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Entry

Inclusion in Immersion Education: Identifying and Supporting Students with Additional Educational Needs

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Definition: This entry reviews the research around identifying and supporting students with additional educational needs (AEN) in immersion education. This is important as it is clear from international research that teachers in this form of education experience challenges due to the lack of availability of minority language services, assessments, interventions, and resources. The international research and literature on the positive practices that can be implemented in immersion education to help teachers and schools overcome the challenges they encounter is reviewed. The themes included in this entry are inclusive pedagogies, assessment, literacy, mathematics, and challenging behaviour.

Keywords: inclusion; additional educational needs; assessment; intervention; mathematics; language; literacy

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1. Introduction

Inclusive education involves the removal of barriers so that all students can access education, regardless of their abilities [1–3]. It is based on the premise that the education system, or the school, needs to adapt to meet the needs of the student, rather than the emphasis being on the student changing to "fit in". The understanding is that all students can learn when presented with appropriate learning opportunities [4,5]. To achieve inclusion in education, all students should be treated equally, and accommodations to the environment and teaching/learning strategies should be made to ensure equality of access to the curriculum [6]. Immersion education is an effective form of bilingual education where students are immersed in a new language, where they become bilingual whilst also maintaining their first language development [7]. In this form of education, the day-to-day language of instruction in the school is a minority language, for example, Irish in Irish-medium education. In this context, the students receive all their education through Irish (e.g., mathematics, history, geography) except for formal English and modern foreign language lessons. There are many benefits of immersion education for students with additional educational needs (AEN), for example, developing their linguistic ability, bilingualism, cognitive advantages, social and communication development, and higher levels of self-esteem [8–15]. Students with AEN may require additional support or accommodations to enable them to access the curriculum, for example, differentiation, additional teaching support, or physical adaptations. Foreign language classrooms offer numerous opportunities for students with AEN to develop social skills through peer interaction and communicative practice [16,17]. This can help boost their confidence and motivation to communicate [18].

Even though there are many benefits of this form of education, there have been concerns about the suitability of bilingualism and immersion education for students with AEN [19–24]. Much of this advice is based on misconceptions such as it would be too difficult for these students to learn a second language, it would place too much pressure on them, confuse them, or delay their first language development [24–26]. These misconceptions have discouraged many students from enrolling in immersion education, and

they have also led to students transferring to monolingual schools due to their learning difficulties [19–24]. However, recent research on the benefits and suitability of immersion education and bilingualism for these students has been positive [19,27–30]. Some studies make a valid argument around the moral and ethical implications of exempting students from learning second/minority languages or withholding them from attending this form of education [17,26,31]. One of the cornerstones of inclusion is that every child with AEN should have an equal right to attend the same form of education as their peers. However, within the contexts of immersion education worldwide, it is stated that schools and teachers face difficulties accessing assessments, resources, and interventions through minority languages [32–34]. This entry reviews the international research and literature on the positive practices that can be implemented in immersion education to help teachers and schools to overcome the challenges they encounter. The themes included in this entry are inclusive pedagogies, assessment, literacy, mathematics, and challenging behaviour. The inclusive practices reviewed are important for immersion education teachers as inclusive practices in the immersion education classroom are vital to ensure that students are not exempted/removed from this form of education, but, instead, provided with opportunities to thrive within it [35].

2. Inclusive Pedagogies

Inclusive pedagogies are important in the classroom to ensure the needs of all students are met; however, it can be challenging to extend what is ordinarily available to all learners [36]. Differentiation in second-language learning is essential for meeting the diverse needs of students, who often vary widely in linguistic abilities, cultural backgrounds, and learning styles [37,38]. Effective differentiation involves tailoring instruction to meet these varying needs of students. This can be achieved by providing multiple pathways for students to: access the curriculum content, engage with learning activities, and demonstrate their learning [38,39]. For example, teachers might use visual aids (e.g., pictures), manipulatives, and simplified language to support comprehension for less proficient students, while offering more complex texts and opportunities for higher-order thinking to challenge advanced learners [38–40]. By incorporating strategies such as cooperative learning, personalized tasks, and varied assessment methods, teachers can create an inclusive environment that not only supports language acquisition but also fosters content mastery and cultural understanding for all students.

