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**‘You’re looking at this different language and it freezes you out straight away’: Identifying challenges to parental involvement among immersion parents**

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There is now consensus among researchers and educators that parental involvement in education is related to children’s academic and social success at school. However, less is known about the reasons why some parents choose to become involved and others do not. In recent years, there has been a move towards developing theoretical models which can be used to explore parents’ motivations for involvement. However, little research has focused on how such models might apply in alternative educational models, such as immersion education. Immersion parents have been given little opportunity to share their unique and valuable insights into what parental involvement means in a context where the language of the school and the language of the home differ. The present study utilised qualitative methods to explore the experiences of involvement of parents with children in Irish immersion schools. Here, findings are presented relating to parents’ perceptions of challenges to their becoming successfully involved. These findings were derived from two datasets: a series of semi-structured interviews with 10 immersion parents and from responses ( $n = 84$ ) to open-ended questions on a large-scale parental involvement survey. Implications of the findings for future research, and suggestions for policy and practice in immersion schools, are considered.

**Keywords:** parental involvement; immersion education; qualitative; home–school relations; heritage immersion

## **Introduction**

### ***Parental involvement in education***

An extensive body of literature points to the conclusion that student educational outcomes are influenced by parental involvement. Benefits of such involvement have been shown for students' motivation (e.g. Grolnick and Slowiaczek 1994; Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, and Doan Holbein 2005), reading attainment (e.g. Sénéchal and LeFevre 2002), behaviour in school (e.g. Cotton and Wikelund 2001; Hill et al. 2004), attendance (Cotton and Wikelund 2001; Epstein and Sheldon 2002) and academic achievement (e.g. Miedel and Reynolds 1999; Fan and Chen 2001; Hill and Taylor 2004). The positive relationships between parental involvement and student achievement have been demonstrated using cross-sectional (e.g. Grolnick and Slowiaczek 1994) and longitudinal designs (e.g. Miedel and Reynolds 1999; Barnard 2004). They have been found in a variety of countries and contexts, and also with students of all age groups (e.g. Simon 2004). Evidence for causal relationships between parental involvement and student achievement can be found from experimental and quasi- experimental studies where intervention studies have documented better outcomes for students whose parents participated in the programmes than for controls (e.g. Jordan, Snow, and Porche 2000). The benefits of parental involvement have also been documented for school communities (Jordan, Orozco, and Averett 2001) and for parents themselves (Peña 2000).

Given the evidence that parental involvement is related to students' success, it is important to identify factors that encourage or facilitate parental involvement. Much previous research has investigated which parent characteristics are related to higher levels of involvement (Hill and Taylor 2004). Socio-economic status (SES), educational background and elements of family structure have all been found to be associated with levels of involvement (e.g. Grolnick et al. 1997; Davis-Kean 2005). However, such sociological trends do not tell us much about parents' motivations for involvement or the possible psycho-social factors which may militate against such participation. They also cannot explain the variation in levels of involvement within demographic groups. For the purposes of the present research, which examines the nature of parental involvement in an immersion context, it is pertinent to look at *why* parents might or might not choose to become involved in their children's education.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997, 2007) moved beyond demographics with a model of parental involvement grounded in psychological literature (see also Hoover- Dempsey and Sandler's contributions in Walker et al. 2005). This framework suggests that parents choose to become involved in their child's education for the following reasons: their personal construction of the parental role; their personal sense of efficacy for helping their children succeed in school; their perception of opportunities and demands for involvement presented both by their children and their children's schools; and life context variables. Thus, they argue that parents will become involved when they perceive their role as a parent as including a role as co-educator of their child; when they feel that their involvement will make a positive difference to their child's education; when they feel that they have the skills, knowledge and resources necessary to be effectively involved; and when they receive invitations from their child's school and/or from their child to participate in the education process.

### ***Parental involvement in immersion***

Parental motivation and high parental support have also been posited as important features of the success of immersion programmes (Branaman and Rennie 1998; Howard, Sugarman, and Christian 2003). While immersion students have consistently been found to achieve higher levels of proficiency in the target language than their 'drip-feed' counterparts, it has been argued that the classroom environment alone is insufficient for pupils to attain full fluency and that classroom teaching must also be accompanied by family commitment and community support (Hinton 2001).

However, previous research has identified, in particular sociolinguistic contexts, that having a child educated through a language that is not the first language (L1) of the parents presents difficulties relating to effective parental involvement in education. So far, however, this has mainly been researched in the context of parents of students who are being submerged in the target language, which is the majority language of the community, for example the case of Hispanic immigrant parents in the United States, where barriers to parental involvement relating to home language, differing cultures and expectations of education, and SES have been studied extensively (e.g. Bermudez and Marquez 1996). However, it is argued here that, although

there may be similarities across the contexts, it is not appropriate to generalize from this to the heritage immersion context found in, for example, Ireland, Wales or New Zealand (to cite but three examples from a wide range), where parents can opt to have their children educated through a language which is not the parents' own L1, or even an L2 (second language) they are proficient in (in a context where English-medium education is the norm). It is expected that a variety of different psychological and sociocultural factors may influence the nature of involvement in this setting and that parental involvement in such a context thus merits study in its own right. Recently, the role of parents in dual immersion has received some research attention, with Whiting and Feinauer (2011) examining parents' motivations for choosing dual immersion and Parkes and Tenley (2011) looking at parents' satisfaction with dual language programmes. While such analyses of parental motivation and satisfaction are important in enlarging our understanding of the role of parents in immersion, it is argued that it is crucial that an exploration of *why* and *how* parents are actually *involved* once they have chosen immersion is particularly important in order to help secure student success in these programmes.

