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## **Parents and Early Immersion: Reciprocity Between Home and Immersion Pre-school**

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### *Abstract*

*This study examines the importance of parental support for early immersion in the context of a study of Irish-medium pre-schools or naíonraí. Data were collected from all of the major participants in this early immersion model, including parents, teachers, classroom assistants and inspectors, in addition to detailed tests of 225 three-year-old children. This allows an analysis, not only of the effect of the parents' support for the child's early learning in the naíonra, but also of the impact of the child's target language learning on the language use in the home. Focusing here on the results from parents allowed the development of a profile of those choosing early immersion in Irish, based on socioeconomic and educational data. Parents' reasons for choosing this type of pre-schooling are examined, as well as their satisfaction with their child's experience. Multivariate analyses of children's test results show the significant influence of parents' ability in the target language on their children's language scores. Finally, parents' requirements are examined in order to target ways of increasing their active support for their children's language acquisition. Overall, these data indicate an urgent need to involve parents as partners in order to maximise the effectiveness of early immersion.*

## **Introduction**

The experience of immersion education can be found all over the world, reflecting the different requirements of multilingual countries, as well as the need to provide for immigrant and transient populations. Examples of early immersion in a heritage language beginning at kindergarten level can be found in a number of countries such as the Basque Country, Catalonia, Hawaii, New Zealand and Wales, as well as in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland.<sup>1</sup>

Other countries such as Canada and Finland provide immersion in languages of particular economic relevance which are spoken by significant minorities of their population. Immersion pre-schooling has generally grown up because of the desire of parents and educators to expose children as early as possible to the target language. There are sociopolitical differences in the aims of immersion from country to country (see, for example, Artigal & Lauren, 1992), from a desire in some cases to increase the future pool of speakers of a minority language, to a more pragmatic economic rationale in other cases. Whatever the main political aim, the children involved are exposed to another language and culture from an early age.

The links between parental involvement and school achievement have, in general, been well researched, and positive effects have been noted in the areas of pre-school parent tutoring (e.g. Karnes & Zehrback, 1975), children's reading (e.g. Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991; Cowden & Preece, 1989) and mathematics scores (e.g. Jackson, 1974). Intervention studies to counteract social disadvantage (e.g. HeadStart in the US and the Rutland Street Project in Ireland) emphasise the importance of actively involving parents in their children's learning. Parents' empowerment has also been the subject of research on minority language children's school success (Cummins, 1986; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Moll, 1995).

Research indicates that parents play a central role in lobbying for early immersion education in minority languages (Ó Murchú, 1987; Lyon & Ellis, 1991; Lyon, 1995; van der Goot et al., 1994; Ní Mhaoláin, 1995). As

Ó Murchú (1987: 20) noted, they are 'the motivating, initiating and driving force'. However, there has been relatively less consideration of parents' role in supporting language learning in immersion than there has been in intervention pre-primary education, for example, in the teaching of reading or in the empowerment of minority language parents. Evaluations of immersion programmes have tended to look at academic and linguistic outcomes for pupils, with a view to improving areas such as curriculum, pedagogy and teacher education (see, for example, Day & Shapson, 1996; Genesee, 1984, 1987; Swain & Lapkin, 1982). Thus, the focus of research has mainly been on the school, with relatively less recent interest in investigating the range of parents' motivations behind the choice of the immersion model, parents' cultural objectives, or the effect of immersion attendance on parents' target-language use in the home.

Some studies, such as Singh (1986), have pointed to the need to include an assessment of the attitudes of parents as well as those of children and educators when evaluating immersion programmes. However, work on parents' attitudes has tended to target their responses to State educational initiatives or impositions (e.g. Siguan & Garcia, 1991), their choice of programme for their children (e.g. Leroux, 1989; McEachern, 1980) or their decision to remove children from immersion (e.g. Hayden, 1988). Webster (1991) describes the role of Canadian Parents for French in setting up immersion schools and in disseminating information to parents considering immersion programmes. However, there has been relatively less concern with parents' day-to-day involvement in immersion and how it impacts on home life.

Faltis (1995) looked at ways of building bridges between parents and multilingual schools. He noted that the relationship between parents and bilingual or multilingual schools is more problematic than in mother-tongue education, since the target language may constitute a barrier to some parents. Parents of children in bilingual or immersion schools may not believe that they have a valid role to play in supporting their child's learning, if they are not themselves

proficient in the target language. This has a parallel with the experience of immigrant parents with children in mainstream schools. Torres-Guzmán (1995) discussed such a situation when she examined the experience of a New York school in involving Latino parents from poor districts, where parents' language proficiency was a significant issue. Because of their lack of proficiency in the target language, some parents choosing an immersion school for their children may not perceive a role for themselves as active supporters of their children's education in their own homes, cooperating with teachers to achieve the desired academic and linguistic outcomes. Instead, they may believe that their best or only possible contribution lies in lobbying to raise the awareness of education authorities and local communities of the demand for immersion, and in fund-raising to support such schools.

Paulston (1992) claimed that research on bilingual education must go beyond narrow attempts to evaluate particular programme designs, and take into account the societal factors which underlie the language outcomes of bilingual education. In examining Irish-medium pre-schools or naíonraí in the Republic of Ireland, it was considered imperative to take account of the child's immediate community, the family, and to look at the interaction between the home and the immersion setting. While the focus here is on parents, the data are drawn from a large-scale study (Hickey, 1997) which also evaluated children's progress, examined teaching methods and teachers' in-service training needs.

