I just couldn't handle my stress for some reason. So, then they offered to pay for the grinds school and I took the opportunity but at the old school I think the only downside was kind of... I think it was just so hard to get Irish teachers. So, for my time at the school some teachers just weren't great. They had to use google translate for notes. Like it just kind of wasn't the same then because then you would have to go home and make your own notes and then as well as that I wanted to do Biomed in college so I needed to do chemistry to get most of my courses, whereas like it is hard to get a chemistry that can speak Irish as well. So, we didn't have chemistry by the time I was in school.

I: Okay. You mentioned stress there with the Junior Cycle. I just want to zone in on that. From your experience of going through that stress around State examinations and then was ... am I correct in saying that was an influence in your decision to move?

R: Yeah.

I: Are there any supports that schools could put into place that might help students who might feel the same and then feel that moving schools is their only option? Do you think?

R: Sorry, what was the question again?

I: Are there any supports that you feel schools could put into place to help students who feel that kind of stress?

R: When I moved school it was more kind of... there was more talk about mental health and stuff, and how to manage stress, and there were more guidance counsellors that you could go to at any time and book a session with any time. If you were feeling really stressed it was just more kind of welcoming. The people were more welcoming. In the office you could go and talk to them. I don't know, I just feel like there wasn't as much emphasis on that as there was in the old school.

- I: It's a big issue at the moment and we only saw it I suppose when Covid pulled us away from the school and we saw how important it was to have those mental health structures and supports in place. So, I suppose that kind of leads nicely into the next question. Is there anything then that your old school; the Irish medium school; did well, that you feel could be enhanced and could be made better?
- R: Well, I think the teachers were always really... they put themselves on the same level as the students. Like you would be happy to go up and talk to any of the teachers at the end of class. They would never kind of give off the impression that they were too good for the students or whatever, whereas now that I am in college, I can see that not everyone is like that. Like a lecturer is not going to say, "Oh come up to me at the end of the class if you need to talk about anything" Whereas in the Irish school I feel like I would have been happy to go up to any of my teachers and ask if I had a problem.
- I: Okay. Actually, now I am going to focus on the... you mentioned college, so I am going to jump to another question, if that is alright. I want you to imagine that I am a student in your old school, and I am telling you that I am thinking of moving to an English-speaking school because I am worried about understanding terms in English in college.
- R: Yeah.
- I: What advice would you have for me before I made that decision to move?
- R: People have actually said that one to me as well. But I thought the same when I was moving to the English school. I thought it would give me a head start in college but to be honest it is not hard at all to grasp what they are saying. Like you think you don't know anything in English but then once you are there it's not really rocket science. Some words yeah, you probably have to look it up when you go home or whatever, but I don't think it should... like I don't there is really any downside to learning through Irish.
- I: Again, it's almost like you are reading my script here [Name]. Because my next question is, what do you think are biggest benefits of attending an Irish medium school? So, do you feel that you got any benefit from your time spent in the secondary school through Irish?
- R: Besides the ego boost of being able to say *pé rud gur mhaith liom* [anything I like] I feel like it is just for the Leaving Cert first of all, it is handy to have the benefit of actually knowing what is going on in Irish, whereas everyone else I have spoken to that have gone to English schools their whole lives have always hated Irish because of the way they have been taught it. They just don't seem to know what is going on. So, I think that was good, and as well just having that kind of insight into the culture of Ireland, I loved that. Talking to say grandparents and stuff, they always seemed to love that. So, I just think it is nice.