### ***Parents in immersion in Ireland***

Immersion education has become an increasingly popular choice for Irish parents. Irish immersion schools, or *Gaelscoileanna*, were established from the early 1970s onwards in response to parental demand for an alternative to the English-medium schools which are predominant in Ireland. Initially, such parents tended to have relatively high proficiency in the target language: Cummins (1974; as cited in Coady and Ó Laoire 2002) found that nearly half of the children enrolled in Irish immersion schools at that time were from Irish speaking homes. Many of these parents reported that they needed competence in the language in order to qualify for their jobs, with 51% of fathers of children in Irish immersion schools employed in government or semi-state jobs where proficiency in Irish was then a required qualification (Ó Riagáin and Ó Gliasáin 1979). The number of Irish immersion schools grew throughout the 1970s and experienced a dramatic growth spurt in the 1980s, continuing to grow steadily since then. Currently, there are 139 all-Irish primary schools outside of Irish-speaking (*Gaeltacht*) areas in the Republic of Ireland (Gaelscoileanna 2011), a number which is expected to grow in the coming years in

response to increased parental demand.

Harris and Ó Laoire (2006) claim that this rapid rise in popularity of immersion schools in Ireland has brought with it associated changes to the profile of a 'typical' immersion parent as someone who is highly committed to, and proficient in, Irish. They noted with surprise that relatively little detailed research on parental involvement in immersion schools has been conducted in Ireland, given that the Gaelscoileanna movement has been so parent- driven. Hickey (1999) explored the reciprocity between home factors such as parental Irish proficiency and support for the target language and children's Irish achievement in immersion preschools, but since then there has been little consideration of this issue at primary school level. Harris and Ó Laoire pointed to the significance for students' achievement in immersion of increasing numbers of parents with low proficiency in Irish. Indeed, in 2006, Harris et al. found that only 5.8% of immersion parents had native- speaker ability in Irish. Higher numbers of parents with low/no proficiency in the language may result in a growth in the numbers of parents experiencing difficulties relating to involvement in their child's education. The current research aims to investigate the nature of such difficulties, something that is currently lacking in the literature. Difficulties relating to parental involvement may have implications for children's educational success generally and may also have a significant impact on their learning of Irish .

### ***Ireland as the context for the present research***

Despite the status of Irish as the L1 of the Republic of Ireland, and the existence of a small number of Irish speaking districts (known as *Gaeltachtaí*), Ireland is a predominantly English speaking country. Irish has been in decline since the seventeenth century, with efforts to revive the language having been made since the final quarter of the nineteenth century. The school system has been the primary vehicle for the attempted revival of the language (Coady and Ó Laoire, 2002). All children attending school study Irish as a subject from the time they enter primary school until the time they complete secondary school. A minority of children (approximately 6%) attends Irish immersion schools at primary level, and it is these schools which are the focus of the present research.

However, it should be noted that the school represents just one domain in which children learn and the broader sociolinguistic context should also be taken into account when considering the present study. Findings from the 2011 national Census revealed that 1.77 million (41.4%) of people said that they could speak Irish. However, there is a clear mismatch between Irish ability and use, with only 1.8% indicating that they used the language daily outside of the education system and a further 2.6% responding that they use Irish on a weekly basis only (Central Statistics Office 2012). While there are networks of Irish speakers in the country, these are largely dispersed, and as a result the opportunities for immersion (and mainstream) students to use the language in real communicative settings outside of school are very limited (Murtagh 2007). This, in turn, entails a limitation in the richness of language to which pupils are exposed, but it is also likely to depress their motivation to use the language as a result of being mainly or wholly associated with the school curriculum and not with peer culture (Baker 2003).

There tend to be assumptions made that the parents who choose to send their children to Gaelscoileanna are an elite group, and Borooah, Dineen and Lynch (2009) noted that ‘allegations of the comfortable middle class ambience of Gaelscoileanna have remained at the level of anecdote’ (p. 435). In fact, there are a number of Irish immersion schools in areas of social disadvantage (Gaelscoileanna 2011), while the mix within particular schools can vary. Harris and ÓLaoire (2006) note that there is likely now to be more diversity in terms of education, SES and proficiency in Irish among the Gaelscoileanna parent body than would have been the case in earlier decades. More information on this issue was gathered in a study of English reading and mathematics achievement in Gaelscoileanna by Shiel et al. (2011), who noted that a larger proportion of parents of pupils in sixth class in Irish immersion schools came from a high SES background (45%), compared with 30% of parents in a 2009 national assessment of English-medium schools. However, they also noted that 20% of the parents in their Irish immersion sample fell into the lowest SES bracket (as assessed by parent occupation). While this constitutes a smaller proportion of low-SES parents than in the English-medium schools in the national assessment (32%), nevertheless, it indicates that Irish-medium parents are a less homogeneously high socio-economic group than has previously been assumed, with 55% in middle or low-SES

categories. It is therefore possible that there are significant numbers of parents who may experience some challenges to becoming involved in their child's education through Irish.

## **Method**

### ***Study design***

The study discussed in this article formed part of a larger research project which explored parental involvement and home–school relations in Irish immersion from the perspectives of all of the primary stakeholders (immersion parents, principals, teachers and pupils). The findings presented here are derived from the mixed methods study of parents' experiences of involvement. A sequential exploratory design was employed in this study, whereby an in-depth exploratory qualitative phase was followed by a larger quantitative study. Here, the qualitative findings relating to participants' experiences of difficulties relating to involvement are presented. These are derived from both the semi-structured interviews conducted and parents' responses to open-ended questions on the involvement survey regarding their perceptions of difficulties with involvement.