The data from the children's tests, and from the surveys of teachers, parents and inspectors were integrated in evaluating the programme. The majority of parents in Ireland choosing to send children to immersion pre-schools are speakers of English, and the majority of the children come from English-only homes. It is argued that the experience and needs of this group of immersion parents is of relevance to the range of international contexts in which minority language immersion is conducted, and that consideration of this case-study allows consideration of some of the issues confronting parents in heritage language immersion worldwide.

The aim of the parents' survey was to determine the typical linguistic, social and educational backgrounds of parents choosing early immersion in Ireland, and to ask parents what they need in order to support their children's acquisition better, as well as how they assess the impact of their children's attendance at immersion on their use of the target language in the home. Parents' reasons for choosing an Irish-medium pre-school or naíonra, their satisfaction with their choice, and their assessment of the naíonra's impact on their home use of the target language was examined. Data on parents' socioeconomic and educational backgrounds were also considered and compared with non-immersion parents. These findings are also relevant to the body of parents of children in immersion primary schools in Ireland, since there is evidence of greater similarity between the pre-primary and primary immersion parents than between primary immersion and primary non-immersion parents (Hickey, 1997). It is argued that immersion education can only be enriched by harnessing parent power and further developing the model of the immersion parent as providing active support for second language acquisition, as well as lobbying for official recognition and raising funds for immersion programmes.

### **Background to early immersion education in Ireland**

Attempts to revive Irish have been underway now for over a century, with State support for over 70 years. The main burden of the State's aspiration towards creating a bilingual society was laid on the education system. Irish was made a compulsory subject in schools from school entry, and the number of fully Irish-medium schools grew and peaked in the 1940s when this sector made up about 12% of all schools (Ó Riagáin, 1997: 201). In the 1960's Irish language supporters became concerned about the declining standard of Irish in schools and in society, and the shift away from Irish-medium teaching in primary and secondary schools and teacher-training colleges. Contact with the then recently formed Welsh-medium play-groups indicated that pre-school immersion might

provide a model for establishing a sound base for Irish among young children. The first Irish-medium pre-school or naíonra was set up in 1968 and 26 had opened by 1978 (Mhic Mhathúna, 1993). An administrative body An Comhchoiste Réamhscolaíochta was founded in 1978, which aims to coordinate the naíonraí already functioning, and to facilitate the setting up of new naíonraí. It has been singularly successful in promoting the spread of naíonraí, which show a steep increase since 1983 especially. Currently there are over 3000 children enrolled in over 200 naíonraí.

The rationale behind the naíonra movement is three-fold, based on the belief that:

- (1) Pre-school education is beneficial to the child, family and community;
- (2) Young children acquire a second language naturally in appropriate conditions;
- (3) Pre-schooling through Irish assists in expanding the use of Irish in the realm of the family, which, in turn, helps to promote integration in the community.

While the Republic of Ireland is mainly English-speaking, there remain some Irish-speaking districts known as Gaeltachtaí, mainly along the western seaboard. In these communities about a quarter of the children attending naíonraí come from homes where Irish is the only language spoken, and about 40% come from bilingual homes. In such communities naíonraí provide mother-tongue support for native speakers and Irish-English bilinguals, but also provide the first sustained contact with the language for the English monolinguals attending. In English-speaking areas (i.e. most of the country) the majority of children (80%) have no home contact whatsoever with Irish, so the naíonra is their first experience of the language. Overall, over three-quarters of all children attending naíonraí in the Republic of Ireland are from English-only homes. About a fifth come from homes where at least some Irish is used in addition to English, while

7% come from Irish-speaking homes, the majority of which are in the Gaeltacht or Irish-speaking communities.

### **Definition of a Naíonra**

In an information booklet for parents naíonraí are defined as follows:

A naíonra is a group of children of between 3–5 years of age, who come together for a few hours each day, under the guidance of a Stiúrthóir or Leader, to play and to learn through play ... The naíonra has two main objectives:

- *to help the child to develop in every way;*
- *to help the child to acquire Irish or to improve his/her knowledge of Irish by using it as the means of communication.*

An Tuismitheoir agus An Naíonra:  
The Naíonra Explained for Parents (1994: 5)

The *Stiúrthóir* or Leader engages the children in stimulating, age-appropriate and enjoyable tasks through the medium of Irish. The pedagogical approach aims to offer teaching which is informal and child-centred (particularly with regard to language), in a structured environment which offers stimulation through a wide range of toys and activities, and in an atmosphere of controlled freedom. Naíonraí sessions last between two and three hours, usually every weekday. Leaders speak only Irish, but they respond to English utterances from the children and encourage them to use their developing Irish.

### **Parents Who Choose Early Irish Immersion**

A bilingual questionnaire was developed and distributed to all of the households with a child attending a naíonra in February 1993, and data were collected from 1807, or 73% of the total number attending at that time. This response rate is particularly high for a self-administered postal questionnaire. The most likely explanation for this seems to be the level of interest and commitment felt by the parents of children in naíonraí. While the response rate was high, it was important to consider whether those who did not respond differed significantly from those

who did. In order to draw the children's sample, data on the home language of all children had been collected on a sheet completed by Leaders of each naíonra. From this, it was concluded that the home language of non-respondents did not differ significantly from the profile for respondents to the questionnaire, and that, on the critical variable of home language at least, the surveyed parents were representative of the entire group of naíonra parents (see Hickey, 1997 for further discussion).

