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The Design and Content of an Online Continuous Professional Development Course in Special Education for Teachers in Irish Immersion Primary and Post-Primary Schools

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Abstract: This article discusses the design and content of an online continuous professional development (CPD) course in special education provision for students in Irish immersion (IM) primary and post-primary schools. The course was developed using the data from a mixed methods study on the needs of teachers in this area. This article describes the ABC course design method used. It presents the five modules of the course: (1) bilingualism and second language acquisition, (2) assessment, (3) inclusive pedagogies, (4) universal design for learning, and (5) ICT for the inclusion of all students. It also includes data from a course evaluation form completed by participating teachers (N = 25) in relation of the areas of the course that were effective, areas that they would like to learn more about, and recommendations on how the course could be improved. It is anticipated that this article will be of interest to immersion teacher educators internationally.

Keywords: continuous professional development; special education; immersion education; teacher education

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Citation: Nic Aindriú, S.; Connaughton-Crean, L.; Ó Duibhir, P.; Travers, J. The Design and Content of an Online Continuous Professional Development Course in Special Education for Teachers in Irish Immersion Primary and Post-Primary Schools. *Educ. Sci.* **2023**, *13*, 281. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13030281

Academic Editor: Leonidas Kyriakides

Received: 29 December 2022
Revised: 25 February 2023
Accepted: 1 March 2023
Published: 6 March 2023

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1. Introduction

A dearth of research exists internationally on the continuous professional development (CPD) needs of immersion teachers in special educational needs (SEN). The research available has found that many bilingual/immersion education teachers find it difficult to meet the SEN of their students due to challenges such as a lack of assessments, interventions, and resources in the language of instruction [1–5]. Hence, further research in the area of professional development for teachers in bilingual/immersion education is needed to appropriately mediate the challenges that these teachers may encounter when meeting the needs of all their students. Through further research in this area, courses can be designed that are specific to the needs of immersion education and that are accessible for these teachers. Limited research has been conducted in bilingual teacher education in general [1–5]. The limited data available suggest that teachers in these contexts would benefit from further CPD in relation to: (i) theoretical knowledge around bilingualism and second language acquisition, (ii) appropriate assessment for students learning through a second language, and (iii) teaching strategies and interventions to help them deliver content appropriately in a bilingual/immersion context [6–9]. It is also recommended that they should have access to information within the course that is based on research and evidence-based practices.

The course discussed in this article was developed to meet the needs of teachers teaching students with SEN in two sociolinguistic contexts, Irish immersion (IM) Gaelscoileanna and Gaeltacht schools as described below. The course was developed based on the findings of a mixed methods study which investigated the needs of IM primary and post-primary teachers in this area [10]. The ABC course design process was used to design this course.

This process was originally implemented as a face-to-face 90-min workshop in which "academic teams work together to create a visual 'storyboard' showing the type and sequence of learning activities required to meet the module's learning outcomes, and how these will be assessed" [11]. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this workshop was adapted for online implementation [11]. The development of this course sought to answer the following research questions:

(a) How can the use of the ABC course design process benefit the development of an online CPD course on meeting the SEN of students in IM schools?
(b) What were the benefits of undertaking this course for IM teachers?
(c) What are the CPD needs of immersion education teachers in special education? and
(d) What are the challenges that IM teachers face when accessing online CPD?

Research in this area is important as there are little data available on the content that should be included in a CPD course for teachers of students with SEN learning through a second/minority language [1–5]. The contents of this study will add to the limited data available in this area, and it will provide as a point of reference for those considering developing a CPD course in this area. It will also provide further information for immersion education teachers/practitioners that want to learn more about strategies and approaches that will improve their practice.

1.1. The Research Underpinning the Course

The research on which this course development is based identified that teachers in IM schools would like more CPD in special education that is specific to meeting the needs of all students learning through Irish [10,12]. The most frequently reported areas in which teachers would like CPD were (1) Irish literacy, (2) assessment of students learning through Irish, (3) identifying students with SEN learning through Irish, (4) differentiation, (5) second language acquisition, and (6) inclusive pedagogies [10]. In relation to the course design, teachers wanted to learn more appropriate teaching strategies to implement in their classroom and access resources that will help them meet to the needs of all their students. The opportunity to learn from other teachers was cited as the third most important element. Being given time to consolidate their learning was also important for teachers (4th) and many teachers wanted access to research on SEN provision in IM schools (5th). The course designed and discussed in this article is based on the findings of this research. It was designed with the needs of the teachers involved in the research at the core of the course development. The 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language outlines an integrated approach to the Irish language, in which nine areas of action are specified, including education [13]. One of the objectives of the strategy is that a high standard of all-Irish education will be provided to all students and that IM schools will continue to be supported in this area. It is anticipated that the development of this course can help achieve this objective as well as strengthening participating Gaeltacht teachers' capacity to meet the needs of all the learners in their classes [14]. The aims of the course were to enable participating teachers to:

a. Devise and implement a range of informal and formal assessment approaches to profile any student in the areas of language and communication, literacy, numeracy, and personal and social development [1–5].
b. Devise a differentiated plan of teaching that builds on student's strengths and addresses their areas for development [1–9].
c. Use a range of pedagogical resources, including digital resources, to meet the learning targets that derive from the plan [15,16].
d. Reflect on current practice and engage in peer reflection to support the development of their own teaching and leadership capacity [17].