Topics covered in the study included parents' motivations for choosing immersion, and satisfaction with that decision; the nature and extent of their involvement in home- based learning activities and school-based activities; and their experiences of home–school communication. The data presented and discussed here thus comprise only one part of the data collected in the larger study that sought to examine the issue of parental involvement in-depth from a range of perspectives. To contextualize this study, and to indicate the demands and benefits associated with involvement in their child's immersion education perceived by many parents, it is helpful to consider the comment of one parent who usefully frames the current discussion by stating her beliefs about why parents have an obligation to be involved and her acknowledgement of the challenges and benefits of such involvement:

*It's a big ask. But as I see it, if you're thinking of putting your child into anything, there's always something that's asked. Like, if you're putting your child into an English school, you know they're going to be speaking English, and you have the basic concepts for them. So, if you're putting them into an Irish school, it's the same commitment –*

*you need to – you know? And I think there are a lot of rewards that come from sending your child to an all-Irish school – the culture, the dance, the sports side of it. There’s an awful lot. (HP4)*

In the wider analysis of the parents’ qualitative data, it was found that their identification of perceived challenges pervaded their reports regarding their involvement in their children’s education in immersion, and because it emerged as one of the most salient features of their experiences, it is the focus here. Thus, this selection was made in the belief that examination of these data offers illuminating insights into parents’ perceptions of challenges to successful involvement which are likely to be of particular interest to educators and researchers interested in improving home–school partnerships in immersion schools. However, it should be noted that this examination must be understood as being one part of the wider study described above.

### ***Participants***

Participants in the qualitative phase of the study consisted of 10 parents of children in Irish-medium primary education, recruited from four schools in the Greater Dublin area. Schools were selected in order to ensure a spread of school types (considering factors such as size, location, length established and official categorization of disadvantage). Parents were thus interviewed from schools which were large (circa 500 pupils), which were smaller (less than 120 pupils), which were long-established (more than 40 years) and which were newly established (less than five years). One of the four schools was given designated disadvantaged status under the Department of Education and Science DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) scheme based on socio-economic and educational indicators of social disadvantage such as unemployment levels, housing, proportion of medical card holders (means-tested entitlement to free medical and basic dental care) and basic literacy and numeracy of the families in the school’s catchment area. They receive additional supports accordingly.

Five of the parents interviewed had a child in their second year of primary school (aged about five to six years, in senior infants’ class) and the remaining five had a child in their sixth year (aged about 9–10 years, in fourth class) in an Irish-medium school. The parents of children in these two classes in each of the four schools were sent a letter of invitation and information sheet in order to recruit participants: all those who

volunteered to participate were interviewed. The ratio of female to male participants was 9:1. Each interview was audio-recorded and lasted approximately 40 minutes. Interviews were semi-structured in nature. The interview schedule was developed on the basis of a review of the existing literature and involvement theory described above and refined following a series of pilot interviews ( $n = 6$ ). All interviews were conducted in English.

All parents listed their nationality as Irish. Parents showed a spread of educational attainments, from primary education to degree level. Seven of the parents interviewed were married or in some other coupled relationship, while three were in lone-parent families. One of the participants interviewed had attended an Irish immersion school, while those remaining were all educated through English. Parents were asked to categorise their own Irish proficiency on a brief questionnaire prior to the interview, and from the categories offered, seven classified themselves as low-proficiency (henceforth indicated by LP here), while three classified themselves as high-proficiency (henceforth HP) parents.

The findings from the 10 interviews in the qualitative study are here enlarged upon by the inclusion of quotes from parents in response to open-ended questions on an anonymous in-depth parental involvement survey. Participants who completed this survey were 563 parents of children in 10 Irish immersion primary schools in the Greater Dublin metropolitan area of Ireland (approximately 10% of all such schools in this region). Of those who completed the survey, 148 availed of the opportunity to make additional comments. Of these, 84 comments related specifically to parents' perceptions of difficulties relating to their involvement in their child's education. The questionnaire was presented in Irish and English. Where parents included Irish in their responses, English translations are offered here.

## **Data analysis**

The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The resulting transcriptions were read and submitted to a content analysis, following closely the guidelines set out by Mayring (2000). Transcripts were reviewed until clear sections were identified. Ten main sections were identified which largely (but not exactly) corresponded to sets of questions in the interview schedule. Participants' responses for each

section were then isolated. These responses were reviewed in order to establish what they communicated. Responses were then condensed into distinct themes under each section. These theme categories were adapted for use as a coding frame. The initial coding frame was applied and then reviewed for themes that overlapped or were ambiguous, leading to some revision, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). All 10 interviews were then coded using this revised frame- work. Inter-rater reliability was carried out on 20% of the data by a researcher experienced in qualitative analysis, and agreement was found to be 84.5%, considered to be a satisfactory reliability outcome.

An independent coding frame was initially developed for the parents' responses to the open-ended questions on the survey, using the same procedure as outlined above. It was noted that the themes identified in the resulting coding frame overlapped considerably with the themes relating to challenges or barriers identified in the coding frame developed for the interviews. Inter-rater reliability analysis was conducted on the coding of the open-ended responses and agreement was determined to be 95.2%.