In what follows, a number of comparisons are made between the characteristics of naíonra parents and those of more general populations. One such comparison is with a large sample of mothers and fathers of children aged 4 years or younger in the Republic of Ireland (ESRI Survey of Income Distribution, Poverty and Usage of State Services, Callan et al., 1989). Another is with a national sample of adults who were surveyed about their ability in Irish and their current use of the language (ITÉ National Survey on Languages, Ó Riagáin & Ó Gliasáin, 1994). These comparisons provide a context in which to interpret the responses of naíonra parents on questions relating to their socioeconomic status and to their ability in Irish.

The profile of parents choosing early Irish immersion for their child can be summarised under four headings:

- (1) educational background,
- (2) mothers' involvement in the labour force,
- (3) occupational status, and
- (4) Irish ability.

Parents who chose to send their pre-school children to a naíonra differed from the general population of parents with at least one child aged four years or less in the following ways:

#### ***Educational background***

Regarding educational status, it was found that almost twice as many naíonra parents had a third-level education than the general population of parents of pre-school children. Thus, highly educated parents were significantly better represented among the naíonra parents than in the

general population of parents. However, about one third of the naíonra fathers and one quarter of naíonra mothers had the lowest educational qualification, while another 5% of each had no qualification later than primary school. Thus, naíonra parents cannot be considered a homogenous educated elite.

*Mothers' labour force status*

Mothers who choose to send their child to an Irish-medium pre-school are about twice as likely to be employed outside of the home as the general population of Irish mothers with at least one child under four years.

*Occupational status*

Both fathers and mothers of children in naíonraí are significantly more likely to have higher occupational status than would be predicted from the general population of parents, with a higher representation of professional/managerial workers and teachers than in the general population of parents of pre-schoolers. Thus, the parents who choose to send their child to early Irish immersion are significantly more likely to have high occupational status than the general population of pre-school parents. However, about a third of the naíonra fathers had manual occupations outside of farming, pointing to the spread within this group, and the fact that parents choosing a naíonra for their child do not constitute a homogenous elite.

*Parents' Irish ability*

A higher proportion of naíonra parents have moderate to good Irish ability than a national sample of adults in the same age-group.<sup>2</sup> However, the overall proportion of naíonra parents with moderate to good Irish is small, and it was found that over 80% of naíonra parents living in English-speaking areas and 40% of naíonra parents living in Gaeltacht or Irish-speaking areas reported that they had no Irish or only

very weak ability. This indicates that even parents who are not themselves competent in the language see the experience of early immersion as worthwhile for their child. It also indicates that these parents are likely to have significant difficulties in interacting with the school through the target language and in supporting their children's learning in that language.

### **Reasons for Choosing Early Irish Immersion in a Naíonra**

Parents were asked about the factors which played a role in their decision to send their child to an Irish-medium pre-school or naíonra. The reason most frequently cited was the parents' desire that the child learns Irish. While this might appear obvious, it shows that parents do believe that attendance at a naíonra will significantly help their child to learn Irish. The second most frequent reason was the general reputation of a particular naíonra or its Leader, indicating that word-of-mouth plays a significant role in promoting the naíonraí.

It was interesting that only a third of parents stated that their intention of sending their child to an immersion primary school later was one of their main reasons for choosing a naíonra. Thus, it appears that, when deciding to send a child to a naíonra, some parents see the child's exposure to Irish there as beneficial in itself, without initially intending that they will go on to immersion schools, perhaps because they have not yet made up their minds, do not wish to opt for an immersion school, none is available to them, or because they cannot secure a place in an immersion school.

Overall, 39% of parents mid-way through the naíonra year reported that they had decided to choose an immersion primary school and another 26% indicated a preference for partial immersion. Only one third of the respondents to the naíonra survey stated that they wished to send their child to English-medium schools. The proportion opting for full or partial immersion primary schooling is significantly higher, at 65%, among the naíonra parents than among a national sample of adults (i.e. not a parent sample) (Ó Riagáin & Ó Gliaáin, 1994), at 30%.

However, it is not clear what schooling decisions are eventually made by those desiring partial immersion, since this option is very limited in the Irish context at present.

It is of interest to compare these findings with those available on parents choosing immersion primary schools in the Republic. There has been relatively little published research on this topic, but Ó Riagáin and Ó Glasáin (1979) carried out a study of 110 mothers of children in Dublin Irish-immersion schools. They categorised the reasons given for choosing an immersion school into ‘language only reasons’, ‘non-language/educational reasons’ and ‘both types of reason’. They found that about a third of those parents chose immersion primary schools for language-only reasons, another third for non-language/educational reasons, and the remainder for a mixture of both types of reason. A similar exercise was carried out on the answers to this question in the naíonra survey. Table 1 summarises parents’ responses to the question regarding why they had chosen a naíonra.

**Table 1** Categorisation of reasons for choosing naíonra

<i>Reasons for choosing a naíonra</i>	<i>% English-speaking area N = 1354</i>	<i>% Gaeltacht N = 425</i>	<i>% Overall N = 1779</i>	<i>All-Irish school choice (Ó Riagáin &amp; Ó Glasáin)</i>
Language reasons only	21	12	19	37
Non-language/educational	18	19	18	36
Language and educational	60	68	62	27
Total	100*	100	100	100

\* Totals here do not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Overall, it appears that the majority of naíonra parents choose to send their child to a naíonra for a mixture of language and non-language/educational reasons. However, roughly a fifth of parents in English-speaking areas opt for a naíonra for language reasons only, and almost a fifth do so for non-language reasons only such as accessibility, facilities and general reputation. Fewer parents in Irish-speaking areas (the Gaeltacht) make their choice only for language reasons.