1.2. Irish-Immersion Schools in the Republic of Ireland

A Gaeltacht school is one that is located in one of the 26 Gaeltacht Language Planning or Irish-speaking heartland areas that has registered to participate in the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme [14]. Irish is the day-to-day language of the school and the language

of instruction, except when English or other languages are being taught. Students in infant classes (age 4–7) have a total immersion experience in Irish [14]. Research suggests that most students enrolled in Gaeltacht schools come from homes where Irish is not the dominant language. There were 109 primary Gaeltacht schools and 22 post-primary Gaeltacht schools at the time of this study in 2020–2021 [18]. Gaelscoileanna (IM schools) are located mainly in cities and small towns outside of the Gaeltacht heartland areas. The data show that most students enrolled in these schools come from households where English is the dominant language [19]. Similar to Gaeltacht primary schools, total immersion programmes of up to two years are provided to students before they commence English language and literacy studies. There were 185 Irish immersion primary schools and 49 post-primary schools throughout the island of Ireland outside the Gaeltacht at the time this course was developed [19]. Most of these schools were situated in the Republic of Ireland (RoI) with 36 primary and 5 post-primary schools located in Northern Ireland (NI) [19]. This study did not include teachers from IM schools in NI. The research available on the most frequently reported categories of SEN in IM primary and post-primary schools in the RoI is presented below in Table 1 [12,20,21]. Unfortunately, for post-primary IM schools outside of Gaeltacht areas, there are no data available on the prevalence and types of SEN experienced by students in these schools. In 2004, it was estimated that 4% (n = 358) of students in primary Gaeltacht schools were receiving additional teaching support [21]. In post-primary Gaeltacht schools at the time, it was estimated that 7% of students (n = 324) had a diagnosis of SEN [21]. Recent research reported that 9.4% of students in primary Irish immersion schools outside *of* Gaeltacht areas in the RoI present with a diagnosis of SEN [12]. It was estimated that for the school year 2017–2018, 16.57% of students enrolled in IM primary schools outside of the Gaeltacht received additional teaching support from the special education teacher [12].

Table 1. The most frequently reported categories of SEN reported in primary and post-primary Gaelscoileanna and Gaeltacht schools in the Republic of Ireland.

(Primary Gaelscoileanna) [12]	(Primary Gaelscoileanna) [20]	(Primary Gaeltacht Schools) [20]	(Primary Gaeltacht Schools) [21]	(Post-primary Gaeltacht Schools) [21]
Dyslexia	Dyslexia	Specific Learning Disability (this term includes dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia)	General Learning Disability	Specific Learning Disability
Dyspraxia	Dyspraxia	Mild General Learning Difficulties	Specific Learning Disability	Borderline Mild General Learning Disability
Autism Spectrum Disorder	Autism Spectrum Disorder	Specific Language Impairment	Borderline Mild General Learning Disability	Mild General Learning Disability
Emotional and/or Behavioral Difficulties	Emotional and/or Behavioral Difficulties	Autism Spectrum Disorder	Specific Language Impairment	Severe/Profound General Learning Disability
Specific Language Impairment	Specific Language Impairment	Developmental Coordination Delay		Emotional and/or Behavioral Difficulties

1.3. CPD in the Republic of Ireland

Overtime, CPD has evolved from a 'one-shot' professional development approach, where the emphasis was 'that teacher learning is something that is done to teachers' [22] (pp. 4–5), [23] to a model where teachers have begun to learn in a collaborative environment with the aim of promoting individual professional growth that will positively impact the practices in place in their classrooms [24–26]. Professional development can be defined as any set of activities that improves teachers' knowledge practices and has a positive impact

on student learning outcomes [25–31]. It is recommended that teachers should undertake CPD courses that are practical and will enable participants to easily transfer their learning to their classroom [32]. The benefits of accessing CPD include teachers providing a higher quality of teaching which enhances students' educational attainment and their educational experiences [25,30]. While there are many benefits for teachers who access CPD, the research also states that teachers face challenges when accessing CPD [25,33]. The most frequently reported challenges include a lack of time/work pressure, the cost of accessing CPD, and accessibility to courses, lack of managerial support when accessing CPD, work pressure, family commitments, and having to undertake CPD outside of work hours [25,27–31,33].

In the Republic of Ireland, the Teaching Council of Ireland [34] has developed 'Cosán', the national framework for teachers' learning. The framework recognises that there are many ways in which teachers can learn and undertake CPD, for example, formally, informally, personally, and professionally. Personal development involves teachers developing the skills that they require in life to help them not only in their role in school but also in the life in general (e.g., time management and communication) [34]. Professional development is based on the concept that teachers learn and develop continuously throughout their career to develop the skills that are necessary for them to work effectively in their roles (e.g., using ICT as a teaching method) [34]. The recommended ways in which teachers can engage in CPD include engaging in professional conversations, reading literature and/or research, engaging in team teaching or collaborative reflection with a colleague, attending a professional learning event (e.g., conference), or school-based learning [34,35]. The importance of reflective practice for teachers in terms of their teaching/assessment methods and their students' learning as a means of being responsive to emerging needs of schools and school improvement is recognised in Cosán [34]. This course was developed as a summer course programme, which was developed to contribute to the continuum of teacher's professional learning [36] and to support the goals outlined in the Department of Education's Statement of Strategy, 2021–2023 [37]. Teachers who successfully complete a summer course are entitled to extra personal vacation (EPV) days. These courses can be delivered by providers through a variety of methods, face to face, online, or through a blended learning method. The course discussed in this article was delivered online due to the COVID-19 pandemic and because participants lived all over the RoI. In the RoI, teachers in IM schools access CPD in a similar manner as to that outlined above. There are no special requirements that teachers in IM schools should have additional teacher education in the area of bilingualism, immersion education, or special education. Research on the CPD needs of teachers in IM schools has found that it has been challenging for teachers to access courses based on meeting the SEN of students learning through Irish [10]. It has been found that the majority of courses available to this cohort are delivered through the medium of English with a focus on students learning through English and that many of the course providers do not have an understanding of the needs of students learning through Irish and of the challenges that teachers in IM schools face [10].

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. ABC Course Design

The development of this course is in line with the Cascade Model of CPD development [38]. It was anticipated that teachers who were willing to attend the online course would return to their schools and disseminate their new learning and skills to their colleagues. This method was chosen as the resources available to the researchers were limited, particularly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the course a lot of teacher self-reflection activities were added to overcome the challenge of developing teachers' inclusive mindsets [22,39]. Furthermore, the content of the course was differentiated as much as possible based on the context in which teachers worked, e.g., primary Gaeltacht or post-primary Gaeltacht school [19–21,39].