## **Findings**

Seven main themes relating to challenges regarding involvement were identified during the content analysis of the interview and survey comment datasets, and in the summary in Table 1 are grouped as factors relating to the levels of *parent, child, family* and *school/community*, along with the frequencies with which they occurred in each phase of the research. Phase I refers to the series of semi-structured interviews ( $n = 10$ ), and Phase II refers to responses relating to challenges to involvement ( $n = 84$ ) made to open- ended questions in the anonymous survey. In each case, the interview data are discussed first and then the survey comments.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

## **Parent factors**

### ***Low proficiency***

The most frequently reported barrier to involvement that was identified by the parents was their perceived lack of proficiency in the language of the school, Irish. Over two thirds of the interviewees and almost a quarter of those commenting in the survey open-ended questions ascribed their difficulties in participating in a range of involvement activities, from helping with homework to speaking Irish with their children, to their low proficiency in the target language. What was most noticeable in their data was their linkage of this low proficiency with other, more emotional issues such as embarrassment, feelings of anxiety or discomfort when on the school premises, worries about being thought stupid and lack of confidence when communicating with their child's teacher. One parent commented on how daunting it is for parents to communicate with their child's school if they do not speak Irish well. She described feeling self-conscious and unsure of herself in trying to speak Irish in the school grounds, while trying to follow the school's guideline for parents, which aims to encourage target language use on the premises:

*I was embarrassed, because you don't know whether you're pronouncing it properly, or you think they're looking at you going 'Huh, she's after saying that wrong' or something.' (LP6)*

Another parent noted the significance of such anxiety among low Irish-proficiency parents in the context of such school policies:

*I was standing one day waiting for a teacher's meeting and the husbands were coming up going*

*'I'm just afraid someone's going to speak to me in Irish 'cause I don't know how to reply!' I think there is that fear, there is that barrier that, yes, you're sending your child, but we don't know how to speak it, you know? (LP2)*

One parent of a child aged about nine years recounted that it had taken her several years to feel confident enough to increase her involvement with her child's school, and she attributed her increase in confidence directly to her increase in proficiency in the Irish

language:

*To be honest with you, I am one of them parents that just drop them at the school and things like that. And it's an awful lot to do with confidence, 'cause straight away you're looking at another language and it's like, even though your kids are coming home speaking it and everything, you're looking at this different language, and it freezes you out straight away. You're afraid to go there. Because, I think it's more that parents . . . don't want other people to think they're stupid, dumb. To be honest, that's the way I felt. (LPI)*

The survey respondents also echoed this concern about speaking Irish in the school, and one commented on feeling marginalised or alienated when interacting with other, more proficient, parents at her child's school:

*I have felt intimidated in the past when surrounded by confident Irish speakers, like I was not part of the group. As a result, I sometimes avoid these situations.*

This feeling of intimidation was echoed by another respondent who reported discomfort in relation to interactions with the teachers, despite her attempts to learn the language as an adult:

*I feel intimidated in front of teaching staff/principal due to my poor knowledge of Irish. I hated Irish at school as we had to 'rote learn' and the teachers were unsupportive. I have tried to attend Irish classes (3 years running) but I didn't seem to improve.*

Apart from this difficulty in speaking the target language around school staff and other parents, several survey parents also expressed concerns about using incorrect Irish in front of their children, both from the point of view of teaching them errors and in terms of the undermining of their authority. For example, one parent wrote:

*[My] family is quite young and I am anxious about using incorrect words/grammar – lack of confidence, especially now that the older child corrects me!*

Another parent referred to her insecurity regarding her ability to use Irish with her children:

*My lack of confidence and fear of teaching incorrect Irish is a big*

*thing for me.*

This lack of confidence and feeling of invalidation as an educational partner (arising from low target-language proficiency) was also identified as directly affecting parents' involvement in home learning activities. Interview participants described such feelings and their resultant frustration:

*I just wouldn't know enough. . . I feel I'd just tell them the wrong thing, so I feel like I would just be better off leaving them to get on with it themselves. It gets frustrating always having to say to them 'you'll have to ask your teacher tomorrow'. (LP4)*

This was corroborated by similar comments by the survey respondents, who chose to elaborate on the perceived effects of their low proficiency in Irish. The impact on parents' ability to help with homework appeared to cause particular concern, with parental recognition of its effect on parents' ability to support their child's learning, for example

*As a parent who speaks little Irish, I'm nervous about the level of support I can give my child with homework as she gets older. Advice on this is always welcome.*

One parent volunteered a suggestion for what would have helped her, but was not supplied in school:

*As I have very limited Irish and find it very hard to understand, I would have found it very useful to get a copy of their homework in English as I would have been able to help her a lot more instead of going to the Irish-English dictionary for every second word.*

### ***Practical issues***

Immersion parents share the normal stresses of modern life with parents in mainstream schools, and it was to be expected that parents in this study would also experience practical, logistical difficulties relating to becoming more involved. These included time pressures, childcare issues, rival commitments, etc. Being a single parent, having other children and working outside the home were all issues mentioned by parents interviewed. When asked about her involvement in her child's school, one parent expressed a wish to be more involved, but felt she did

not have the time to do so: ‘I should be more active. . . But I’m a single mum and it’s hard, you know?’ (LP2). This was echoed by comments made by several survey respondents also, for example

*I would like to be more involved in my child’s school but due to work commitments I currently find it impossible. I would like to be more involved in the future.*

As another parent put it, ‘I am time-poor. I’ve a full time job and 3 children’.