- I: So, they are some very nice advantages, but do you feel that there are any disadvantages associated with attending an Irish medium secondary school?
- R: That is hard to think of...
- I: If there is nothing running off your head you don't have...
- R: I don't think there are...
- I: Are there any disadvantages? I don't know.
- R: No. I don't think so.
- I: So, well that is grand. Then I get to skip the next question! So, that is fine. So, in the focus groups that I did already this year, the school community and the atmosphere was mentioned as a key factor in the decision to remain or to leave. Do you think that the school community and the atmosphere are important?
- R: Yeah, definitely. That was the thing that kind of broke my heart the most when I had to leave. Because my old school was so fun and everyone was so close. I feel like most *Gaelscoils* as well, the years are really small and you kind of... you are friends with everyone. There are no groups really. You could talk to anyone in your year, and as well with the Irish say the music, the kind of *céilís* and stuff that would happen, just every kind of season is so fun. Sports day, like Christmas time, Halloween; like I definitely missed that the most because moving school to such a big year as well, that there wasn't that sense of community at all, especially being at a grinds school as well.
- I: This is aside the fact but I am just curious about this. Was it a big year group or a big class?
- R: Yeah, there were hundreds of people in my year alone, and that was a smaller year than 5th Year below us, and then there was 4th Year as well. So, there was like... I don't even know how many people. I think around a thousand in that school.
- I: That is some group. That is some amount of correcting!
- R: I still meet people in college and they are like "What school did you go to?" and I am like "The Institute" and they are like "Oh the same" and we just have never seen each other before.
- I: That is ludicrous. Especially I think sometimes with the *Gaelscoils* something that I have noticed from a teacher's perspective, that doesn't happen in a lot of schools, is you are so interconnected with lower year groups and higher year groups. You tend to know people from first year right up to 6th Year, which I think is a very special thing.

- R: Yeah. Like say [Name] was out last night... with all the year and the year above, and like every night out its always like "Oh [School]..." like it's just so fun having all the years know each other.
- I: Until this silly pandemic is over and you can really enjoy being young people again.
- R: Yeah.
- I: So, anyway, I will get back on track here. There are only two more questions now [Name]. So that was the school community and atmosphere. So, another factor mentioned was the student teacher relationships. So, they were mentioned in the focus groups as being quite important in the decision to remain in the school or to leave. Why do you think that student teacher relationships might have mentioned as an important factor for staying or going?
- R: Again, I think because the years are so small. Like the teachers just know the students. You can actually form a connection, whether that is good or bad, I don't know, but it was definitely one of the big factors in my decision to leave as well because I felt like the teachers actually cared about me. I didn't want to leave because I felt they actually had the best intentions for the students as well. I wasn't just another face in the classroom.
- I: Okay, very good. Then I suppose the final question [Name] is quite open. Feel free to expand as you will or to just think out loud, I suppose, is the right term. What social factors do you think have the greatest influence on a student's decision to remain or to leave an Irish speaking school? By social factors I mean parents, teachers, families, friends, siblings. Any part of society. From your own experience what do you think?
- R: Friend wise... because I was kind of 50/50 for such a large part of it. Friends wise was definitely "Please don't leave. The school is so fun. We can stay together." Then parents wise it was more so like "You are really stressed; I feel like you could handle your stress more if you move. I feel like you could achieve better grades if you were less stressed and you moved." But then again, like hearing that other friends were moving and then me thinking "What if I miss out on this opportunity to leave?"
- I: And tell me did you ever consider or talk about... and I am just curious about this; did you ever think about or consider the bonus points or the bonus point structure for studying through Irish?
- R: Yeah, I did. But then that was also kind of like in my head as well. It was either that and don't do chemistry or do chemistry and just sacrifice that.
- I: So again, it comes back to subject choice then was a huge factor?
- R: Yeah.

I: Would you have been willing, if the school had been able to provide for chemistry; even if it was through English; would that have been a satisfactory kind of solution?

R: Yeah, I think definitely.

I: Then in terms of... again this is me just thinking off loud; I am off script here. You mentioned at the start mental health, and I found it particularly interesting that that was kind of the open-door policy with guidance counsellors that you mentioned. Is there anything like that that you feel, looking back, that schools should be providing as a matter of course? That you shouldn't have to go to a private school to avail of? Like could schools be doing to help you with the mental health and deal with stress?