A framework that can be implemented to ensure the inclusion of all learners is universal design for learning (UDL). It is a framework that is used for planning standard curriculum activities that embraces diversity and allows all children to learn effectively [41,42]. This framework can be implemented to include students from a diverse range of backgrounds, including those with AEN [41–43]. The framework recognises that all students learn differently, and that greater flexibility should be implemented in lessons to ensure that all students can learn effectively [43]. UDL is underpinned by three principles [41,42]. Firstly, multiple means of engagement should be implemented, with students being offered a variety of ways to access and engage with learning materials. Through offering the students a choice, student engagement and motivation are promoted [37]. Multiple means of representation is the second principle, where it is suggested that new learning/information should be presented using a variety of methods, for example, offering textbooks in audio format. Multiple means of action/expression is the final principle, where students are offered a variety of ways to demonstrate their learning, for example, giving answers orally rather than in writing [44–47]. One study investigated the use of the UDL guidelines by French immersion teachers [48]. Observations were undertaken of these practices, and it was found that teachers used a variety of strategies to include students. In the area of comprehension, teachers used manipulatives to present new concepts, pretaught vocabulary to increase understanding, rephrased and restated oral language, used questioning to develop understanding, and presented concepts using simple and accessible language. Adaptations were made to materials, and technology was used to engage and encourage

learners, for example, to assist with note taking. For assignments and assessments, several adaptations were made. Directions were read aloud to students and often broken into accessible steps. Written directions were provided to students as well as oral directions to allow them to revisit the directions given if needed. Examples were modelled for students, so they knew what was expected of them and what the success criteria were. Students also had the option to respond orally rather than in writing. Reinforcements were used by the teachers in French immersion schools; this was achieved by asking students to repeat directions, teaching study skills, and providing study guides.

Howard ([35], p. 158) compiled a comprehensive list of inclusive strategies for students with AEN learning a second language. This list includes strategies to meet the needs of students with a range of learning difficulties. For students with communication and interaction difficulties learning a second language, it is suggested that clear routines using the target language are established, activities in the classroom are structured through assigning roles to the students, students should have ample opportunities for target language input and output, and special consideration should be given to how students are grouped for collaborative groupwork activities. It is important that the teacher gives these students sufficient "wait time" to process the information that they are receiving. Technology can encourage and motivate students in this category also. For students with cognition or learning difficulties, it is recommended that they receive support for the development of their meta-cognitive and linguistic skills. This can be achieved through using a multisensory approach, repetition, and explicit teaching. Students who have social, emotional, and mental health difficulties can be supported through creating a safe and positive classroom/school culture, providing reinforcement and praise consistently, incorporating their interests in their learning to improve motivation, and reducing anxiety through indirect correction rather than direct correction. Sensory and/or physical needs can be supported through implementing technology, adapting materials, and providing additional teaching support.

The Immersion Education Checklist is designed to help immersion teachers, administrators, and curriculum specialists observe and improve immersion teaching practices, and contains some of the UDL principals outlined above [49]. It is intended to be a flexible tool for various educational contexts and can be used for self-reflection, peer observation, or administrative evaluation. It is divided into seven categories, each representing key pedagogical goals in immersion settings:

1. Integrate Language, Content, and Culture: Focuses on organizing curriculum around thematic concepts, specifying language and content objectives, and incorporating cultural learning.
2. Attending to Continuous Language Growth and Improving Accuracy: Emphasizes accountability in student language use, addressing errors, and using feedback techniques to promote accurate language production.
3. Make Input Comprehensible: Involves using visual aids (e.g., pictures), body language, and other tools to ensure students understand the language and content being taught.
4. Creating a Second-Language-Rich Learning Environment: Encourages the use of target language materials, exposure to extensive language input, and participation from native speakers.
5. Using Teacher Talk Effectively: Focuses on clear articulation, adjusting language complexity, and modelling accurate language use.
6. Promoting Extended Student Output: Involves planning activities that encourage extended discourse and higher-order thinking, such as simulations and debates.
7. Attending to Diverse Learner Needs: Highlights the importance of accommodating varying language abilities, cultural backgrounds, and learning styles through differentiated instruction.