While these are reported as difficulties relating to parental involvement in general, comments on this topic are also interesting because they serve to illuminate parents’ perceptions of the types of involvement that they feel they *should* take part in or are required by immersion education, such as trying to speak Irish with the children in the home. One participant noted:

*I find that the biggest barrier to it is that you’re in such a rush during the day, ‘cause I’ve three of them... And it’s not that I don’t want to speak Irish to them at home, but it’s the rushing that’s the biggest problem. But I’ve started to speak it with them, and I’m trying. (HP1)*

## **Child factors**

### ***Child’s resistance to parental overtures for involvement***

As noted above, a salient theme emerging from the interview data was that parents construed speaking the language of the school at home as a significant type of involvement in their child’s education, but even if parents do feel confident enough to try to speak the target language at home, their attempts may be rebuffed by their children. Several parents reported that actively supporting their children’s developing language skills by speaking it at home, as advocated by many immersion schools, became problematic or fraught, particularly with older children. One parent described this happening in her family:

*As the years went on, we tried to speak Irish with him at home, and his attitude was ‘I’ve had it all day at school. I don’t want it here!’ So we stopped doing that. (LP2)*

This was supported by comments from three other parents interviewed, with similar experiences:

*The ten-year-old a couple of years ago starting saying ‘Ah Mam, I’m not in school now. Don’t be starting!’ (HP3)*

One parent interviewed described needing to show sensitivity to her child’s response in terms of efforts to use Irish at home:

*There’d be days when she’d say ‘Oh no, just English’, but then there are days [when she agrees to Irish]. . . At home we’d often say to them, ‘Let’s speak as Gaeilge [in Irish]’ – do you know that way? Just to try and bring it in, but then if after fifteen minutes she’s not interested, we’d just leave it. (HP2)*

Several questionnaire respondents also chose to comment on their child’s resistance to their attempts at using Irish in the home. These echo closely the comments of parents interviewed in the qualitative phase. For example,

*If only there was some way of getting my children to help me with my Irish rather than them not wanting to speak Irish outside of school – how to do that I don’t know unfortunately.*

Another parent wrote:

*When I speak it at home, they go mad – they hate me speaking it and give out. We find it so useful in foreign countries though! [i.e. as a ‘secret’ language]*

Similarly, another parent wrote of her inability to effectively encourage her children’s use of Irish:

*I would love to find a way to motivate my children to speak Gaeilge [Irish] at home – I get a withering look if I suggest it. My eldest is going on her first trip to the Gaeltacht [Irish speaking region] but apart from that I can’t think of an external activity tr í Ghaeilge [through Irish]!*

Survey parents also noted that their children associate the Irish language solely with school and, as a result, do not wish to use it outside of the school setting: ‘My children do not have a grá (love) for speaking Irish and often do not wish me to speak to them in Irish’. Another parent reported a similar experience: ‘My son associates Irish with school but not with home/play’.

These reports of children rejecting or blocking parental attempts to speak Irish at home may be linked to their rejection of something they

identify strongly with school. In addition, there may also be an implicit discomfort relating to a perception, among some children at least, that their parents do not 'do it right' or do not have anything to offer in terms of help with Irish. This was illustrated by a parent interviewed who described a 'no go area' with regard to her supporting her son's reading at home, in both English and Irish. She appeared to have given up trying to be involved in this aspect of his development because of her own perceived limitations:

*I don't go near the reading really. He would laugh at me if I tried!  
He's much better at reading than me. (LP1)*

While the parents above reported rebuffs regarding their attempts to speak or read in the target language with their child, others parents interviewed attributed their lack of involvement to a lack of invitations from their child. It was noted that they reported that the frequency of invitations for involvement decreases as a function of the child's age, with parents commenting that the older their child got, the less they expressed a need or a desire for their parents' help or involvement. This, in turn, resulted in some parents failing to make any overtures for involvement, or falling out of the habit. For example, one mother said that she rarely helps her daughter with learning activities in the home anymore:

*She gets on with her all her homework and that herself. She doesn't need my help at all anymore really. If she did I'm sure she'd ask me.  
(LP5)*

## **Family factors**

### ***Low proficiency of other family members***

As noted above, parents reported difficulties with using Irish in the home to support their children's L2 development, but interestingly, these were not confined to low-proficiency parents. Several high-proficiency parents in both the interview and survey data commented on their decision not to use the language if other members of their family were not as proficient as they. For example, one parent interviewed, who indicated that she was a fluent speaker of Irish, described her attempts to make the language a constant feature of her home environment, but

concluded that this was not always possible because of her partner's low proficiency: 'Her father doesn't speak Irish. So when he comes over we speak English' (HP4).

This theme was found to be more prevalent in survey responses, with several highly proficient parents (self-report elsewhere in the survey) mentioning their reluctance to use Irish for the fear of excluding less proficient family members. For example, one father wrote that 'My wife doesn't speak Irish and I don't like to exclude her from conversations'. Another parent echoed this sentiment, writing that 'Her dad is not at same standard so hard to include him if we are all speaking Irish'.

It was noteworthy that this consideration related not only to parents with low-proficiency spouses/partners, but also to other children. For example, one parent wrote about her difficulties in speaking Irish to the child in immersion because of another child who was not in immersion who objected to her mother and sibling speaking the language:

*My child has an older sibling attending an English medium school and she reacts negatively when she hears my child or me speaking Irish (unfortunately!)*

## **School/community factors**

### ***Unawareness/lack of appropriate resources***

The results discussed above have considered the impact of parental, child and family issues or factors on some kinds of parental involvement. The final set of factors looked at here relate to the other 'player' in the interaction, the school and the wider community. A significant difficulty identified by parents with regard to supporting their children's Irish learning is their perception that there is a lack of suitable materials in Irish, particularly a lack of appropriate reading material. It is interesting to note that while it is true that fewer materials are available in Irish than in English (Hinton 2011), there has been a very significant improvement in the supply of books, DVDs, CDs and games in Irish in recent years. The problem therefore appears to be partly one of awareness and access, since parents would have to seek these materials in special outlets and

online. Thus, in citing dissatisfaction with the lack of suitable resources for supporting their children's Irish, parents may be signalling a need for more information from the school about what is available and how to locate it and also a lack of confidence that they could choose and use those that are available. For example, when asked if her child ever read books in Irish that were not related to school, one parent explained:

*There's nothing there for them in Irish. Everything's in English, you know? And yes, I could go out and buy him a book that's in Irish, but I don't know how I'd. . . But if it were a newspaper or something maybe I could throw it at him and say 'here, have a read of that'. But there isn't actually anything on a daily basis that you would read, because there's nothing around. (LP2)*

Another parent reported a similar experience or not seeing Irish materials available in the usual outlets, but her comments also indicate an assumption that her child has a L2 reading proficiency that matches her L1 reading proficiency:

*There isn't a lot in Irish. . . And, as I say, back to John again, because he loves to read and if you could go out there and get some of the really interesting books that you can get in English. . . Like, he loved all the Harry Potter books and different things like that. But if they were more. . . if there was a lot more Irish displayed, he would be able to get out there and get them. (LP1)*

Survey respondents also chose to make comments about the perceived lack of appropriate resources. For example, one parent wrote: 'I find a lot of Irish activities/resources are difficult to access if one's Irish is not up to standard'. Another parent commented that

*There seems to be very little on the internet in regard to child-friendly interactive games etc., things which children are naturally interested in. . . – I feel more online interactive resources would encourage my children to use more Irish in their free time.*

The issue of resources was also relevant to parents' attempts to learn Irish themselves, which, as discussed above, some parents thought would help them to become more involved. Addressing this issue in relation to adults who wish to improve their Irish, several

survey respondents also described frustration at the lack of Irish classes for adults available in the community which they themselves could avail of. One parent wrote:

*I am recently unemployed and have sought out Irish-speaking classes in the locality. Very hard to find. Feel that would help enormously with my Irish speaking. Have a lot of Irish but it's dormant. My desire to become a good Irish speaker is huge.*

Some parents who perceived that their lack of Irish proficiency was holding them back from full involvement commented that they felt that learning the language would help them support their children's learning and indicated a wish to organise this around parent needs, rather than them simply availing of general courses for adult learners:

*Would love to do Irish classes and feel it would benefit my child who is currently in school and my next child who will be starting Naíonra [preschool] in September. I know myself a lot of the parents would pay a teacher to teach say two hours one night a week*

Other parents felt that Irish classes for immersion parents should not only be available in the community, but should be provided by the school itself. As one parent wrote:

*I was shocked that my child's Gaelscoil did not have a class for parents to learn Irish. This would have helped me!*

### ***Dissatisfaction with supports offered***

Despite some parents describing lack of access to such opportunities to learn Irish, in fact the most common way in which immersion schools attempted to support parents to be involved in their child's schooling was to make language classes available to parents. However, this appears not to guarantee success. Several of the parents interviewed had attended Irish classes at some stage in their child's school career in an effort to increase their proficiency, yet most of those who reported they had done such courses found the experience unsatisfactory, in part because of the difficulty of catering for different needs. One parent, for example, found that she did not reap much benefit from the class, as she did not receive the one-on-one interaction with the teacher that she felt she needed to keep up:

*I did go to a class, but I had the little one with me and it was a very full class, and it was going over my head like. . . I mean, I think some people don't grasp it quite as quick. They need a bit more one-on-one time. Or, I'd need one-on-one time I should say, to understand it more, or to ask questions. When there's a big group of people it's hard to put questions across. (LP6)*

Another parent explained that she lost interest very quickly in the Irish class she attended, as the dialect of the teacher did not match the one she was familiar with in her prior learning:

*Well the one thing that I found when I was doing the night course was that the person who was doing it, he was from Donegal. . . And that turned me off, because they have a different accent. . . And I kind of got disinterested. (LP2)*

Issues such as difficulty level and dialect gap were echoed by other respondents, but a more fundamental one adverted to by this speaker was the perceived gap between the teacher's goals and her own in terms of learning Irish:

*You see I just want to learn the basics. I just want to learn how to say 'Hello! Goodbye!' and help with the homework a little bit, and that's all I'm interested in. Whereas this was a whole big conversation, and he was giving us poems and everything, and I thought: 'Not interested'. (LP2)*

This interviewee therefore appeared to want language classes with goals linked more directly to the task of homework support and basic interaction in school than was on offer in the general course she was attending. Survey respondents also described disappointment with their attempts to learn Irish in adult classes in order to support their children's learning, for example 'Tried Irish classes in my son's school. Did not enjoy or learn anything. . . Very disappointed'. Another parent wrote: 'I have done 2 courses in Irish but just can't take it in. She is in 6th class now and I still can't put a sentence together' (i.e. after child has been over seven years in the school). Comments such as these indicate a need to consider the teaching objectives of language classes offered to parents to help them improve their proficiency in the language through which their children are learning, in addition to a need for greater exploration of ancillary ways of helping parents to be educational partners without target language proficiency.