R: I think in the school that I moved to there was a teacher, Mr [Name], and he would come and say introduce himself to everyone. Everyone knew who he was and he would kind of have little talks and stuff and made himself approachable to the year and then he was the person who said "If you ever need to come to my office, like just write your name..." We had a little page on the wall and you wrote your name and you wrote a time that suited you and then you could just come down at that time and talk about your worries, and then from then on, he could send you to the guidance counsellor, he could call your parents to talk about things. Like it was really kind of... you just felt comfortable. You didn't have to go to any teachers and then see them in class. It was like it was this safe place to go to.

I: So, it was like... would I be right in saying it was almost like a Year Head role, except the Year Head didn't teach you?

R: Yeah.

I: So that gave... again I don't want to put words in your mouth, but I find it interesting. So, are you saying that because he didn't teach you it gave him a kind of a distance that you felt more comfortable discussing issues?

R: Yeah, definitely because I know even talking to some students, they wouldn't have been comfortable then going to class with him and sitting down for maths.

I: If he had known what was going on in their lives.

R: Yeah.

I: I understand.

R: Like it is up to you whether you want to go back and see him again. Like you could just leave it there and don't go back or you could go back for another chat.

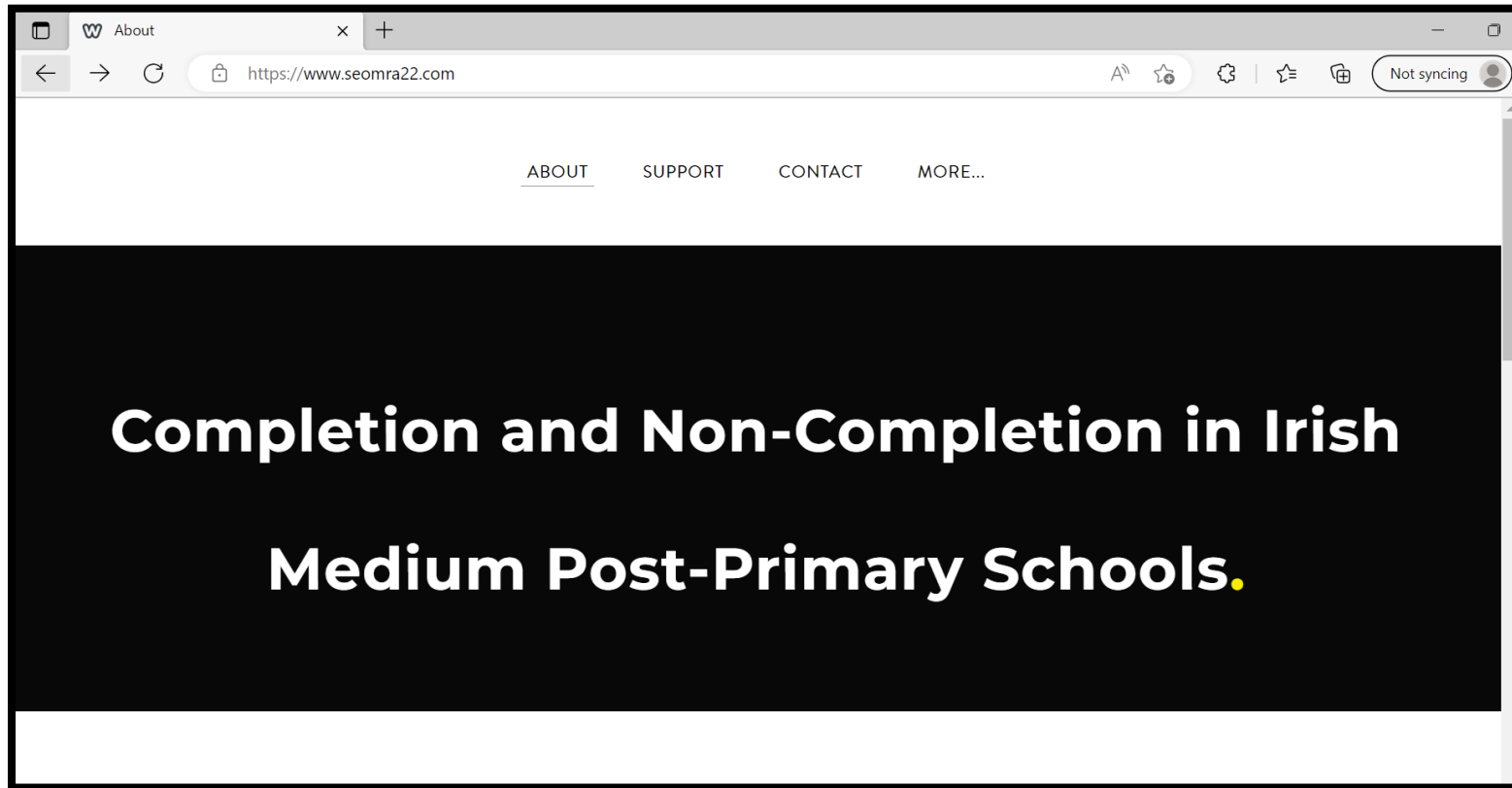
I: Okay. Do you think that if the schools maybe had some system like that, or even a mentoring system starting up a bit earlier than 6th Year, would that be helpful to students are considering staying or leaving?