It is clear from the overview of the checklist above that there should be a consistent and focused approach to language input and output in the immersion education context. There is also a clear link between the checklist and some of the principals of UDL [41–43].

The checklist is a comprehensive observation list that can be used by teachers and schools in a variety of ways, for example, through self-assessment and peer assessment. It could be implemented using a staged approach overtime, where one or two of the categories are observed and practice is modified based on the findings before another area of observation is started [49].

3. Literacy

Best practice is the early identification of literacy difficulties among students and to provide early intervention to meet their needs, thus improving their reading ability [50–52]. This can be a challenging factor for immersion education as students are learning through a second language [53–58]. Often in the immersion education setting, students with literacy difficulties are only identified when they are older and have begun formal majority language (e.g., English) literacy instruction; this may not happen until after two full years of education due to the immersion period and the lack of minority language assessments available [59]. This often means that they may lose out on the very important early intervention period [53–60]. Research in the context of French immersion education shows that English phonemic awareness assessments can predict future achievement in French reading [55,56,60–62]. While this method may be suitable for students learning through a minority language as a second language, it would not be suitable for students who have a minority language (e.g., French) as a first language. Furthermore, without formal literacy instruction in English, students taking this assessment in the early years of full immersion may be at a disadvantage.

The research shows a strong link between phonemic awareness interventions including phoneme division/blending, and students gaining higher levels of reading achievement [63,64]. However, there has been little research in this area in immersion education contexts [55,56,60–62]. It was found that students who conducted phonemic awareness interventions in their second language (French) made better gains in terms of phonemic awareness in both languages (English and French). This is due to the principle of language interdependence, which facilitates the transfer of academic and literacy skills from one language to another ([65], p. 114). Evidence of this concept is reinforced by an earlier metanalysis of 47 studies on the transfer of cross-linguistic and decoding skills from the first language to the second language [66]. Research also shows that reading speed and comprehension skills transfer from the first language to the second language [67–70]. Interestingly, it is suggested that the motivation to read does not translate from the first language to the second language [71]. Therefore, it is important for students to be given praise and encouragement to motivate them to read in their second language. The research on immersion education states that struggling readers would benefit from schools implementing interventions which include phonological awareness, decoding skills, spelling strategies, oral language/vocabulary development, and visual word recognition in the language of instruction of the school [20,56,60,62,63,65,72].

4. Language, Communication and Mathematics

Language plays an important role in developing mathematical and thinking skills for all learners [73]. There are several cognitive skills that students studying mathematics may experience difficulties with such as working memory, visual spatial skills, executive function, and language skills [73–76]. Students with a low level of language proficiency may find it difficult to acquire the language of mathematics and, thus, this may negatively affect their mathematical abilities. This is an important point for consideration for students in immersion education contexts with limited language ability in the language of instruction of the schools [73]. Research results suggest that the mathematical abilities of students with language impairments can vary from those without impairments. It was found that many students who had a language impairment had difficulty learning number sequences [77,78]. The required mathematical vocabulary can be taught through a variety of formats, for example, formal teaching in the classroom, semiformal activities, or informal

activities [79–82]. It is important that this vocabulary is taught in the immersion education classroom to ensure that students have the academic language required to access the mathematics lessons and activities. Mathematics can be challenging for second-language learners if they do not have a deep understanding of the vocabulary, syntax, and grammar of the second language, for example, particularly in the early years of immersion education [73]. This can prevent them successfully engaging in various learning activities, for example, explaining processes, describing, formulating conclusions, and presenting arguments, in oral and written contexts [73,83]. Therefore, it is important that teachers support their students' participation in mathematical discussions [79–82]. Teachers should give students the opportunity to participate in mathematical discussions at their proficiency levels. This can be achieved by using several methods, for example, using gestures and objects to clarify meaning, accepting and building on students' answers, repeating statements using more mathematical terms, and focusing on mathematical content and arguments.