### ***Perceived lack of invitations/opportunities for involvement***

Finally, some survey respondents commented on their wish to be more actively involved in the school, but perceived that their input would not be considered appropriate: ‘Would love to help out in classroom – but not applicable in our school!’ Another parent described her willingness to help but her inability to channel that to the school because of her concern that such an offer would be unwelcome:

*I would like to help in the classes/at school without the teacher feeling it was a criticism. I also don't know how to tell her that I am willing to help.*

Another parent attributed this to the school's size, with more opportunities for active involvement in the early days after the school was founded, but fewer invitations to help in the immersion school since it became larger and longer established:

*I find that parents are less welcome at the school now and that parents are not asked to help out in the classroom activities/tours etc. now in comparison to when the school started.*

It was interesting that this theme did not emerge in the interviews, where parents focused more on parent, child and family factors and on availability and suitability of classes in Irish. It is possible that the interviewees were reluctant to offer what might appear to be overt criticism of their school, but that this was more possible for the anonymous survey respondents.

## **Discussion**

As outlined in the introduction, there is a substantial body of research demonstrating that parental involvement in education contributes to a child's educational success, but relatively little on parental involvement in immersion education, pointing to the particular need to explore immersion parents' involvement and the factors that impact on it or impede it. Rather than re-inventing the wheel, it is important to situate the discussion within the body of knowledge regarding parental involvement, and it is argued here that Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995, 1997, 2007) *Model of Parent Involvement* is particularly useful. This model identified as pivotal the following factors: parents' personal construction of the parental role; their personal sense of efficacy for helping their children succeed in school; their perception of

opportunities and demands for involvement presented both by their children and their children's schools; and life context variables. The results of the present study are reviewed in light of this model, examining how the themes uncovered correspond with each of the conditions outlined in the model and how the framework may need to be adapted or extended for the immersion education context.

### ***Construction of the parental role***

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997, 2007) argue that it is those parents who believe that parents should be involved in their children's education who are most likely to become involved. Parents with a less active role construction will be more likely to think their child's education should be 'left up to the school'. In the present study, most of these immersion parents did appear to construe their role as a parent as including an obligation to be involved in their children's education. However, the way in which they construed this role appeared to be problematic in some cases. Parents appeared to operate with a general model of involvement that differed little from that of a parent with a child attending an English-medium school, without adapting this construction appropriately to an immersion context. Thus, parents primarily appeared to construe 'parental involvement' as referring to parents teaching their children concepts or language *in the same way the school presents them*, or helping their children with homework *through the language of the school*, and many parents felt unable to do this successfully. What appears to be absent is a consideration of the skills that they do have as parents to contribute to supporting their child's education. Direct instruction in the target language is only one mechanism through which parental involvement can positively influence student's achievement. Exploration with parents of the ways in which they can show encouragement, reinforcement and the modelling of positive attitudes towards the language and learning could be a more effective, and more feasible, way for parents to support a child's learning in immersion. For example, if children identify the target language with school, as reported here, then it might be more effective for schools to convey to parents the value of simple leisure activities such as watching

a cartoon in Irish on TV with their child rather than giving them general recommendations such as advice to ‘speak Irish’ with the child. It was apparent from the data that parents, as well as children, tend to see the target language as something that is ‘done in school’ and they therefore would benefit more from identifying ways of supporting their child’s exposure to it through less school-like activities. Thus, they need help to widen their role definition with regard to supporting the target language to include *non*-school like activities, and more fundamentally, they need to adapt their construction of their role of parental involvement for the immersion context in ways that help them to value – and increase – their contribution to supporting and developing their child’s *L1 skills*, as well as their *L2 skills*.

### ***Personal sense of efficacy for involvement***

The issue of how immersion parents construe their role clearly has enormous implication for their sense of efficacy for that role. The most salient issue in these data relating to parents’ sense of efficacy for involvement in supporting their children in immersion education was their reports that their own lack of proficiency in the target language posed problems for involvement in a range of activities, both in the home and in their child’s school. Low proficiency in the language through which their children are learning appears to impact very significantly on parents’ general sense of efficacy as educational partners, not only in terms of constraining their actual involvement (I leave it to her really), but also in causing anxiety that they are a negative factor (I might teach him wrong), which in turn undermines such parents’ personal efficacy further (he’d laugh at me). Several parents expressed this concern that their involvement would actually be detrimental to their child’s learning, mentioning fears of somehow ‘contaminating’ children’s learning by using incorrect Irish vocabulary or grammar. These data point to some parents with low proficiency constructing a rationale by which their non-involvement with homework and other supportive activities are deemed preferable, in the apparent belief that their children would be better off without their participation in this regard.

### ***Invitations for involvement from child's school***

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler assert that parents are more likely to be involved if they perceive general invitations for involvement from their child's school (arising from a welcoming and open school climate) and if they perceive specific invitations from their child's teacher or from their child. Several parents reported feelings of isolation from their child's school, or feeling incapable of helping either in the class or at home, largely due to their lack of proficiency in the target language. Feeling uncomfortable or unwelcome in a domain where they do not speak the language of communication means that parents do not perceive the school as a place where their involvement is welcomed. The lack of specific invitations for involvement from their child's school was also mentioned by some parents, particularly in relation to school-based involvement activities.

### ***Invitations for involvement from child***

The findings from the present study point to the previously overlooked importance of the role that children themselves play in shaping the involvement of their parents in immersion education. It is clear from these findings that children are not passive recipients of parental support for and involvement in their education, but are active participants who can influence and shape the nature and extent of their parents' involvement. While Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model noted that a parent's perception of specific invitations for involvement from their child is an important condition for involvement, relatively little attention has been devoted to the wide variety of ways in which children can not only elicit involvement, but also actively resist or rebuff it, and shape the ways in which it is enacted. Resistance from children was predominantly reported in relation to parents' attempts to speak Irish with them in the home. Several parents reported that their children did not enjoy using the language and identified it only with school. Children may also perceive that their parents' lack of proficiency in the language means that they are unable to communicate effectively with them, that it may be burdensome for parents to do so or that it will not help them improve their own language skills. Thus, as well as a parent's personal sense of self-efficacy, children's evaluation of the benefits of their parents' involvement may be an important feature in an immersion context, and a study examining children's perspectives will be reported in the future.

