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To cite this article: Aisling Ní Dhiorbháin, Sinéad Nic Aindriú, Lorraine Connaughton-Crean & Pádraig Ó Duibhir (26 Jul 2023): It's more the invisible benefits – multilingual parents' experiences of immersion education and their reasons for choosing immersion, Language and Education, DOI: [10.1080/09500782.2023.2238680](https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2023.2238680)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2023.2238680>



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Published online: 26 Jul 2023.



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It's more the invisible benefits – multilingual parents' experiences of immersion education and their reasons for choosing immersion

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ABSTRACT

The participation of multilingual children in minority language immersion programmes is under-researched internationally. The Republic of Ireland (RoI) has become a linguistically and culturally diverse society. In the RoI, parents have the opportunity to educate their child in English-medium or Irish-medium (IM) schools. However, the cohort of multilingual children attending IM schools is very small. This study investigated the reasons why parents who spoke a home language other than Irish or English chose to enrol their children in IM primary education. It also investigated parents' perceptions of the benefits of this form of education. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 15 parents from a variety of language backgrounds. It was found that parents were motivated to enrol their child in IM primary schools to provide them with the opportunity to learn a variety of languages at an early age. Benefits associated with learning multiple languages and immersion in Irish culture and heritage were seen as the main advantages of IM education. A minority of parents chose an IM school when there was no space for their child in an English-medium school. Parents reported that they did not experience significant challenges in IM immersion. Recommendations arise to support the participation of multilingual families in immersion education.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 27 January 2023



Accepted 3 July 2023

KEYWORDS

Immersion education;
Irish; Irish-medium;
multilingualism;
multilingual parents;
plurilingualism

Introduction

Currently, there are more than 200 languages spoken daily in the Republic of Ireland (RoI) (CSO, 2017). Preliminary results from the 2022 census suggest that the population of the RoI has risen by 7.6% to 5.1 million people since the 2016 census and immigration is one of the main reasons for the increase (CSO, 2022). As with other EU countries, growth in immigration over the last 20 years has seen an increase in linguistic and cultural diversity

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in Ireland. According to Census 2016, 13% ($n=612,018$) of families spoke an additional language that was different from Irish or English at home, with one quarter of those who spoke a foreign language at home being born in Ireland (CSO, 2017). Irish is a national minority language that is spoken by 1.7% ($n=73,803$) of the population on a daily basis outside of the education system. In the RoI, parents have the option to educate their children through the medium of English in English-medium (EM) schools or through the medium of Irish in Irish-medium (IM) schools regardless of their home language.

IM schools are located in bilingual communities known as the Gaeltacht, where residents of Gaeltacht areas speak Irish or Irish/English, these areas are located principally along the western seaboard (Údarás na Gaeltachta, 2023). IM schools are also located outside of Gaeltacht areas in cities and small towns where English is the majority language of the community (Údarás na Gaeltachta, 2023). These schools provide a form of immersion education where the curriculum is taught through Irish and the day-to-day language of instruction and communication of the school is Irish (Department of Education & Skills (DES) 2017). A total immersion approach is adopted in IM schools and all subjects, with the exception of English language literacy lessons, are taught through the medium of Irish (DES 2017). The introduction of formal lessons in English is usually delayed until the child's second year in school. It has been found that students attending IM primary schools excel in all linguistic skills in Irish compared to their peers in EM schools (Harris et al. 2006) and they achieve levels of English language reading that are comparable to students in EM schools (Gilleece et al. 2012). In EM primary and post-primary schools, Irish is a compulsory subject taught daily, however, there are many concerns around students' lack of proficiency in Irish and the teaching and learning of Irish in this context (Department of Education 2021). Nevertheless, the majority of adults who attended primary or secondary school in the RoI have some level of Irish language proficiency.