5. Early Recognition of Mathematical Difficulties

Early recognition of mathematical learning difficulties and early intervention is best practice [83–85]. Teachers are encouraged to use a range of assessment resources to assess students' mathematical abilities [86]. This is particularly important in the immersion education context, where standardised assessments in the minority language are often unavailable for early years students [32]. A study carried out in Australia on students learning through French immersion education found that students were at a small disadvantage when they were tested in their second language compared to when they weretested in their first language [87,88]. This may be due to their lack of French vocabulary and/or the higher cognitive demands of reading in their second language, French. It is therefore recommended that students being assessed in their second language should be given more time to take the test so that they have the opportunity to obtain equivalent results compared to those being tested in their first language. It has been reported that it is often difficult for students in immersion education contexts being assessed in their second language in mathematics to understand the mathematical problem and to be aware of the mathematical operation to be implemented [87,88]. However, the results showed that there was a crosslinguistic transfer of skills in mathematical knowledge when students' results were compared in their first and second languages. Ní Riordáin & O'Donoghue [89] studied the relationship between mathematical ability to solve written problems and a student's level of proficiency in Irish. Students in this study were from Irish-medium schools (n = 37). A control group of monolingual English students of the same age group (n = 49) also participated in the study. The results suggest that students whose first language was Irish were at a disadvantage in terms of written mathematical problems when they were assessed in English.. Therefore, it is important for immersion education teachers to assess the total abilities of their students using bilingual assessments, informal assessment methods, and minority language assessments. Recommended assessment methods for second language learners and immersion education students include checklists, questionnaires, and parent–teacher meetings [86]. Informal assessment in mathematics is very important in this context as standardised assessments may not be available in the minority language of instruction. Teachers are encouraged to use a full range of informal assessment in their classroom, including learning portfolios, observation, peer-assessment, self-assessment, conversation, drawing, student interviews, classroom-based assessments, and reflective diaries [86].

6. Mathematical Interventions

Using applications (apps) in the classroom for mathematics has many advantages, for example, they can provide face-to-face teaching, thus giving the child the opportunity to build a strong mathematical knowledge base [90,91]. Applications have been identified as beneficial to the development of mathematical competence/skills among students with AEN [91–94]. Most of the research was carried out on the impact of information and communications technology on students' learning of mathematics in the students' first

language [90–95]. Little research has been carried out on the effectiveness of mathematical applications developed/used for students learning through a second language. In research on Portuguese–English bilingual students aged 5–6 and the effects of undertaking learning activities in Portuguese or English using a mathematics apps [96], they found advantages for students when activities were carried out in the first (Portuguese, Brazil) or second (English) language. However, it was reported that the students who used the app in their first language experienced greater benefits. It was reported that these students completed more mathematics activities than those who performed them in their second language. This result may suggest that students need more consistent contact with the second language to engage with the application at a higher level. For students who were learning English as second language, it was found that mathematical apps can have the same positive impact on the development of mathematical skills as they do for the monolingual English language students [96]. There are many advantages of using mathematical apps for students learning through a second language, for example ([96], p. 2327), the following:

- Providing students with a relatively high level of contextual support to make sense of their learning activities.
- Face-to-face mathematics guidance through an on-screen teacher who could support the development of the child's academic cognitive academic language proficiency.
- Using activities with virtual objects, labels, and a multisensory approach.
- Providing an appropriate level of cognitive demand in a learning activity.
- Providing an opportunity for students to work within their zone of proximal development.
- Continuous assessment opportunities.
- An exciting, engaging, and rewarding learning experience for students.
- An individual learning platform that promotes scaffolded learning.