- R: Yeah, definitely. I think it really depends on the person it is as well. Like I wouldn't say... I wouldn't advise school to rush in and just pick the first person they see. Like I feel like if it was just anyone half as many people wouldn't have gone.
- I: So, this Mr [Name]...what you are saying is he was the right person for the right job really?
- R: Yeah. He had a background in like psychology and psychotherapy. So, I don't know... just everyone I have spoken to that kind of was the same, like really anxious and stuff, he just knew what to say.
- I: That is perfect. Again, I just find it fascinating. I am thinking of different things schools could be doing to help kids outside of keeping them in school, just to help them feel better about themselves.
- R: And as well it was kind of like more... like say you missed a few minutes of English to go... like it wasn't the end of the world because it is better than you staying at home all day from school just to not talk to anyone. But if you know that you can go in and talk to someone for ten minutes and then get the last say half an hour of the class... like I feel like it made such a difference. To just put that ahead of everything.
- I: That is nice. Actually, now that I am thinking about it, tell me do you ever speak Irish outside of school anymore?
- R: When I see the girls from [School] like we do it as a joke but then we just get so into it, like, and then I am like I actually miss this. I miss having to speak Irish in school.
- I: I am just thinking back to... you mentioned the culture and the community and speaking it to your grandparents and that kind of connection that seems to be there between older and younger generations and maybe Irish is a bridge.
- R: When I am with [Grandmother] as well, when I go and visit my nannie, she will tell me to teach her Irish. It doesn't ever work at all but I try and she loves it!
- I: Very good. I think that is a nice little link that I would like to maybe focus in on with other people in other interviews. That is it from my questions [Name].
- R: Perfect.
- I: If I have brought up any bad memories or if there is anything that you want to discuss there are various supports available to you and I have them listed on the website for this study, which is Seomra22.com. Alternatively, you can just send me back an email and let me know and I can send you all the written information. So, have you any questions about anything that we discussed today?
- R: No, that is perfect. If you need any more information or whatever, just hit me up.