The higher proportion of those basing their decision on both language and non-language reasons in the naíonra survey than in the Ó Riagáin and Ó Gliasáin survey of immersion school parents is probably due to the fact that people opting into non-compulsory pre-school education are more likely to include non-language/educational reasons in their decision process than those choosing between types of school in the compulsory school system.

Naíonra parents who said that they were considering sending a child to an immersion primary school were asked how important they judged Irish-medium pre-schooling to be. The majority (87%) said that it was 'very important', 12% thought it 'not very important' and just 1% said that it was 'not important at all'. These figures contrast significantly with the response of immersion school parents (i.e. parents with children already in Irish-medium schools) in Dublin in the Ó Riagáin and Ó Gliasáin (1979) study, which found that only 28% of those parents thought that the provision of Irish-medium pre-schooling was very important, and 36% thought it not at all important. Ó Riagáin and Ó Gliasáin explained the low interest in Irish-medium pre-schooling in their study as representative of parents' high levels of satisfaction with their immersion school and the child's progress in Irish, even without pre-schooling through Irish. However, they added:

*It is clear from our study of home bilingualism that the earlier in the family cycle that children acquire competence in Irish, the better are the possibilities for home use of Irish being established. As few parents appear able to do this by themselves, there would seem to be an a priori case for immersion pre-school units where there can be a follow-through to an all-Irish primary school.*

*(Ó Riagáin & Ó Gliasáin, 1979: 130)*

It must be remembered, of course, that at the time of the Ó Riagáin and Ó Gliasáin study there were far fewer naíonraí available to parents, and that overall, the take-up of all forms of pre-school education in the Republic of Ireland was lower, due to social factors such as lower numbers of women working outside of the home. In the context of immersion education today, it is interesting that the

discussion about the value of early exposure to a language has now shifted to an even earlier age group, as in the Cylch Ti a Fi groups organised by Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin in Wales. There is now, in south Dublin, a Parents and Toddlers group (Na Mamailínigh) which meets in each others' homes for a few hours each week, and aims to establish patterns of at least some Irish use with babies and very young children. Hickey (1999) argues for the establishment of such groups in Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking) areas in order to support use of the language in the home.

### **Parents' Satisfaction Level and Perception of Progress**

Parents were overwhelmingly satisfied with their decision to send their child to a naíonra, with 96% reporting that they 'would do the same again, with the same naíonra'. Another 3% said that they would prefer to wait until their child was older than s/he had been when starting to attend, but would then choose the same naíonra. Only 1% said that, on reflection, they would now rather send their child to an English-medium play-group. Overall, 96% of respondents felt that their child enjoyed the naíonra. There were no significant differences between parents in Irish or English speaking communities regarding satisfaction, except that marginally more Gaeltacht parents (5%) said they 'would choose the same naíonra, but wait until child is older' than did parents in English speaking areas (2%).

Ninety-two per cent of parents reported an increase in their child's use of Irish after at least two terms in the naíonra (7% saw no change and 1% reported a decrease). Of those reporting an increase, almost 60% stated that this took the form of individual words or rhymes and songs which the child used 'regularly' at home, while another 25% stated that these were 'sometimes' used. Parents living in Irish-speaking districts (regardless of their home language) were more likely to report an increase in regular Irish conversation by the child (19%) than parents in English-speaking districts (5%).

Most of this increased use of Irish was directed at parents (84%), grandparents (48%) and extended family (32%). Interestingly, 28% of parents reported that their child spoke Irish in play with dolls, cars and other toys. This supports Karniol's (1990) observation that young children, acquiring an L2 through immersion day-care, practise their new L2 in doll play. Karniol commented that dolls were assigned the names of other children in the immersion situation and 'reprimanded, changed, sung and "read" to, danced with, fed and generally conversed with' (p.159).

Parents' perception of progress in their children was not confined to the increase they observed in their Irish. Over 80% also reported that their child:

- now knows colours, shapes and some letters;
- can now count to a higher number than before.

Fifty six per cent stated that they felt their child's English skills had also improved, whereas only 1% felt that the child's L1 English had fallen behind its peers.

### **Parents' Contribution to Children's Irish Scores**

Tests of Irish production and comprehension, as well as general cognitive ability were administered to 225 children from 25 naíonraí (see Hickey, 1997). Multivariate analyses were carried out, using the children's Irish production scores as dependent variable. Variables were entered with child-level variables first<sup>3</sup> followed by naíonra-level variables.<sup>4</sup> Parents' Irish ability accounted for almost 20% of the total explained variance in the children's Irish production scores in the hierarchical regression, a larger proportion of the explained variance than for any other child-level variable. The multi-level model results also indicated that parents' Irish ability remained a significant factor in the children's overall production scores.

Parents' Irish ability was found to be significantly correlated with actual use of Irish in the home (either as a primary home language or as one of the languages of the home), number of siblings in Irish-medium

education, and residence in an Irish-speaking district. However, it is important to remember that the effect of parents' Irish ability shown by the multivariate analyses is not simply due to this correlation with other variables, such as living in the Gaeltacht, since in the multivariate analyses other variables are controlled for in assessing the impact of an individual variable. Thus, while it is expected that parents' Irish ability is linked to residence in the Gaeltacht and to speaking Irish in the home, nevertheless, it remains significant even when those variables are controlled for by the statistical analysis.