It was decided that this course would be delivered completely asynchronously due to the time challenges that teachers face when accessing CPD and the fact that teach-

ers were going to undertake this course during their summer holidays from various locations [25,31–33]. As part of the ABC course design process, the authors of this paper met with colleagues from the Teaching Enhancement Unit in the Institute of Education, Dublin City University online to undertake the workshop. Within the workshop, the authors created a 'storyboard' for the course content and activities were selected to ensure that the six ABC learning types were included [40,41]. In Table 2, an overview is provided of the activities incorporated in the course and how they relate to the ABC course design. Within the table, there are elements from different modules, the content presented does not relate to any one module alone and it is not presented in an order of processes or sequence. When planning for an online course, there were several factors to be considered, such as ensuring that the course was consistent and easy to navigate, planning both online and asynchronous activities, building an online community, developing resources, and encouraging teacher engagement and participation through active learning [40,41]. The content of this course is specifically designed in line with best practice principles for instructional design and effective online pedagogy to maximise motivation, engagement, and learning through a high level of discussion on and interaction with the online course content [42–46]. All modules offered accessible and rich online content. Content was presented in a multimedia format, e.g., podcasts, videos, screenshots, and video demonstrations [42–46]. Interactive learning assignments were provided throughout the modules. Activities were designed to allow for peer learning, sharing, and mentoring, along with the development of a community of practice [34]. The use of this variety of online pedagogical teaching and learning techniques ensured that (1) participants engaged actively with the course content, (2) reflected on their own practice, and (3) applied what they had learned throughout the course to their own professional practice [25,42–46].

Table 2. Examples from the course in terms of how each ABC learning type was incorporated into the course design [40,41].

Learning Type	Definition	Examples from the Course
Acquisition	Where learners gain an understanding of new concepts, models, vocabulary, and methodologies [40,41].	– Reading multimedia – Websites – Digital documents and resources – Listening to podcasts/webcasts – Videos
Investigation	The learner takes an active and exploratory approach to their learning where they search for and evaluate a range of new information and ideas [40,41].	– Observations (media/blog) of teaching pedagogies and assessments – Identify the areas of development for a student and create a plan to meet the student's needs. – Reflect on a lesson and identify how ICT can be used more in their classroom.
Practice	Where the learner applies the knowledge they have acquired in their context [40,41].	– Reflective tasks – Case studies – Simulations—role play/observations – Analysing a speech and language sample – Re-create a lesson previously taught to incorporate either UDL or differentiation. – Completing a language environment questionnaire and rating/scoring it
Discussion	The learner articulates their ideas/learnings/questions, and they respond to their tutor/peers [40,41].	– Discussion forums – Professional reflections – Group discussions on a topic – Sharing of resources online

Table 2. *Cont.*

Learning Type	Definition	Examples from the Course
Collaboration	Participants work together to build knowledge [40,41].	– Development of a shared resource library – Development of a community of practice using discussion forums.
Production	The learner consolidates and demonstrates what they have learned [40,41].	– Designing assessments and lesson plans – Creating a dynamic assessment of vocabulary or writing or numeracy. – Prepare a set of readers' theatre lessons for their class.

2.2. Course Evaluation

All the teachers who participated in this course had previously undertaken a survey of their CPD needs in this area as part of the research that informed the development of this course [10]. Teachers who undertook the questionnaires and interviews in the initial research were invited to undertake the CPD course developed [10]. Those who expressed an interest in undertaking the course in the initial research were invited to complete an expression of interest form. This allowed for participant anonymity to be maintained in terms of the initial data collected. Those who expressed an interest were emailed by the researchers and invited to partake in the course. They were provided with login details to the course Moodle page. They were all provided with a plain language statement and informed consent forms before participating in the study. They all provided informed consent prior to completing the course and undertaking the course evaluation form. Upon completion of the course, participants were asked to anonymously complete an evaluation form. Participants were not asked any identifying questions in the form due to the small sample size. This evaluation form received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee in Dublin City University prior to being released to participants (N = 25). This methodology was chosen as it allowed students to provide feedback on the course design and delivery, this in turn will enable the course developers to improve the teaching and learning associated with the course [45]. This form had six quantitative items that evaluated participants perceptions of the course [46]. It is thought that using between six and nine items in a course evaluation form increases the validity of the results [46]. Unfortunately, there are no set standards available in terms of how course evaluation forms are set [45]. The questions asked were based on the six standards of scholarly teaching: setting clear goals, adequate preparation, appropriate methods, course results, effective presentation, and reflective critique [47]. Participants were asked to evaluate their learning in the form and hence, the form needed to be customised based on the content of the course provided [48]. Furthermore, the development of the evaluation form was based on the available literature in this area. There were items on the form which allowed participants the opportunity to provide summary ratings for example using the Likert scale of very effective, effective, etc. There were also open-ended questions to help provide more in-depth information [49]. The form provided important data around participants' (N = 25) experiences of engaging with the course, their opinions around the usefulness of the course content, and their recommendations for course improvement. It took participants 10–15 min to complete. Participants were asked to provide feedback about their own learning relative to the course's learning outcomes. The topics covered in the course evaluation form were: (1) teaching methods, strategies, course delivery, and clarity, (2) course materials, (3) student engagement and involvement, (4) course structure, (5) student learning and course learning outcomes, and (6) overall comments. The data gathered were analysed using descriptive analysis (e.g., mean, median, and mode) due to the small sample size. This method was used to identify patterns in the responses of the participants and to measure the frequency in which participants selected items/choices

within the evaluation form. This type of analysis was chosen as it enabled the authors to gather data that describe the engagement that participants had with the course.