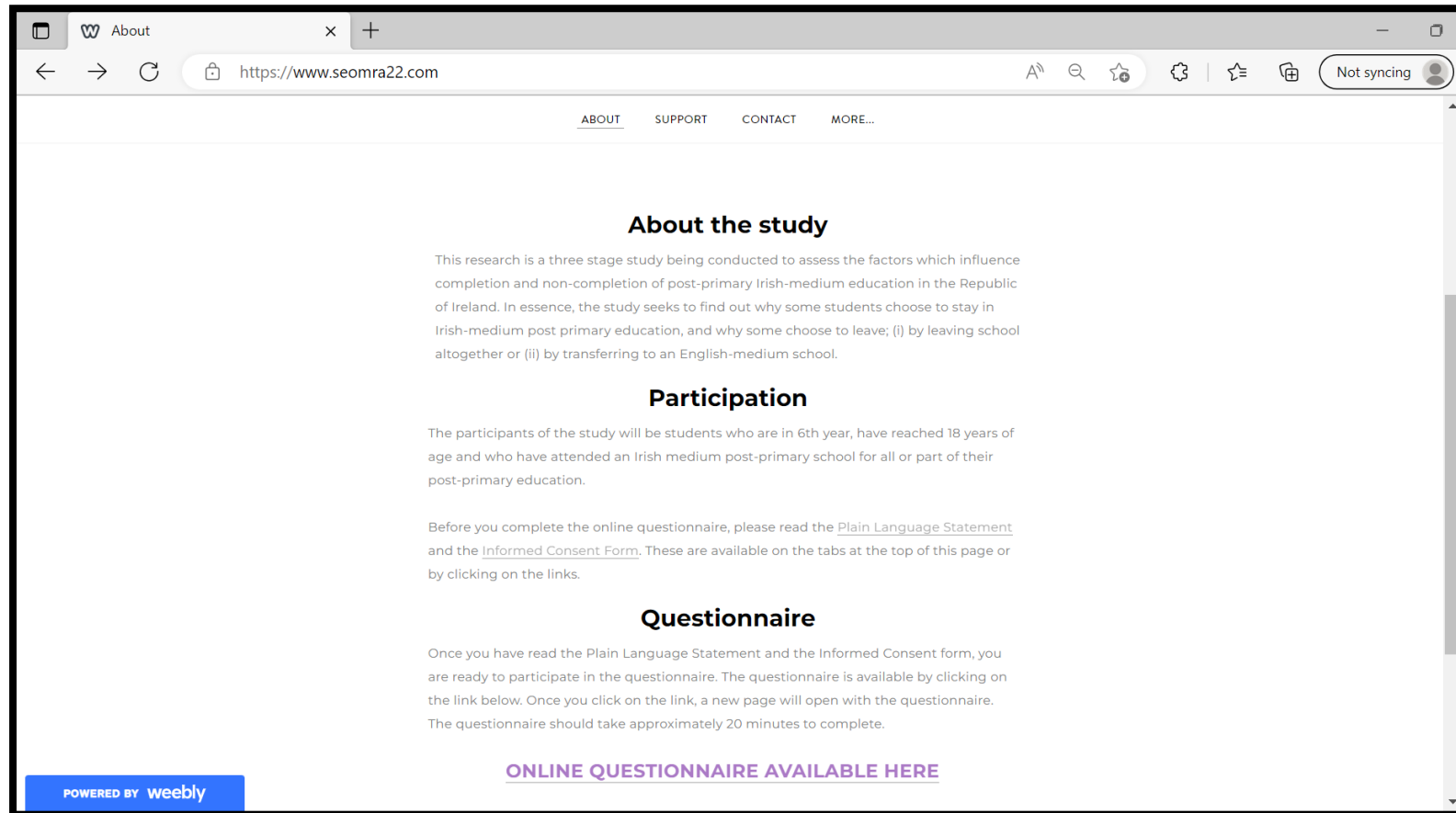
I: No problem. I am going to end the recording now.

Appendix L – Research Website

Website Landing / Home Page



Website About Page



The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL <https://www.seomra22.com>. The page has a navigation menu with links for [ABOUT](#), [SUPPORT](#), [CONTACT](#), and [MORE...](#). The main content is organized into three sections: "About the study", "Participation", and "Questionnaire".

About the study

This research is a three stage study being conducted to assess the factors which influence completion and non-completion of post-primary Irish-medium education in the Republic of Ireland. In essence, the study seeks to find out why some students choose to stay in Irish-medium post primary education, and why some choose to leave; (i) by leaving school altogether or (ii) by transferring to an English-medium school.

Participation

The participants of the study will be students who are in 6th year, have reached 18 years of age and who have attended an Irish medium post-primary school for all or part of their post-primary education.

Before you complete the online questionnaire, please read the [Plain Language Statement](#) and the [Informed Consent Form](#). These are available on the tabs at the top of this page or by clicking on the links.