The focus of this study was multilingual parents in IM primary schools outside of Gaeltacht areas. There is a lack of research available as to why multilingual parents choose IM education for their children and what the perceived benefits are. This study, which is the first of its kind, investigated parents' ($N=15$) views in these areas using semi-structured interviews. The term multilingual parents is used in this paper to refer to parents who speak a home language to their children that is different from Irish or English (Paradowski and Bator 2018). In this study, multilingual children or students are defined as those 'who predominantly speak at home a language that is different from the majority language of instruction and who often start to learn the majority language systematically when they enter early-childhood education' (Langeloo et al. 2019, p. 536). Our study also included families where one parent spoke English and the other parent spoke a language other than English. We focused on schools outside of the Gaeltacht as this is a particular linguistic context where the dominant language outside of school is English (McAdory and Janmaat 2015). Parents outside the Gaeltacht may have more choice in whether to choose an IM or an EM school for their children, whereas an IM school may be the only local choice for parents living in the Gaeltacht (DES 2013). The under-representation of children from linguistically diverse backgrounds in IM education is concerning, as IM schools do not reflect the linguistic and cultural diversity of the society in which they are located. Many IM schools are oversubscribed (Mhic Mhathúna and Nic Fhionnlaoich 2021; Strickland and Hickey 2016). Oversubscription to schools and admission policies may restrict representation from multilingual families in certain schools (Darmody et al. 2012). In the Darmody et al. (2012)

study of school sector variation in the ROI it was reported that the majority of IM schools (67%) had no ethnic minority students. It is also possible that parents who have recently arrived in Ireland may not have information about IM schools (Mhic Mhathúna and Nic Fhionnlaioich 2021).

This research is important in relation to helping to increase student diversity in IM schools by finding out what motivates multilingual parents to send their children to IM schools. The findings of this study will provide more information on plurilingual perspectives (Little and Kirwan 2019; Swain and Lapkin 2005) of immersion education that support linguistic and cultural diversity within immersion programmes along with the promotion of the immersion language. It is hoped that the findings of this study will inform the implementation of the ‘Strategy for Integration of Migrants 2017–2022’ in terms of ensuring that children from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds are not disadvantaged from accessing a place in an IM school (Department of Justice and Equality 2016). Within this study, recommendations have been made to further support the participation of multilingual families in IM education.

Immersion education and multilingual learners

Bilingualism and multilingualism have many advantages that include linguistic, cognitive, economic, social and emotional advantages (Baker and Wright 2017; Haukås et al. 2022). According to the interdependence hypothesis, the language learning skills and strategies developed in one language contribute to a person’s common underlying proficiency to learn other languages, this is particularly relevant for third language learning (Cenoz 2003; Cummins 2021). Research shows that students who do not speak the majority societal language at home can do as well academically in an immersion education context as their counterparts who attend non-immersion programmes (Lindholm-Leary and Genesee 2014; Mady 2015, 2017; Somers 2017). For example, Somers (2017) identified that immigrant learners were at no disadvantage in terms of majority language learning after attending immersion education and that they had a higher standard of language acquisition in their immersion and home languages when compared to immigrant learners who attended non-immersion programmes. Therefore, it can be suggested that immersion programmes can offer additional opportunities to learners from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds in terms of linguistic capital that will help learners achieve educational, social, and economic capital without compromising achievement in the majority language. Immersion education may be particularly suitable for multilingual learners as immersion teachers’ pedagogies are focused on second language learning and all children who do not speak the immersion language at home will be at a similar starting point in immersion (Somers 2018). Nevertheless, some challenges were identified for multilingual families when educating their child in an immersion education context (Davis et al. 2019, 2021). Some parents expressed concerns about the lack of formal teaching in English and explained that additional teaching in English would assist learners in the development of the academic language which is not as easily accessible to children outside of school. Parents also had a variety of experiences in dealing with educators. Some parents were encouraged to enrol their children in an immersion school, however, in other cases parents were encouraged to do the opposite. The lack of definite policies or criteria has shown different practices and attitudes between schools. Davis et al. (2021) also highlight that if strategic support is not

provided in immersion schools to support the learning of students' home languages then there is a risk of subtractive learning of the home language. The challenge of supporting acquisition of students' home languages is highlighted in the literature when English is the majority societal language (Cummins 2015).