2.3. Participant Profiles

In total, 25 participants completed the course from a variety of IM school contexts (primary/post-primary/Gaelscoileanna/Gaeltacht schools) [10]. Most of those who undertook the course came from IM primary schools outside of the Gaeltacht (n = 16) and only a small number of teachers came from primary Gaeltacht schools (n = 5), or post-primary IM schools outside of the Gaeltacht (n = 4). Unfortunately, no post-primary Gaeltacht teachers undertook this course. Seven of the teachers were aged between 20–30 years old, seven were aged between 31–40 years old, nine were aged between 41–50 years old, and two teachers were aged between 51–60 years old. Of those who completed the course, 12 teachers worked in the role of special education teacher, 9 were mainstream class teachers, 1 teacher was a subject teacher at post-primary level, and the remaining participants were either administrative teachers (n = 1) or teaching principals (n = 3). The participants had been in their current role for a varied length of time, nine of the teachers had only been in their role for 0–5 years, seven had been in their role for 6–10 years, seven had been in their role for 11–15 years, and two teachers had been in their role for more than 20 years. The level of education that the participants held varied with some holding: (a) primary degrees (n = 8), (b) primary degrees and a post-graduate degree (n = 7), (c) a primary degree and a masters (n = 9), or a (d) doctorate (n = 1).

3. Results

3.1. Course Modules Developed

The course was divided into five modules which are outlined in further detail below. The course structure reflects the important and interconnected nature of teaching, learning, and assessment. This interconnectivity is demonstrated through a balance of units on assessment and the identification of students with SEN, the creation of student profiles, interventions, inclusive pedagogies, resources, and ICT. Throughout each unit, participants were encouraged to be reflective and reflexive, thus enabling them to function as effective teachers in the classroom [22,29].

3.1.1. Module 1: Bilingualism and Second Language Acquisition

The contents of the first module of the course focused on bilingualism and second language acquisition [6–8]. The aims of this module were:

- to gain an understanding of the stages of second language acquisition,
- to recognise the differences between a student presenting with a learning difficulty and a student who needs more exposure to a second language and teacher support to help them access the curriculum effectively,
- to gain an understanding of the markers of a learning difficulty based on international research in bilingualism and second language acquisition,
- **to reflect on bilingualism and second language acquisition and the identification of students with SEN in the context of a participants' individual school.**

3.1.2. Module 2: Appropriate Assessment for Students Learning through Irish

The need for more information and skills within this area was identified as a priority by teachers in the study that underpins this course development [10]. The aims of this module were:

- to create a holistic profile of development for students using a range of internationally recommended practices,
- to understand how to identify the student's individual learning profile, building on strengths and areas of needs,
- to analyse and understand the process of creating a holistic development plan to meet the needs of students with SEN in IM schools,

- to understand how to effectively monitor and evaluate a student's progress towards selected objectives,
- to individually and collectively reflect on and evaluate current practice and identify areas for improvement in creating a holistic profile of development for students.

The methods of assessment that participants were introduced to included informal assessment [50,51], language sampling [52], parental report [53], and dynamic assessment [54]. This course provided participants with the opportunity to reflect on and discuss how these modes of assessment can positively influence their teaching as well as the learning experiences of children with SEN in IM schools.

3.1.3. Module 3: Inclusive Pedagogies

In Module 3, the course participants were encouraged to investigate a wide range of pedagogical approaches to help them meet the needs of all their students learning through Irish [10,12]. The aims of this module were:

- to identify the required elements in an immersion education classroom to ensure that students are provided with the optimal conditions to promote their learning,
- to reflect on the important elements of immersion education in the context of participants' individual school settings,
- to become familiar with a range of interventions that can be used in the areas of language and communication, literacy, numeracy, and personal and social development.

One important resource that participants were introduced to here is the Immersion Education Checklist [55]. This is an excellent resource for teachers to use in order to ensure that their classroom structure and teaching are appropriate for an immersion education context. Other strategies introduced which are beneficial for students learning through a second language include the readers theatre [56], reciprocal teaching [57], language experience approach [58], cognates for vocabulary development [59], and the use of audiobooks [60]. Another aspect which was delivered by speech and language therapists was how to meet the needs of students with language and communication difficulties learning through a minority language [9].

3.1.4. Module 4: Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Module 4 covered the use of inclusive pedagogies within the UDL framework [61–63]. The aims of this module were:

- to understand the principles and techniques of effective instruction for the inclusion of all students with SEN learning through Irish,
- to become familiar with a wide range of instructional strategies for the development of language and communication, numeracy, literacy, and personal and social development skills in students,
- to become familiar with how modifications can be made to the curriculum, teaching strategies, and assessment to meet the SEN of students learning through Irish,
- to reflect on the use of appropriate planning, preparation, and assessment practices that progress students' learning,
- to select and discuss teaching approaches appropriate to meeting learning objectives and the students' learning needs through the lens of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework.

The UDL framework was selected as it enables teachers to reduce the obstacles within the classroom that may impact on students' learning, e.g., the modes of instruction and assessment, instructional materials, or the types of learning tasks being undertaken by learners [60] It has also been recognised as an appropriate framework for supporting culturally diverse learners [60–65].

3.1.5. Module 5: ICT for the Inclusion of Students Learning through Irish

Unit 5 of this course focused on the use of ICT resources to support the inclusion of all students with SEN learning through Irish [62,63]. The aims of this module were:

- to understand the value of using ICT for the inclusion of all students in the classroom,
- to become familiar with the various ICT options available to implement in the classroom when meeting the SEN of students learning through Irish,
- to plan for the use of ICT in the classroom,
- to share the challenges that teachers face in this area and their resources.
- to reflect on the content of the course and identify actions for their individual classroom practice.

Participants sourced, shared, accessed, and subsequently embed suitable forms of ICT in their teaching. In a society where students are continually bombarded with visual and audio material, this course explores the effective use of digital technologies and how it can enable independent learning for students and how it can enhance classroom instruction to ensure that all students learning through the medium of Irish can access meaningful learning experiences and experience success [62,63].