### ***Life context***

This level of Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model refers to parents' perceptions regarding whether they have (1) the skills and knowledge to be successfully involved and (2) the time and energy for involvement. In common with many parents the world over, immersion parents interviewed and surveyed in the present study reported challenges relating to each of these conditions. Low-proficiency parents in particular described feeling that they lacked the necessary skills to participate in various aspects of their child's learning, from helping with homework, to communicating with school staff, to supporting their child's L2 development, and the concentration of these parents on this theme may point to a sense of the greater effort such involvement would cost them, and the greater scarcity of resources of time and money available to parents of lower SES and educational levels. However, even for higher-proficiency parents, it was notable that many appeared to believe that supporting a child who is learning through their L2 demands more time and resources than it would if their children were attending English-medium schools. This is worth further investigation and discussion with parents.

The present findings also show that there are life context variables in an immersion context which are not included in Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's conceptualisation. Several parents in the present study who felt that they *did* have the language skills to support their children's Irish language learning reported failure to do so due to their wishes not to exclude or isolate non-Irish-speaking partners or family members, some of whom were reported to react in a hostile manner to the use of the language in the home. When investigating parental involvement in an immersion context, proficiency levels of the whole family may therefore be relevant.

### **Conclusions and future research**

The findings discussed here indicate that immersion parents have particular needs with regard to parental role construction and involvement in their children's education. While acknowledging that the sample of parents interviewed here was relatively small (in keeping with qualitative research norms), it is significant that the majority of the challenges to involvement which were most frequently reported in the in-depth interview were also the most prevalent challenges on which

comments were added by the larger sample of parents in the anonymous survey. It is argued that this substantially increases confidence in these findings, given the pattern of corroboration between the issues identified in the interviews and in the additional comments contributed by the 84 parents surveyed.

While the experience of difficulties relating to involvement was not the preserve of low-proficiency parents, low proficiency in Irish was an overarching theme in the data. While it is tempting to think that merely teaching the target language to parents would be a panacea (and many parents themselves also appear to believe that this is the case), other parents who *have* made such attempts report that for many, this is neither a practical nor attractive solution. The conclusions of this study point to the value of exploring parallel and alternative ways of helping parents to be active partners in their children's education. This could involve some reconsideration of school policies such as those requiring use of the target language on school premises, if this effectively silences a significant proportion of parents: the provision of an 'English zone' where it is accepted that English will be spoken with parents could help in this regard. It is also likely to require a more conscious attempt to harness parents' strengths rather than focusing on their weakness in terms of language proficiency. For example, discussing with parents the importance of developing their children's L1 oral skills and literacy, and talking with their children *in English* about what they are learning at homework time would be worth exploring. Informing parents about the English-language versions of textbooks could support those who are prepared to buy at least some of these extra texts to help with their children's homework, particularly in areas where children might have particular needs such as mathematics and where parents feel excluded by more technical vocabulary. Informing parents about suitable resources (*and* accessible sources for them) and less school-like activities that they can use to increase the exposure to Irish in the home may also have benefits for both low- and high-proficiency parents. In sum, this points to the value of developing a 'translated' model of parental involvement for immersion parents, which seeks to encourage a more active interpretation of parental involvement in their children's education among all parents of a school, and in particular helps lower-proficiency parents to make use of the skills that they *do* have for successful involvement, such as emphasising their role in supporting their children's L1 oral language development, supporting their L1 literacy at home and showing positive attitudes to the L2 and to learning

the L2.

The present study constitutes a qualitative exploration of immersion parents' experiences and difficulties relating to involvement, using both interview data and qualitative comments from a large-scale survey. Reports on other facets of this study will consider parental involvement in immersion education from the perspectives of all of the primary stakeholders, including those of children themselves. The findings discussed here point to the value of exploring an adapted role definition of involvement with immersion parents that would allow them to 'play to their strengths' in an active educational partnership with the school, rather than their using a role definition that focuses on their weaknesses, which poses the danger of them becoming 'sleeping partners' in their child's education. The development of a comprehensive picture of the issues involved in supporting parental involvement in the education of children in immersion is crucial so that the invaluable support that parents can provide can be best utilised to bring about the most positive outcomes for children, parents and schools.

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Table 1: Summary of themes in interview and comment analysis

Theme	Example	% Frequency	
		Phase I (N=10)	Phase II (N=84)
<b>Parent Factors</b>			
• Low parental language proficiency	<i>I just wouldn't know enough... I feel I'd just tell them the wrong thing.</i>	70	22.35
• Practical issues	<i>I am time-poor!</i>	40	9.52
<b>Child Factors</b>			
• Child's resistance to parental attempts for involvement	<i>When I speak it at home, they go mad. His attitude was "I've had it all day at school. I don't want it here!"</i>	50	15.29
<b>Family Factors</b>			
• Partner/Family member low proficiency	<i>My husband has little Irish so he feels excluded.</i>	10	14.45
<b>School/Community Factors</b>			
• Unawareness/Lack of appropriate resources	<i>There's nothing there for them in Irish. Everything's in English, you know?</i>	30	13.09
• Dissatisfaction with supports offered	<i>Tried Irish classes in my son's school. Did not enjoy or learn anything.</i>	20	22.35
• Perceived lack of invitations /opportunities for involvement from school	<i>I would like to help in the classes/at school without the teacher feeling it was a criticism</i>	10	9.44