Parents' motivations to send their children to an immersion education school

Parents' choices around the languages they speak at home and the choices they make for their children's education are complex, multifaceted, and influenced by their ideologies around language learning and the context in which the family lives (Curdt-Christiansen 2018). Family language policies are influenced by socioeconomic, sociopolitical, sociocultural, and sociolinguistic factors as well as parents' own knowledge of language, their own experiences, and education (Curdt-Christiansen 2009, 2018). Parents' ideologies may differ from the language practice and management of language at home (Curdt-Christiansen 2009, 2018). There is a dearth of knowledge on why multilingual parents choose minority language immersion programmes, such as Irish. Some research has been conducted on the reasons why multilingual parents enrolled their child in French immersion education in Canada. Canada is an interesting context in that 75.5% of the population speak English as a first language and 21.4% of the population speak French as a first language. However, only 63.8% speak English and 19.2% speak French predominantly at home (Statistics Canada 2021). Research identified that immigrant parents were sending their children to French immersion schools due to the benefits of multilingualism and to enhance their child's national and transnational identity (Dagenais 2003; Dagenais and Berron 2001; Dagenais and Day 1999; Davis et al. 2019, 2021). Immigrant parents in Canada chose French immersion education for their children as they linked language learning to linguistic capital that would transform into economic and social capital, which in turn would give their children more opportunities (Dagenais 2003; Davis et al. 2021; Masson et al. 2022). These opinions are closely related to the theories of Bourdieu (1991) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), who state that knowledge of certain languages is a means to gaining linguistic capital which can lead to further gains in social and cultural capital in the form of friendship, employment, and economic resources. The education system plays a strong role in reproducing linguistic capital in certain languages (Bourdieu 1991; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Parents reported that immersion education would bring additional benefits to their children in terms of employment, especially in state jobs as well as additional travel opportunities (Car 2009; Davis et al. 2021; Masson et al. 2022). It was evident that the parents' multilingual background and their positive attitudes to early language learning had a strong impact on the decisions they made to raise their children multilingually and enrol them in French immersion programmes.

With regard to IM education, there have been several factors identified in terms of what motivates parents to send their child to an IM school (Mhic Mhathúna and Nic Fhionnlaóich 2021; Ní Thuairisg and Ó Duibhir 2016). For children attending IM preschools, it was found that the main reasons parents ($N = 156$) chose this type of pre-school for their child were, the social and cognitive development benefits for the children, the interest of parents in Irish, Irish/English bilingualism, and the positive reputation of pre-school (Mhic Mhathúna and Nic Fhionnlaóich 2021). Parents also reported that they were influenced by the positive

reports of family and friends in terms of IM schools when making their decision. The results at preschool level reflect the reasons parents choose IM education at primary level in Ireland (Ní Thuairisg and Ó Duibhir 2016). In a study on the continuity of students from IM primary to post-primary schools, it was found that the main reasons why parents ($N=321$) chose an IM primary school were: that they wanted their child to be able to speak Irish (76.9%) or for their child to be bilingual (61.7%); parents' interest in the Irish language (53.9%); the positive academic reputation of the IM school (47%); and positive reports about the IM school from family and friends (45.2%) (Ní Thuairisg and Ó Duibhir 2016). Less than 1% of those parents who participated in the study spoke a language other than Irish or English at home. Other reasons identified in relation to the motivation of parents include, parents' interest in Irish culture, employment opportunities for their children in the future, higher exam results and opportunities for further language learning (Kavanagh, 2014; Ní Thuairisg and Ó Duibhir 2016). A scheme offering 'bonus' marks to students undertaking state exams through Irish was implemented in the 1920s in an attempt to 'strengthen the position of the Irish language in the education system, with the long-term objective of maintaining and reviving its use in everyday life' (Mac Aogáin et al. 2010, p. 25). Students in IM post-primary schools are awarded an additional 10%, 5%, 4%, 3.75%, or 2.5% of their total mark achieved in a state exam depending on the subject. 'Bonus marks' are awarded based on the difficulty that students may experience when answering the exam papers through Irish. The scheme is implemented on a sliding scale, for example, for those who achieve more than 75% of the marks available in any subject, the bonus is scaled back to ensure that the composite mark, consisting of the subject mark and the bonus, does not exceed 100 percent (Mac Aogáin et al. 2010, p. 27). Internationally, research on the reasons why parents chose Gaelic-medium education (Scotland) or Welsh-medium education (Wales) for their child (O'Hanlon 2015; O'Hanlon and Paterson 2017) mirrored the findings above in relation to IM education. Parents in these immersion education settings also identified the linguistic, cultural, educational, and employment benefits of immersion education.