It is true, of course, that higher parental ability in Irish is also associated with higher educational qualifications and higher occupational status. Research by Ó Riagáin (1997) has indicated the link between Irish ability, educational attainment and occupational status. Similar links are to be found among parents of naíonra children. This raises the issue of whether the positive influence found for parental Irish ability may reflect a socioeconomic advantage for these children rather than the effect only of language support. Some additional analysis was undertaken to investigate this issue. A variable measuring the highest educational qualification attained by either parent was constructed; two variables based on this, one indicating Leaving Certificate qualifications (similar to A-Levels) and another qualification beyond Leaving Certificate, were included in a hierarchical regression analysis. These additional variables were entered as the first of the home-level variables, in advance of parental Irish ability, in order to allow maximum scope for their impact. The results indicated that these additional variables made no significant contribution to the explanation of production test scores, while parental ability in Irish remained significant. Thus, it seems that the link between parental Irish ability and children's production test scores is a genuine one, rather than a proxy for socioeconomic advantages.

Gibson (1985), in discussing the role of parents in immersion, noted that having children in immersion has motivated many parents to try to improve their competence in the target language in order to be able to participate more or help children with

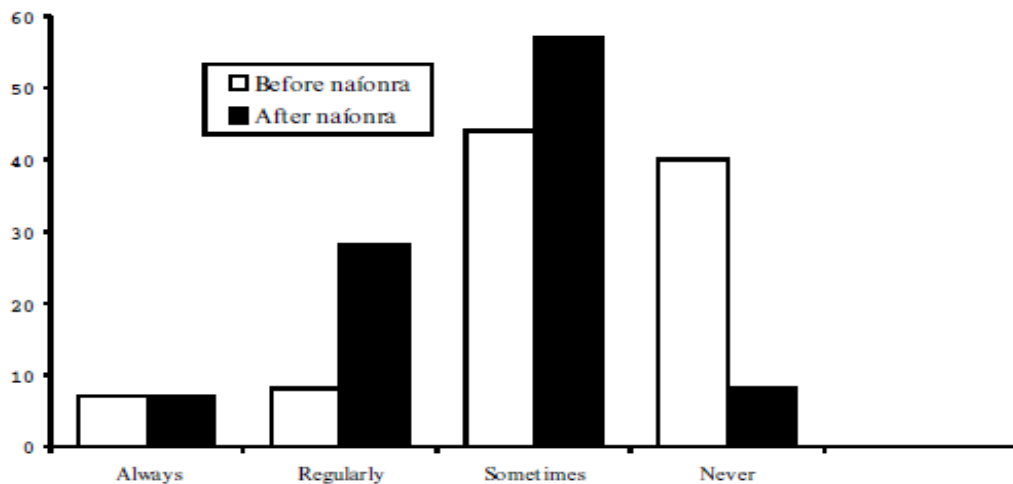
homework. The link between parental ability and children's production scores points to the value for immersion programmes of helping to improve parents' competence in the target language. There are many ways of addressing this need, from the provision of adult classes in the immersion setting, to the setting up of conversation circles, to providing information on self-help materials and classes in other organisations. However, it is worth noting that target-language classes would be of greater benefit, and have higher take-up among parents, if they were more focused on the language being learned and used by their children in immersion, rather than using the format of adult language classes offered to the general public. If parents could see an earlier result in terms of being able to interact simply with their children in the L2 (rather than learning how to book a hotel room or introduce themselves, as is often the case in courses directed at adults) then this would increase their motivation. It is important to encourage parents to use their growing ability in the target language at every opportunity with their children, and practical suggestions about how to increase this use in the home would be most likely to have the desired effect.

### **Naíonra Effect on Parents' Use of Irish**

While the results show that parents' ability in the target-language influenced their children's production scores, it is also of interest to consider whether the child's attendance at early immersion influences the use of the L2 in the home. National surveys of Irish ability in the last twenty years (CLAR, 1975; Ó Riagáin & Ó Gliasáin, 1984, 1994) have shown that in those samples, fewer than 21% of the adults surveyed claimed to have used Irish 'often' or 'several times' since leaving school. This survey of naíonra parents set out to assess how often parents had used Irish in the home before their child started attending the naíonra, and afterwards also, to see if they perceived any change in their level of use. There was already some evidence from small-scale studies of the positive effect of naíonra attendance on Irish use in the

home (Owens, 1992; Mhic Mhathúna, 1995) and this question in the parents' questionnaire set out to establish how widespread the effect might be.

Figure 1 shows that parents report substantial increases in their use of Irish in the home after a child has spent about a year in the naíonra.



**Figure 1** Effect of naíonra attendance on home use of Irish between respondent and child

As expected, there was no change in the percentage of parents who 'always' use Irish with their partner or children, but there was more than a trebling of reported 'regular' use of Irish between the respondent ('self') and her/his children, as well as a trebling of regular Irish use between the respondent's partner and children, and among children in the same family.

The largest change was the drop in those who never used Irish at home, from 40% before the naíonra, to only 8% after their child attended. Those who spoke Irish regularly at home trebled after their child began attending, to 30%, and those who sometimes used Irish also increased, to 57%. In all, 81% of respondents reported that they perceived an increase in the frequency of Irish use in their home since their first child began attending a naíonra. A Sign-Rank test of these changes showed that there was a significant

increase in home use of Irish in all four categories (between self and partner, self and children, partner and children, children with each other) after a child began attending a naíonra.