7. Challenging Behaviour

Research in the area of challenging behaviour and bilingual/immersion education students is limited. The limited studies available suggest that there is a difference in the strategies required for classroom management when majority language classrooms are compared to foreign language classrooms [97–99]. One factor that needs to be considered more in the foreign language classroom is student motivation; this is due to the connection between a student's motivation to learn, including their motivation to learn a foreign language, and classroom behaviour [100]. When students are motivated, they are more focused on their learning and are more engaged. When they are demotivated, they may be less likely to partake in learning activities and this, in turn, can have a negative impact on their behaviour due to being disengaged in learning [99]. There are several reasons cited in the literature for a student's lack of motivation and engagement in learning; these include low self-confidence, high anxiety, and inhibition on a personal level. Negative teacher attitudes and behaviours also can contribute to this lack of motivation, for example, a lack of praise and positive reinforcement in the classroom, and an unsupportive classroom culture [101–104]. In a study on the misbehaviours most frequently observed in foreign language classrooms, it was found that mobile phone use, students using their first language, a lack of willingness to study due to low motivation, excessive talking, or asking irrelevant questions were listed [99]. It is important to note that these behaviours were also identified in studies of majority language classrooms; they are not specific to immersion education. The use of students' first language in the immersion education classroom is very challenging for foreign language teachers who are trying to immerse their students in an additional language. Some strategies listed by teachers to deal with these behaviours included using classroom rules, using body language, increasing volume when talking, and being positive [99]. Another factor which may impact student's ability or willingness to speak a second or foreign language in the classroom is "foreign language anxiety" [105–107]. This anxiety "can interfere with the acquisition, retention and production of the new language" ([105], p. 86). Horwitz et al. [106] identified three different elements withing foreign language anxiety: (i) communication apprehension,

(ii) fear of negative evaluation, and (iii) test anxiety. However, Young [107] believes that there are six causes of foreign language anxiety: (i) personal and interpersonal anxieties, (ii) learner beliefs about language learning, (iii) instructor beliefs about language learning, (iv) instructor–learner interactions, (v) classroom procedures, and (vi) testing. In studies on Irish-immersion education, it was found that autistic students were often reluctant to speak the language of instruction of the school. They could hear and comprehend what was said to them through Irish but would often not reply through Irish [108]. This may be due to being anxious about speaking a second language; therefore, it is important that students are able to experience positive and supportive classroom environments to try to reduce this anxiety. There are several interventions or strategies that can be used in a classroom to help reduce this anxiety, for example, project work, establishing a supportive learning community/ atmosphere, developing positive student–teacher relationships, providing indirect rather than direct, correction, accepting the need for self-worth protection, teacher immediacy, and positive praise in the classroom [109].

Regarding bilingual education, Tabors [110] states that teachers must be aware of the steps involved in acquiring a second language to distinguish between difficult behaviours resulting from learning difficulties and those associated with learning a second language. Studies have found that positive social interactions with peers can have a positive impact on bilingual students' academic achievement and behaviour [111–114]. It is therefore important that students have the opportunity to interact with their peers in the classroom in order to feel included and supported [111–114]. One method to help students interact positively is peer-mediated interventions [111]. These interventions can improve students' social interactions and language development, for example, by using a peer buddy system. From a classroom instruction and social skills development aspect, Brilliante and Nemeth [115] suggest that offering a social story to a preschool child in their home language leads to better understanding by the child and that the teacher has a better opportunity to deliver on the objectives of the story. This is also an important resource for parents or carers as it can also help establish and develop home–school partnerships. It was found that using the home language with a child can reduce behavioural issues [116]. Instead of being seen as negative, the home language should be used to help the child learn and help the child in the multilingual classroom [117]. According to Brilliante and Nemeth [115], when teachers can support students' communication and learning in their home language and second language, this promotes the bilingual development of students, including those with learning difficulties. Educators and external professionals should develop language plans based on the specific needs of each student and the resources available in the school. In addition, McWilliam [118] claims that the use of language supports such as word walls, labels, photographs, graphics, etc., in every aspect of the school day will allow the child to have more opportunities to use the language. Kohnert & Derr [119] states that consistent use of both languages will benefit learners by reinforcing positive behaviours. This can be achieved, for example, by using pictures to accompany sentences in both languages [120].