3.1.6. Assessment and Reflective Practice within the Course

The participants were required to complete learning activities throughout the course that encouraged them to reflect on and discuss what they have learned in each module (see example in Table 3). They were also required to complete reflections at the end of each module using the discussion forum before they could move on to the next module. This interactive discussion space provided a forum for collective reflection and learning which was supported through feedback from the tutor. At the end of the course, students completed a reflective assignment of approximately 500–600 words in which they reflected on what they learned throughout the course, and they linked it back to specific experiences that they had while in the classroom. Within the learning activities and the mega-reflection, participants reflected on their learning within the course content in a four-stage format: (1) information (main points of the course material), (2) development (what questions were prompted by the course content?), (3) elaboration (how might these issues be addressed?), and (4) application (how to apply learning to everyday practice?) [43,44].

Table 3. An example of the assessment participants had to complete at the end of the course.

In this learning activity, you must reflect on the positive impact your interaction with the course material will have on your future teaching practices. You must write a 500–600-word reflection (a Word/PDF document) on one of the following topics, assessment, interventions, universal design for learning, and ICT. Choose one of the following from the course content: – One assessment method that you will apply in your future teaching. Discuss why you chose this strategy (advantages), the challenges you might face in implementing this strategy, and how you might overcome these challenges. – One intervention (you can choose a universal design for learning here). Discuss why you chose this strategy (advantages), the challenges you might face in implementing this strategy, and how you might overcome these challenges. – One piece of ICT software. Discuss why you chose this software (advantages), the challenges you might face while implementing this software, and how you might overcome these challenges.

Participants completed a learning log in the form of an online learning portfolio, within this portfolio they posted all their responses to the activities. The benefits of having this portfolio were (1) that course participants had all their work in the one place for them to review at any stage and to enable them to implement the practices that they reflected on in their classrooms, and (2) that course tutors could easily assess course participants' work in one area to ensure that they have completed all the required tasks and meet all the course requirements. The learning log (portfolio) and reflective activity were monitored by the course tutors to ensure they met a minimum quality standard, and guidance was provided to students if these standards were not met. Feedback was designed to encourage teachers to take a self-evaluative approach to their individual and school practice.

3.2. Course Evaluation Results

3.2.1. The Effectiveness of Each Module

Firstly, participants were given the opportunity to rate how effective they felt each module of the course was, using the Likert scale of "very effective, effective, ineffective, very ineffective." Figure 1 below outlines the number of participants choosing each category of response for each module. It is clear from the findings that participants found every module either very effective or effective which is positive feedback. This in turn suggests that the objectives of each module were met through the teaching and learning activities provided within it.

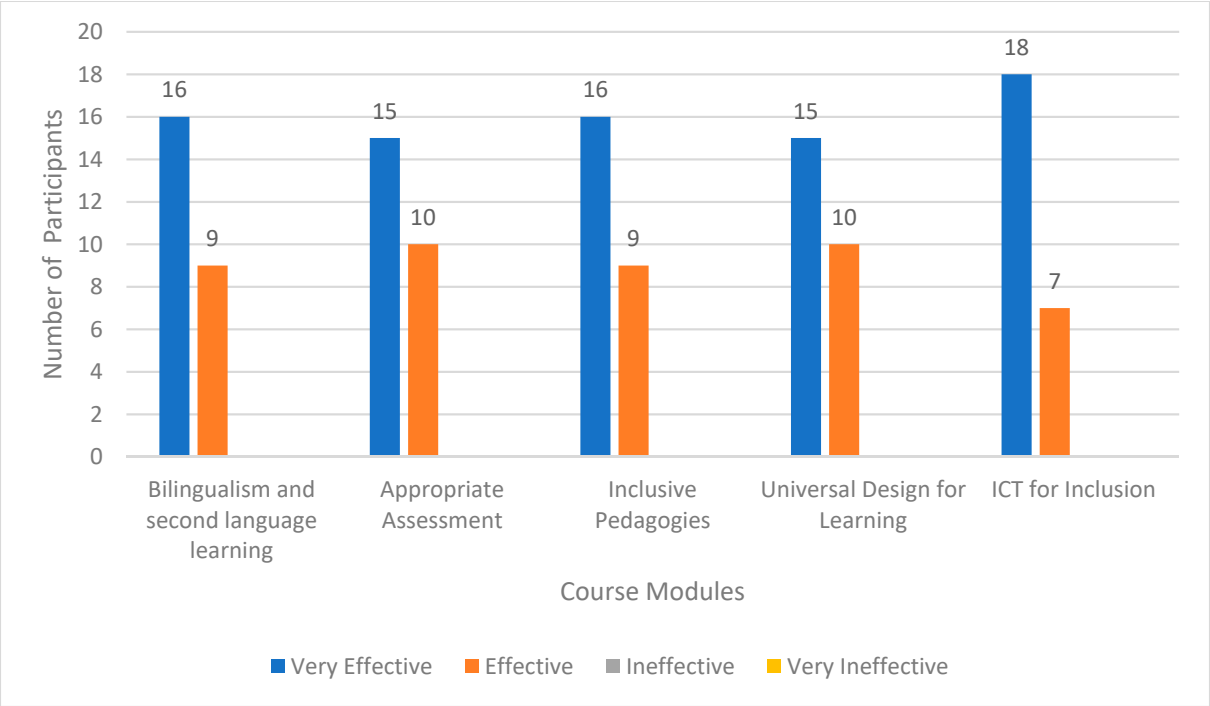


Figure 1. Participant (N = 25) opinions around the usefulness of the course content.