Parents were asked about which activities in the home were most likely to occasion the use of Irish. Leaving aside the 'always/mostly' category, which reflects stable home use for a rather small percentage of households, the activities which parents judged to elicit target language use on a 'regular' or 'occasional' basis in the home were:

- mealtimes (67% regular or occasional use overall);
- washing/dressing the child (61% regular or occasional use overall);
- journeys (56% regular or occasional use overall);
- reading stories (52% regular or occasional use overall);
- doing housework and gardening (51% regular or occasional use overall)
- helping older children with homework (46% regular or occasional use overall).

Family activities which were least likely to elicit Irish were: listening to the radio and watching TV (presumably linked to the very low provision of suitable Irish-medium programmes for this age-group before the advent of the new Irish-language channel Teilifis na Gaeilge) and prayer (family/church) in the English-speaking areas (probably because the majority of those parents who attend religious services attend English-medium services, either by choice or due to the lack of an Irish-medium alternative in these districts). In their own contact with the naíonra, only a minority (13%) of parents spoke Irish, half spoke some Irish and some English, and over a third (37%) spoke English only.

Overall, parents reported that their child's attendance at an immersion pre-school increased their home use of the target language. In turn, it was found that this home usage contributed significantly to the explained variance in the hierarchical regression ( $p < 0.014$ ) on the children's production scores. Taking these results together, they point to the role of continuing home support for the target language, and the importance of encouraging parents to use the Irish available to them as often as

possible in order to support their children's acquisition in early immersion.

### **Parents' Requirements**

Given the importance of parents providing home support for their children's language acquisition in early immersion, there is a need to examine how best to facilitate parents' involvement. Parents were asked about the information the naíonra provided for them, and asked which services they would find helpful. Table 2 indicates that almost half of the respondents wanted copies of the rhymes and songs the children learned in the naíonra, although another quarter said they already had these supplied. Between 30–40% wanted samples of the phrases learned, and help in using Irish at home. While there is some help already available in the form of a booklet of Irish words and phrases for parents of naíonra children (Basic Irish for Parents, Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann and An Comhchoiste Réamhscolaíochta, 1989), and in the form of posters, books and tapes (An Comhchoiste Réamhscolaíochta, Catalóg) parents appeared not to be aware of these aids. Thus, it is important that the immersion programme should direct parents to the aids already available, ideally with some discussion at a parents' evening on how best to use them. Parents need to understand that their use of such materials will significantly help their children's acquisition.

**Table 2** Services provided by naíonra to parents — or services requested

<i>N = 1779</i>	<i>% 'Already Provided'</i>	<i>% 'I would like this'</i>
Copies of rhymes/songs	25	48
Samples of phrases learned	37	40
Help on using Irish at home	20	32
Parent & toddler group	3	31
Help with selecting Irish books/tapes	22	30
Regular information on activities	54	24
Social events for parents in Irish	9	20
Irish conversation group for parents	8	19
Irish class/information on Irish classes	22	18

The preparation and dissemination of a short video to parents showing scenes from a typical naíonra would be very helpful to parents (copies of this could be made available to each naíonra for parents to borrow). This could illustrate children using common phrases which parents could incorporate into the child's home routines, and information could be provided on the video about the value of using Irish words and phrases with the child and reading simple stories regularly, as well as practical suggestions for selecting books and using Irish phrases naturally at home.

Almost a third of naíonra parents said that they would like to attend an Irish-speaking 'Parent and Toddler' group, constituting half of the respondents with child(ren) younger than the naíonra child, and there is a need to develop materials for such voluntary groups to facilitate their operation. In Wales, Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin have established a network of parent and toddler groups for children under three years, and these groups then feed into the Cylch Meithrin or Welsh-medium pre-school.

Over half of naíonra parents reported that they never read target-language books to their children at home, and another third did so only occasionally. Yet reading simple children's books aloud is a very effective strategy of providing L2 input for parents whose own L2 skills are limited. Almost a third of parents would like help with selecting Irish books and tapes, and difficulties in the choice of such

materials may contribute to their infrequent use in the home. Clearly, many parents are unsure of how to introduce Irish in their homes, given their own limited competence, and they need active encouragement in order to engage in structured activities such as reading very simple Irish books. Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin in Wales, as part of their Cylch Ti a Fi scheme, help parents to choose appropriate books and read them to their children, by providing weekly 30 minute coaching sessions for parents in reading aloud in Welsh. In these sessions, parents can practise reading the 'book of the week', chosen by an immersion teacher or adviser, and have their questions regarding vocabulary and pronunciation answered by a fluent speaker. Parents then practise reading aloud to each other to gain confidence. These parents are, therefore, receiving language tutorials specifically targeted at the language items their children are acquiring, as well as guidance about suitable books. They are also being empowered to offer their children daily target-language input at home in a way that is enjoyable and realistic for those with limited L2 ability, with the added benefit of helping the children's pre-reading skills. Thus, this simple facilitation of daily target-language reading to young children allows even those with limited L2 ability to provide appropriate L2 input, as well as literacy support and an achievable demonstration of their interest in, and active involvement with, their children's L2 learning.

The provision of a range of taped children's books in the target language is of great importance to parents attempting to support children's acquisition. The number of such taped books is currently very limited in Irish, which means that there is little support for parents who are willing to use Irish books with their child, but are unsure of their own competence to read aloud to their children. Hickey (1991) found that parents of somewhat older children were reluctant to buy Irish children's books or read to their children in Irish, because of their own limited competence in the language, but the results of a taped-book experiment with their children showed positive benefits in promoting the children's interest and accuracy in L2 reading.