8. Dynamic Assessment

Dynamic assessment (DA) is a formative approach to evaluating and supporting second-language learners that integrates assessment and instruction [121,122]. Unlike traditional assessments, which typically measure what a student can do independently at a fixed point in time, dynamic assessment is an interactive process that seeks to understand a student's potential for language development through guided support. This approach not only assesses current abilities but also identifies the learner's zone of proximal development—the gap between what they can do alone and what they can achieve with help. It is argued that teacher educators play a crucial role in facilitating this process, bridging the gap between theoretical concepts and practical activities in the classroom. For second-language learners, dynamic assessment is particularly beneficial because it recognizes the fluid nature of language acquisition and provides real-time insights into how learners respond to instructional cues [121,123]. By focusing on the learning process

rather than just the outcomes, it allows educators to better understand the challenges that language learners face and adjust their teaching methods accordingly [124–126]. This can include varying the complexity of tasks, using scaffolding techniques, or adjusting language input to suit the learner's current level. Ultimately, dynamic assessment helps create a more responsive and supportive learning environment, promoting both immediate language growth and long-term linguistic development. Dynamic assessment has been used as a tool for identifying bilingual students who are at risk of having language or/and reading difficulties [127–132].

9. Discussion and Future Directions

The entry discusses the importance of identifying and supporting students with AEN in immersion education, where students learn through a minority language. This form of education presents unique challenges due to the limited availability of assessments and resources in minority languages [32]. Despite these challenges, immersion education offers benefits such as bilingualism, cognitive advantages, and higher self-esteem [8–15]. However, concerns persist regarding its suitability for students with AEN, often leading to their underrepresentation in these programs [19–24]. Inclusive pedagogies like UDL are essential for accommodating diverse learner needs in immersion education [41,42]. The Immersion Education Checklist provides some very good examples of how these strategies can be implemented in the immersion classroom [49]. It is important that educators in immersion schools are provided with the opportunity to access teacher professional development in inclusive practices, such as UDL [32]. However, yet again, there is a need for more bilingual resources, particularly in minority languages, to facilitate a comprehensive implementation of UDL in the immersion classroom.

The development of evidence-based interventions in minority languages would be beneficial for immersion education students. Early identification of literacy difficulties is crucial, especially in immersion education settings where assessments may be delayed due to the lack of assessments available in minority languages [32]. It is therefore important that teachers in these contexts implement a range of informal assessment practices, as outlined above. In relation to literacy, there is a strong link between phonemic awareness and reading achievement, though more research is needed in a range of immersion contexts. The research on immersion education states that struggling readers would benefit from schools implementing interventions that include phonological awareness, decoding skills, spelling strategies, oral language/vocabulary development, and visual word recognition [20,56,60,62,63,65,72]. In the area of mathematics, to gain a comprehensive overview of the abilities and areas of development for students, it is important that informal and bilingual assessment is undertaken [86]. It is also important for teachers to explicitly teach mathematical terminology in the second language to the students so that they have the cognitive academic language proficiency to access the curriculum. Opportunities to discuss mathematical concepts, problems, and reasoning in the second language are also very important for the development of mathematical language in students.

This entry emphasizes the need for a more inclusive approach in immersion education, ensuring that all students, including those with AEN, have equal opportunities to benefit from bilingual education [1–6]. This involves improving access to bilingual services, enhancing teacher training, and developing more targeted assessment and intervention strategies in minority languages.

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