3.2.2. The Most Beneficial Aspects of the Course

Participants were asked to choose the aspects of the course which they found most beneficial. Six options were provided, and participants could choose all categories that were relevant to them. As can be seen in Figure 2, the elements of the course that participants found most beneficial were realistic ideas for implementing teaching strategies and materials/resources to support teaching and learning. Internationally, this practice is recommended as a positive method of CPD for teachers [35]. This also relates to the fact that accessing teaching and assessment resources through the medium of Irish can be challenging for teachers in IM schools [10]. The area that was cited as being least beneficial was the opportunity to see examples of good practice. This is interesting considering that it is recommended internationally as a form of CPD [30–35]. The examples provided in this course related to teachers teaching students learning through a second language and did not relate specifically to teachers in IM schools. This may be a factor that caused a decrease in the ranking of this category as perhaps the teachers felt that these examples were less applicable to their own contexts [7]. The high number of teachers that chose that they would like more realistic ideas for implementing teaching strategies may suggest that there may not have been enough realistic teaching ideas provided in the course or that simply they may like to progress their learning further in this area.

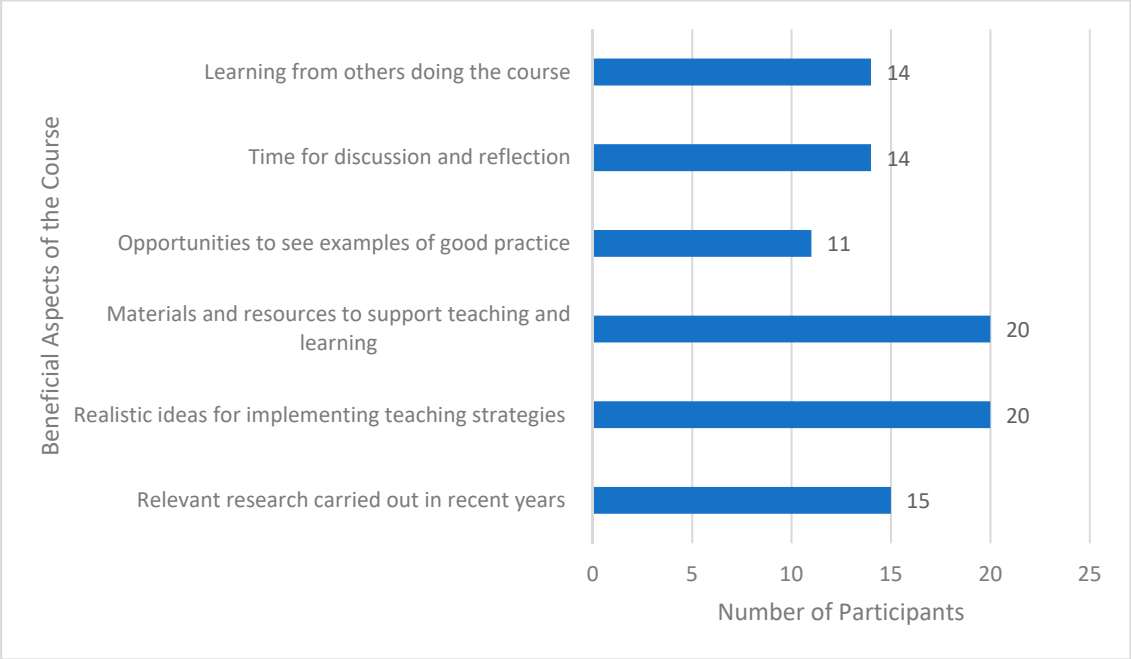


Figure 2. Participant (N = 25) opinions around beneficial aspects of the course.

3.2.3. Areas of Further Learning

Participants (N = 25) were asked to choose from a list of areas which they would like to learn more about after completing the course (see Figure 3). They could choose as many as they felt were relevant to them. The figure below outlines their choices. The answers provided to this question suggest that teachers in IM schools still want more specific CPD which is specialised and relates to their immersion contexts, e.g., Irish literacy strategies [3,4,7,10]. This may be due to the fact that this course was only a 20 h course, and it did not have scope to provide in-depth details on the various elements discussed below. This may suggest that more time needs to be allocated to each module or, it might be a good idea to run a single course on each module (e.g., bilingualism etc.).

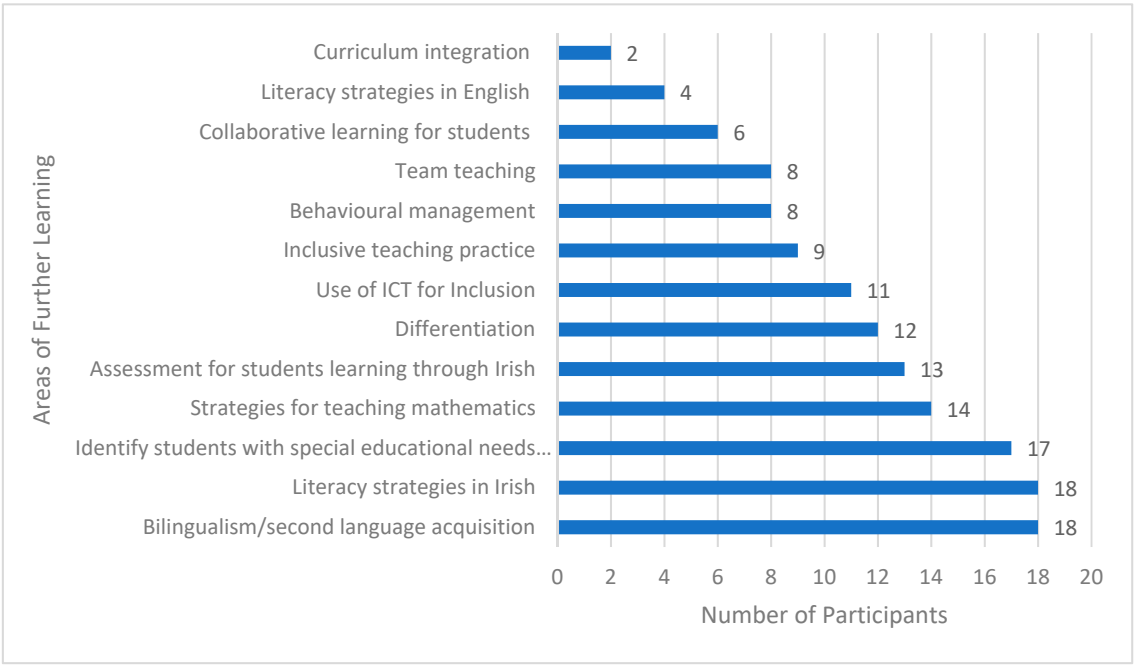


Figure 3. The areas of further learning identified by participants (N = 25).