Questionnaire

Once you have read the Plain Language Statement and the Informed Consent form, you are ready to participate in the questionnaire. The questionnaire is available by clicking on the link below. Once you click on the link, a new page will open with the questionnaire. The questionnaire should take approximately 20 minutes to complete.

[ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRE AVAILABLE HERE](#)

At the bottom left, there is a blue banner that says "POWERED BY Weebly".

Website Questionnaire Page

Questionnaire

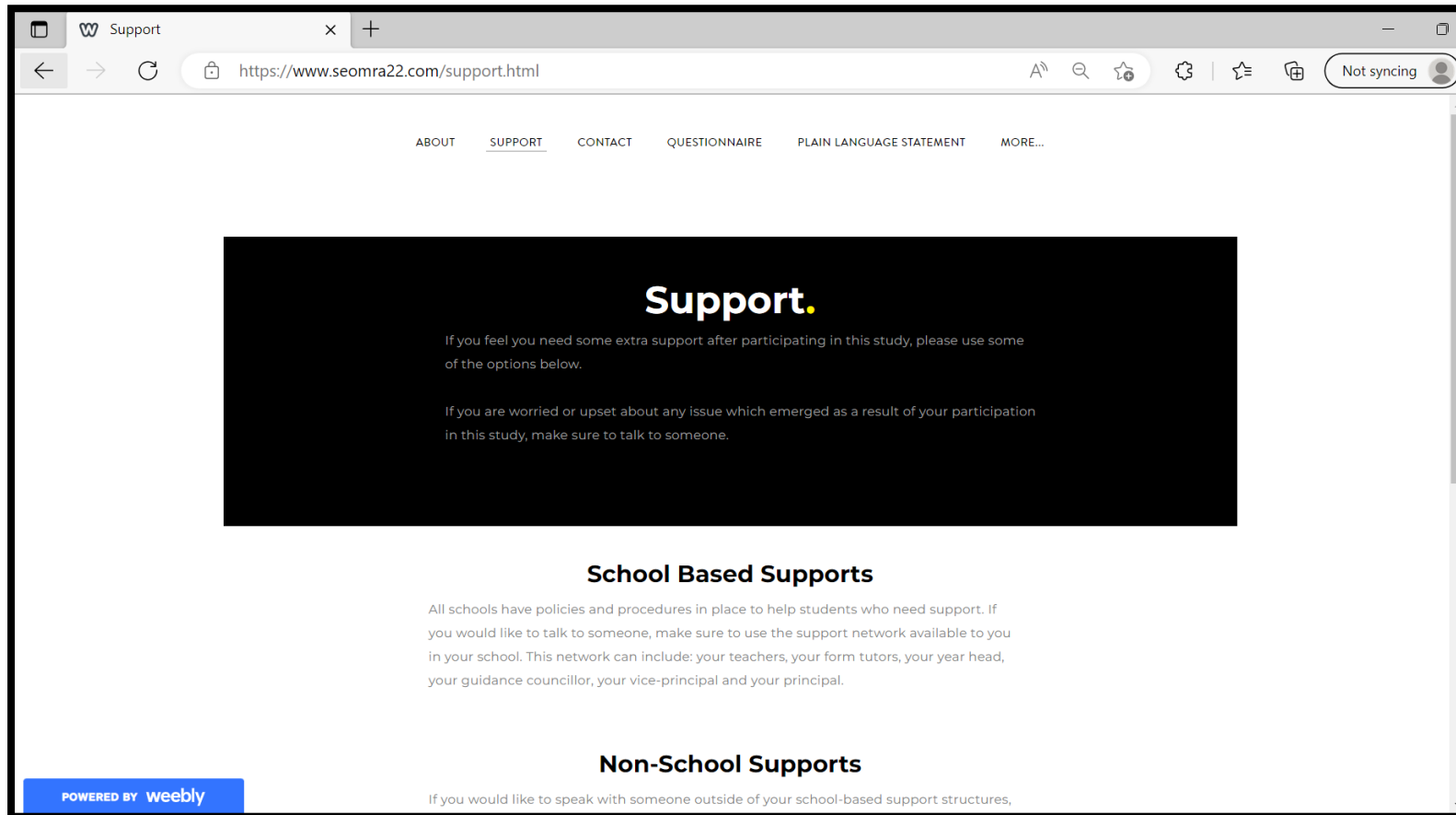
Once you have read the [Plain Language Statement](#) and the [Informed Consent form](#), you are ready to participate in the questionnaire. The questionnaire is available by clicking on the link below. Once you click on the link, a new page will open with the questionnaire. The questionnaire should take approximately 20 minutes to complete.

ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRE AVAILABLE HERE

Please answer all of the questions honestly. Remember, all answers are anonymous.

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Website Support Page



The screenshot shows a web browser window with the address bar displaying <https://www.seomra22.com/support.html>. The page has a navigation menu with links for ABOUT, SUPPORT, CONTACT, QUESTIONNAIRE, PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT, and MORE... The main content area features a large black box with the word "Support." in white, followed by two paragraphs of text. Below this, there are two sections: "School Based Supports" and "Non-School Supports", each with a heading and a paragraph of text. A blue "POWERED BY weebly" logo is visible in the bottom left corner.

Support

If you feel you need some extra support after participating in this study, please use some of the options below.

If you are worried or upset about any issue which emerged as a result of your participation in this study, make sure to talk to someone.

School Based Supports

All schools have policies and procedures in place to help students who need support. If you would like to talk to someone, make sure to use the support network available to you in your school. This network can include: your teachers, your form tutors, your year head, your guidance councillor, your vice-principal and your principal.

Non-School Supports

If you would like to speak with someone outside of your school-based support structures,

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ABOUT SUPPORT CONTACT QUESTIONNAIRE PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT MORE...

Non-School Supports

If you would like to speak with someone outside of your school-based support structures, there are some suggestions and contact details below:

- Childline 1800 66 66 66
- Pieta House 01 601 0000
- Samaritans 1850 60 90 900
- Teen-Line Ireland 1800 833 634
- Gay Switchboard 01-872 1055
- BodyWhys 1890 200 444
- Pieta House 1800 201 890 (The 24/7 Suicide Helpline is available by calling 1800 247 247 or texting "HELP" to 51444)
- Aware 1890 303 302

Home Supports

If you feel you need to talk to someone about how you feel, then speak to someone at home. This can often be a parent or guardian, however, you may also like to speak to some other trusted adult, such as a grandparent or an aunt or uncle.

If you are worried or upset about any issue which emerged from this study, make sure to talk to someone.

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Website Contact Page

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the address bar displaying <https://www.seomra22.com/contact.html>. The page has a navigation menu with links for ABOUT, SUPPORT, CONTACT (which is underlined), QUESTIONNAIRE, PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT, and MORE... The main content area features a dark background with the heading "Contact the Researcher." and the text: "If you have any questions about this research, you can contact the researcher directly by email: claran.kavanagh52@mail.dcu.ie". Below this, on a white background, is the heading "Dublin City University" and the text: "If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, you can contact:". This is followed by the contact information for REC Administration: "REC Administration, Research Office, Dublin City University, Glasnevin, Dublin 9. Tel: (01) 7007816". At the bottom of the page is a map showing the location of Dublin City University on DCU Collins Avenue, with a red pin marker. A "POWERED BY weebly" logo is visible in the bottom left corner of the page.

Contact

<https://www.seomra22.com/contact.html>

ABOUT SUPPORT **CONTACT** QUESTIONNAIRE PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT MORE...

Contact the Researcher.

If you have any questions about this research, you can contact the researcher directly by email:
claran.kavanagh52@mail.dcu.ie

Dublin City University

If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, you can contact:

REC Administration,
Research Office,
Dublin City University,
Glasnevin
Dublin 9.
Tel: (01) 7007816

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Website Plain Language Statement Page

Plain Language Statement

ABOUT SUPPORT CONTACT QUESTIONNAIRE PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT MORE...

Plain Language Statement.

The Plain Language Statement explains the research in normal language that everyone can understand. The statement lets you know exactly what participation in the research requires of you and explains why the research is being done.