Also of great importance to parents of young children is the availability of recordings of children's lullabies and activity songs in the target language, with adequate texts and translations, since singing is an activity in the target language that can be introduced from birth, is relatively constrained in terms of its demands on parents' language ability, and has been shown to be a pleasant and effective language teaching exercise. The promotion of singing to children in the target language can be targeted from birth and provides a pleasant ambience in which to introduce at least some use of the language, as well as exposing children to an aspect of a particular culture through that language. However, for effective introduction into the home, it is recommended that parents be made aware of such materials from early in their child's life, and encouraged to use them and become comfortable with them as the child grows.

In a panel discussion at the 4th European Conference on Immersion Programmes in 1998, participants representing immersion programmes in Bolzano Italy, the Basque Country, Canada, Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, New Zealand, and Wales discussed ways of addressing the needs of immersion parents. The problems of immersion parents differed from one context to the next, in many cases depending on the range of funding available. Maori parents in New Zealand reported that they saw a role for themselves as active and regular contributors to the immersion classroom, whereas parents in Canada, the Basque Country and Ireland were more likely to see themselves as lobbyists and fund-raisers rather than being actively involved in the classroom on a regular basis. The common theme from these varied immersion situations was that parents seemed to take their lead from the school in determining their involvement. Flood and Lapp (1995) consider this in relation to the teaching of reading, in an article aptly entitled 'I never knew I was needed until you called!': Promoting parent involvement in schools'. They point to the need for schools to outline specific ways in which they want parents to support their children's learning and to encourage parents to play an active role. Parents may be inadequately informed

about the work their children are doing in the immersion classroom, and it is incumbent upon the school to address this information gap so that parents can support that work in the home.

In all of the immersion contexts discussed there was a pressing need to improve parents' ability in the target language. The frequent phenomenon of new immersion parents embarking on language courses in the first flush of enthusiasm when their child began attending, but then dropping out after a short period, was considered. Clearly, there is a need to tailor language courses to these parents' shorter-term objectives, so that they can see earlier results, for example in terms of being able to read aloud in the target language, use rhymes and songs the children are learning, and help with simple homework as the child progresses. Such classes need to be provided at the time of day suitable to a particular group of parents, which may be immediately after dropping children to school, or before collection, or at a time when a group of parents are on their way home from work, rather than offering only evening classes, which may not be convenient for the parents of young children. There is also a need to explore other options such as self-help materials, CD-ROM language courses, and some leisure activities through the target language, such as pottery or dance classes, which may be more attractive to parents than language classes.

New immersion parents need continuing encouragement to persevere at the difficult task of learning the target language. Emphasising shorter-term goals such as an improved ability to help with their children's homework and to make an active contribution to their children's education, may be more effective than a generalised aspiration on the part of the school that parents should learn the language. Indeed, such a general statement may simply evoke parents' failures to do so in the past, rather than motivate them to address this need in the present.

## **Conclusions**

Parents who choose to send their child to early immersion pre-schools in the Republic of Ireland base their decision on a range of factors, some of which relate to language and cultural factors, and some to general or educational factors. It is important to recognise this mix of motivations, so that the different objectives of parents can be acknowledged. While some parents may wish to play a role in revitalising a minority language which has cultural significance for them, others may base their decision on quality of education and pupil-teacher ratios. Some parents may feel a certain ambivalence towards the target language, and while they wish their child to become fluent, they may themselves harbour negative feelings towards it as a result of their own school experience or failure to acquire it. Such an ambivalence may be found particularly in minority language situations such as in Ireland, where the majority of today's parents learned Irish as a single compulsory subject from school entry without attaining fluency. Some immersion parents in Ireland may also wish to distance themselves from the image of 'language supporter' because of the historical political, religious and social affiliations of the stereotypical Irish revivalist, even if that stereotype no longer holds in reality.

Similarly, it is likely in other countries also that parents bring a range of motivations to bear on their choice of immersion for their children. Given this variety of factors influencing immersion parents within one state, as well as the possible variability between states, it is useful to target the desire which is common to parents across the range of nationalities offering immersion, that is, the desire of parents to provide children with a happy and successful educational experience and to ensure their children's academic success. This is the objective on which immersion schools can build in order to promote parental support for target language acquisition and, thereby, enhance children's learning.

The parents in this study reported high levels of satisfaction with their choice of early immersion and were satisfied with their

child's progress, not only in Irish, but in general development also. Significantly, parents reported increases in their home use of Irish after their child began attending the naíonra, and it may be that early immersion provides an effective bridge from school use of the minority language to some home use, at an age when children are proud to exhibit new skills and less self-conscious about errors and limitations. It is also important to remember that parents learn their style of interacting with the school in the first years of their child's attendance, and if the model presented to them at the outset requires their active support for their children's acquisition in order to maximise their school achievement, then there is a greater likelihood of their participation than after years of 'leaving that to the school'. Limiting the role of parents in Parents' Associations to fund-raising is a serious loss to children, parents and immersion schools. Widening the role of Parents' Associations to facilitate home-school liaison and promote active collaboration in specific educational initiatives, such as 'Shared Reading', can make a valuable contribution to children's educational progress and enhance both children's and parents' commitment to the immersion programme.