3.2.4. The Challenges of Accessing this Course

Overall, the course received positive feedback as is evident from above. Some of the participants expanded on this fact in their responses to an open-ended question at the end of the form. One of the participants spoke about how they were more motivated in their teaching following the completion of the course [27,28].

> It was a great course, and I am very motivated now.

Two other participants spoke about how the course should be expanded and made available to more teachers in the area. This finding may mean that the cascade approach will be beneficial in terms of spreading information from the course and about the course [15]. In addition, the comments suggest that the course was beneficial in terms of improving teachers' competencies and confidence [27,28].

> Many thanks for giving me the opportunity to undertake the course. I look forward to the expansion of this course so other teachers can see the content.
>
> (Comment 1)

> This was very good. There is a very large gap in SEN and Irish-medium education. I am now much more confident in recommending Irish-medium education to children with SEN.
>
> (Comment 2)

However, as with all forms of CPD undertaken, the participants did experience challenges. Participants were asked to choose from a list of challenges encountered while completing the course (see Figure 4). They also had the opportunity to add any other comments that they had in an open-ended question. The most challenging aspect for teachers related to them not having enough time to undertake the course. This is a factor commonly identified by teachers in all education settings [31–33]. However, in this instance, it would be beneficial to further identify whether the course content was too heavy and placed a burden on participants timewise, or whether they found it challenging accessing the course due to other constraints/commitments. The second most challenging aspect was their ability to access technology or resources. This factor may be due to their lack of experience using Moodle and navigating/accessing content using the platform. Upon reflection, it would be good to consider the online accessibility of the course and perhaps have an online help desk or a manual available to participants in terms of how to access various elements of Moodle.

The specific challenges mentioned by participants were very helpful for the course developers in terms of understanding the challenges experienced by participants. One of the participants found that the quantity of reading material was too much and that this caused them pressure [66]. This is an aspect which needs to be further investigated before the course is made available to the next cohort of teachers.

> There was lots of content and reading involved. I felt under pressure to get it all completed.

This factor was also evident in another response where the participant identified that they found it easier to access content through video.

> Sometimes the course was too academic. The videos were easier to understand.

Another teacher discussed how they did not have sufficient classroom experience when accessing the content and reflecting on their practice. In this instance, differentiation of content may need to be considered further in relation to the teaching experience of participants.

> One module was very difficult for me because I had a lack of related classroom experience.

Another participant felt that the word count for the written activities at the end of each module was too high in comparison to other online summer courses. It may be worthwhile

for course developers to consider further use of the UDL framework within the assessment practices of the course [61].

The number of words required for the written activities was too high, I think.

Whilst this feedback is limited in number, it is very important as it provides an overview of how the course could be altered in terms of delivery/assessment in the future to make it more accessible for the participants.

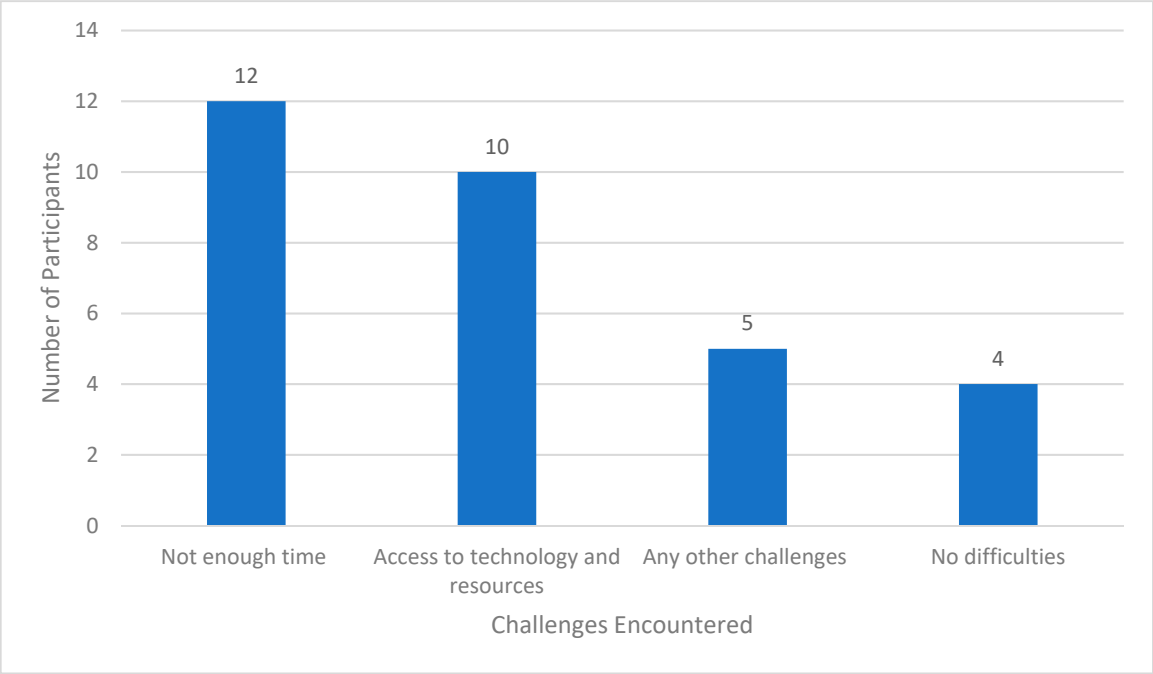


Figure 4. Participant (N = 25) opinions around the challenges encountered while completing the course.