Plain Language Statement for Participating Students

The factors that influence completion and non-completion in Irish medium post-primary education from the student perspective.

Dear Student,

My name is Ciarán Kavangh (Ó Caomhánaigh). I am a qualified post-primary teacher with many years teaching experience in Irish-medium education. I am currently a PhD research student in the Institute of Education, Dublin City University under the supervision of Professor Pádraig Ó Duibhir and Dr. Laoise Ní Thuairisg. I am undertaking important research into: *the factors that influence completion and non-completion in Irish medium post-primary education from the student perspective.*

This research has three stages;

1. Stage 1, involves the completion of online questionnaires,

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Website Informed Consent Page

Informed Consent

ABOUT SUPPORT CONTACT QUESTIONNAIRE PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT MORE...

Informed Consent.

In order to participate in the study, you must provide informed consent. This means that you must understand what the study is about and you must agree to participate voluntarily. You can read about the study in more detail below:

Informed Consent for Participating Students

Research Question
The factors that influence completion and non-completion in Irish medium post-primary education from the student perspective.

Purpose of the Research
This study aims to:

1. Identify the factors which cause students to remain in Irish medium post-primary education.
2. Identify the factors which cause students to consider leaving Irish medium post-primary education.
3. Identify the factors which cause students to leave Irish medium post-primary education and transfer to an English medium school.
4. Analyse the students' perspectives with regards to completion and non-completion.
5. Construct recommendations based on the analysis of the students' perspectives to facilitate Irish medium post-primary schools in maximising

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Website Information for Schools Page

For Schools

https://www.seomra22.com/for-schools.html

ABOUT SUPPORT CONTACT QUESTIONNAIRE PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT MORE...

Information for Schools.

Plain Language Statement for Schools

The factors that influence completion and non-completion in Irish medium post-primary education from the student perspective.

Dear Principal / Chairperson,

My name is Ciarán Kavangh (Ó Caomhánaigh) I am a qualified post-primary teacher with many years teaching experience in Irish-medium education. I am currently a PhD research student in the Institute of Education, Dublin City University under the supervision of Professor Pádraig Ó Duibhir and Dr. Laoise Ní Thuairisg. I am undertaking important research into: *the factors that influence completion and non-completion in Irish medium post-primary education from the student perspective.*

This research has three stages, Stage 1, involves the completion of online questionnaires, Stage 2 involves facilitating focus groups and Stage 3, involves interviews with students to discuss their opinions of and experiences with completion and non-completion in Irish medium post-primary settings.

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Website Further Information Page

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the address bar displaying <https://www.seomra22.com/more-information.html>. The page has a navigation menu with links for ABOUT, SUPPORT, CONTACT, QUESTIONNAIRE, PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT, and MORE... The main content area is divided into five sections, each with a bold heading and a paragraph of text. A 'Not syncing' notification is visible in the top right corner of the browser. At the bottom left, there is a blue banner that says 'POWERED BY weebly'.

ABOUT SUPPORT CONTACT QUESTIONNAIRE PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT MORE...

What kind of personal data will be processed?

The study will collect personal data such as age, geographical location and gender.

The study will also collect data about participants' opinions, responses and beliefs.

Email addresses will be collected, but these will not be used as part of the study itself, rather they will be used to contact participants once they have indicated that they are happy to be contacted by email.

How and where will data be stored?

The electronic data will be stored on the researcher's computer and protected with a password. Any written information will be gathered and stored safely in a locked filing compartment in the researcher's home.

Some digital data will be stored using cloud storage serviced provided by DCU. This could data will be password protected. Only the researcher and his supervisors will have access to this data set.

Who will have access to data?

The researcher and his joint supervisors.

How long will the data be held?

All data will be stored for five years. Data will be stored in accordance with the Record Retention Schedule and Data Protection Guidelines of Dublin City University.

How will data be disposed of?

After five years, the researcher will shred all hard copies of data results.

Data that is stored electronically under an encrypted code, will be deleted by the researcher from each device and online space individually (computer, cloud) after five years.

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