While target language limitations may restrict parents' willingness or ability to contribute, there are, as Faltis contends, 'ways to involve parents in schooling matters that minimise the barriers that language and cultural differences can create (1995: 255). Parents can be helped to work actively within their language limitations to provide at least some target language support in the home, while simultaneously showing children that they themselves value the target language and are convinced of the value of speaking it. An emphasis on the contribution such support would make to children's school success is important in appealing to all parents, whereas more general cultural and revivalist aims are less likely to be effective by seeming too remote, and may, in fact, alienate the proportion of parents who do not share those aims or who may even have some negative feelings towards the language as a result of their own failure to acquire it. It is worth remembering that, in supporting home-school literacy schemes, parents

help their children learn to read, not in order to eradicate world illiteracy, but in order to help their own child to succeed.

Parents in this study indicated a number of ways of addressing their needs. There is scope for informing parents more of the value of their contribution to their child's experience of early immersion. Parents need practical support and encouragement from the immersion programme to use at least some of the target language in the home. Naíonraí or schools could invite parents to observe classes for short periods, provide information on the words and phrases being acquired by the children, teach parents how to sing or say rhymes, songs and phrases in the target language, and could help parents to choose appropriate books and read them aloud to their children. Parents showed an interest in Parent and Toddler groups and this points to another area of development in bringing the introduction of the L2 a step closer to home and earlier in the child's life.

One model which places a high value on the involvement of parents is the Language Acquisition Pre-school (LAP) project in Kansas (Rice & Wilcox, 1995; Bunce, 1995), where there is a strong emphasis on building language skills in mixed groups of children with specific language impairments, L2 learners and mother-tongue speakers of the target language. In this model great importance is attached to the contribution of the home, and parents are viewed as collaborators. Parents are given detailed and frequent information on their children's progress through newsletters, personal contact and conferences, and parents give feedback about their goals for the child and their child's attitudes and activities. Sargeant (1995) notes: 'This exchange of information between school and home facilitates the generalisation of language skills across settings' (p. 129).

While there are obvious differences between the immersion pre-school and the LAP setting, there are strategies from the latter that could be applied in the former. For example, parent evenings each term (in addition to the current introductory meeting before children begin in the naíonra) to discuss the importance of parents' contribution to their children's L2 acquisition would help to

counteract the view that 'the teachers look after that'. Similarly, the LAP practice of giving parents a brief outline at the start of every week of the programmed activities for each day and the themes to be discussed would enable parents to be more active in discussion with their children, rather than asking the usually ineffective 'what did you do in school today?' question. If weekly information is not possible, then a newsletter or sheet each term with details of some seasonal activities and the related language would help parents. In this study, parents who received lists of phrases, songs and rhymes found them helpful, and extending such information to all parents would be beneficial. Given the constraints on the time of parents with young children, it is likely that a short list once a month would be more effective than a one-off lengthy list which they might not consult frequently.

Parents also indicated that they needed help in selecting appropriate L2 materials for their child, as well as advice on how to source such materials, generally not widely available. It is of critical importance that materials such as tapes, books, taped books, videos, posters and information on suitable Irish-language TV programmes be made available to all parents with children in Irish immersion. The targeting of this group of parents and children as a specific market for L2 materials would assist in the dissemination of information about relevant aids.

Some parents whose children attend early immersion wish to improve their own skills in the target language. However, it must be acknowledged that the life-stage of parenting young children does not lend itself to attending classes, and that this group needs more flexible methods of learning language such as 'teach yourself' and CALL materials, perhaps with back-up from the immersion teachers, as well as courses which are more tailored to their needs as immersion parents. Parents also requested conversation classes, and investment in such activities is likely to be well repaid in terms of children's results. The development of holiday language courses for families is a recent advance in Ireland. In this scheme, parents and children stay in Irish-

speaking areas in an educational institution, and parents attend language classes while children engage in art activities, drama, singing and games through Irish. Families are introduced to leisure activities and local history with native speakers in the afternoons and evening, allowing positive interaction with the target language and the fostering of links with an Irish-speaking district. So successful have these family courses been that families return year after year, and children rate them highly compared to other summer camps.

Such developments and parents' own recommendations show that there are many possibilities for broadening parental involvement in immersion from lobbying and fund-raising to include a more actively educational role. Learning about and acknowledging the range of motivations which influences parents' choice of immersion is a first step towards finding a workable role for parents in a particular setting. The impact of even some use of the target language in the home on children's acquisition was shown in this study to be considerable. Involving parents as active partners in immersion can only be accomplished with sensitivity and openness on the part of schools and teachers, but the benefits to children, parents and schools, particularly in language revitalisation settings, will make this effort worthwhile.

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### **Notes**

1. See Arzamendi and Genesee (1997), Artigal (1991), Siguan and Garcia (1991), Slaughter (1997), Benton (1986), Spolsky (1989), Baker (1995), Hickey (1997), Genesee (1984, 1987), Johnson and Swain (1997), Cummins (1992,1995), Argital and Lauren (1992).

For an overall survey of pre-primary immersion see Ó Murchú (1987).

2. Special tabulations from ITÉ (1993) National Survey of Languages (Ó Riagáin & Ó Gliasáin, 1994). The comparison of the Irish ability of naíonra parents with the general sample here relates only to respondents aged less than 45 years in the national survey, in order to match the age profile of naíonra parents. There were 526 respondents in this age-group in the ITÉ survey, comprising 53.9% of the total sample.

3. Child-level variables were: age, sex, general cognitive ability, parents' Irish ability, number of siblings in Irish-medium education, language(s) spoken to the child as baby and toddler, current home use of Irish, and length of attendance at naíonra.

4. Naíonra-level variables were: location in Irish/English-speaking community, Leaders' Irish ability, school/non-school location, number of children per session and pupil-teacher ratio. See Hickey (1997) for discussion.

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