4. Discussion

The process of course development as presented in this paper is but one approach towards developing an online CPD course in special education for immersion education teachers. The course was developed as a direct response to the growing demands for CPD in IM schools in relation to SEN and contributes to teachers engaging in CPD that is relevant for their students [10]. Development of this course was informed by international and national research and literature [1–5]. This course was developed based on the cascade training model of CPD development in which it is hoped that participants of the course would go back to their schools and spread the positive practices and knowledge they acquired from the course [38]. Prior to the development of the course, participants highlighted areas that they would like to learn more about in the area of SEN in IM schools [10]. Such an approach ensured that the content was relevant and directly related to the current CPD needs of these participating teachers [34]. This is an approach which could successfully be replicated in other areas of CPD development or in other immersion education contexts. With minor adjustments and adaptations, the research [10], content, and design of this course could be adapted and implemented in immersion education contexts internationally [1–5].

The online delivery of this course had a number of specific benefits as it enabled teachers across various locations in the RoI to access the content at a time and location that was suitable for them [28,36,37]. Through using the ABC course design format and incorporating a specific range of learning types such as acquisition, practice, and production into the course design, participants had opportunities to participate within a community of practice [40,41]. This in turn fostered possibilities for participation, collaboration, reflection,

and application of learning [42]. Through the evaluation forms completed by teachers, it was found that teachers valued most being given realistic teaching ideas and materials/resources for their classroom. This is an important factor to consider when delivering the course content in the future. It is important that the content is delivered in a practical way which can be implemented within the classroom [23]. Through online discussion fora, opportunities were provided for participants to reflect on their own practice and prepare for implementing course content in their own classrooms [24–26]. Another benefit of the course was the scope for participants to view other participants' responses to forum questions and assignments. In this way, participants could learn from each other, share ideas, and ask questions of each other [43,44]. Opportunities to learn from others and collaboration through discussion forums were identified as the least effective methods of learning in this study, this is interesting since it is an internationally recommended CPD practice [22,29,35]. This may suggest that more face-to-face interaction in the online format is required to encourage a higher level of discussion/collaboration [43,44]. Furthermore, in relation to course assessment it may be beneficial to implement the UDL framework more and provide participants with a variety of ways to demonstrate their learning (e.g., videos and audios) rather than solely relying on written assessments [61].

Overall, the feedback for this course was positive, with some teachers stating that they felt more motivated and confident after undertaking this course [27,28]. However, with all forms of CPD the participants of this course did experience some challenges. The most frequently reported challenge was that of a lack of time [33]. This challenge is frequently reported in research on CPD in other contexts and therefore, it may be worthwhile to evaluate how courses, such as this one, can be implemented within school time [22,29,35]. Alternatively, it may suggest that the course content was too demanding of participants' time and would benefit from being reduced in terms of content [66]. Another challenge encountered was accessing ICT or resources. This may be because participants lacked familiarity with the Moodle learning platform. It may be beneficial for course providers to assess the accessibility of the learning platform that they are using in terms of ensuring that it is accessible to novice online learners [32,43,44]. The method of content delivery should also be considered as well as the amount of content delivered. From the open-ended comments, it was clear that some participants would prefer less reading and more videos [61]. This is something that the researchers will consider further when updating the course.

When reviewing the findings of this article it is important to be mindful of the limitations of the data presented. One of the primary limitations of the study was that the course developed was only completed by 25 practicing teachers in IM schools. This sample is small; however, due to the smaller number of IM schools than English-medium schools in the Republic of Ireland, there are fewer teachers working in IM schools. Moreover, there are fewer students with SEN enrolled in IM schools and this in turn may impact on the number of teachers that have an interest in undertaking CPD in this area. Another challenge that the researchers experienced was the COVID-19 pandemic and the additional pressures that this put on the teachers (e.g., restrictions, social distancing, pods for teaching purposes) [66]. This meant that many teachers may have been experiencing burnout and they were less likely to participate in research or undertake CPD [66]. Nevertheless, the contents of this article are significant as they may offer some further insight into how to meet the CPD needs of immersion education teachers in the area of SEN provision. Particularly, as there is a dearth of research and courses in this area. It is anticipated that the contents of this article may be transferable to other immersion education contexts and of interest to immersion teacher educators internationally when considering their practices. For example, it may guide teachers/practitioners in terms of appropriate approaches and strategies that they can implement in their classroom to meet the needs of all their students. It may also guide teacher educators in terms possible content that they can include in their instruction for those preparing to work/or working in immersion education contexts throughout the world. Going forward, it may be beneficial to develop a working group of teacher educators

from immersion education to work together on an internationally recognised course in this area. Moreover, it might be good to develop a professional learning community where immersion teachers from all over the world can work together to overcome the challenges that they face when meeting the needs of their students.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, S.N.A.; methodology, S.N.A., P.Ó.D, L.C.-C. and J.T.; software, S.N.A., L.C.-C., P.Ó.D. and J.T.; validation, S.N.A. and L.C.-C.; formal analysis, L.C.-C. and S.N.A.; investigation, S.N.A. and L.C.-C.; resources, S.N.A. and L.C.-C.; data curation, S.N.A. and L.C.-C.; writing—original draft preparation, S.N.A.; writing—review and editing, S.N.A.; visualization, S.N.A.; supervision, P.Ó.D. and J.T.; project administration, S.N.A.; funding acquisition, S.N.A. and P.Ó.D. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta, grant number (P61035).

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was approved by the Dublin City University, Research Ethics Committee (DCUREC/2020/195, Date of Approval 7 October 2020).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to the small sample size and the preservation of participant anonymity.

Acknowledgments: We would like to thank all the teachers who participated in the initial study and those who gave their time to undertake the course developed. We are very grateful for this. We would also like to thank An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta for their funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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