Parental experiences of IM education

Studies in IM education identified that parents' own lack of competence in Irish was the main factor that hindered parents' participation in their children's education (Kavanagh 2014; Kavanagh and Hickey 2013; Ní Thuairisg and Ó Duibhir 2016). Some parents reported that they were nervous when speaking to the class teacher or speaking Irish on the school site, as was recommended in the school guidelines. It also became clear that parents were concerned about being able to assist with homework in Irish and that parents sometimes felt on the periphery of the school community due to their lack of proficiency in the language (Kavanagh 2014; Kavanagh and Hickey 2013; Ní Thuairisg and Ó Duibhir 2016). There are strong recommendations from the research that different types of parental engagement should be supported and encouraged regardless of parents' competency in Irish and that parents should be aware that a positive attitude towards immersion will support their children's learning (Kavanagh 2014; Kavanagh and Hickey 2013; Ní Thuairisg and Ó Duibhir 2016). Schools should consider various ways to invite multilingual parents to participate in school activities. Parents can participate in their child's education also by supporting the development of children's language and literacy skills in home languages and talking to them about school

in their home language. Digital resources in particular digital books in Irish (Stenson and Hickey 2019) may be particularly useful for parents. The vast majority of parents participating in previous studies on IM education were of Irish nationality. No study to date has focused on the motivation of multilingual parents to enrol their children in IM or their experiences of IM education. This research responds to this gap in the research.

Materials and methods

The present study investigated, (a) Why do multilingual parents choose IM primary schools for their children? and (b) What are multilingual parents' perceptions of learning Irish and IM education? Semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents ($N=15$) of multilingual children drawn from 6 IM schools outside the Gaeltacht. Ethical approval was received from Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee (DCUREC/2021/224) to undertake this research. It is of note that it was challenging to recruit participants for the research because of the small number of multilingual learners attending IM schools. Principals of the schools acted as gatekeepers and disseminated information about the research. Parents who were interested in participating in the study were asked to contact the researchers if they were willing to be interviewed. Interview questions are provided in [Appendix 1](#). Written informed consent was provided by all parents who participated in the study. One interview was held in person in one of the participating schools and all of the other interviews were conducted online. Online interviews were chosen due to convenience and in order to gather data from parents over a wide geographical area at a time that suited them. The interviews were conducted through the medium of English and held on the university licensed Zoom platform. The audio of the Zoom interviews was recorded and transcribed verbatim for data analysis purposes. Interviews lasted about 40 minutes in duration. When conducting online interviews, all interviews were password protected and they were locked once all attendees arrived. The interview questions were shared with the parents before the interview, and it was explained that they were free to withdraw from the research at any time. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data collected (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The following steps were followed: (i) the researchers immersed themselves in the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts; (ii) a coding frame was designed from the themes and interesting points that arouse from the literature, (iii) the codes were classified by themes; (iv) the major themes were reviewed and amended with a view to their refinement; (v) the themes were named and a definition was set for each theme; (vi) the researchers synthesised the information with a view to extracting an inference from the results of the research. Researchers firstly, coded the data independently and then compared codes and generated themes collaboratively. There were several iterations of the process before themes were named and defined.

Participant profiles

[Table 1](#) shows information on parents' home languages. Parental information is not linked to information about the school or children to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. Ten families spoke English and an additional language at home, and 5 families spoke a home language other than Irish or English.

Table 1. Linguistic Background of participating parents.

Categorisation of Home Languages	Home languages and Number of Parents interviewed
Families speaking English and an additional language	Danish ($n=1$) French ($n=2$) Lithuanian ($n=1$) German ($n=1$) Spanish ($n=2$) Montenegrin ($n=1$) Vietnamese ($n=1$) Brazilian Portuguese ($n=1$)
Families speaking a home language that is different from Irish and English	Polish ($n=3$) Russian ($n=1$) Spanish ($n=1$)

Results

The data presented in this results section relate to the following themes: (a) the reasons why parents choose an IM primary school for their child, (b) the benefits of learning Irish and IM education for their child, and (c) participation of multilingual parents. Each major theme is presented according to the sub-themes resulting from the analysis. Interconnectivity exists between the sub-themes such as the strength of multilingualism and the cultural value and the advantages of IM education.

The reasons why parents select an IM school for their child

The major theme generated as to why multilingual parents select IM schools for their children was: multilingualism (learning multiple languages) and early learning of languages. Cultural heritage, positive reports about the school from contacts, an interest in Irish, and factors associated with the particular school were also evident.

Multilingualism

All the parents ($N=15$) interviewed spoke about the value of language learning and learning multiple languages in particular with regard to the development of cognitive and metacognitive skills that arise from the learning of additional languages. The interest of parents in language learning was the main reason why they chose an IM school for their children in this research rather than a particular interest in Irish. This is different from previous research with parents of Irish nationality where an interest in Irish was the main motivating factor (Mhic Mhathúna and Nic Fhionnlaoich 2021). However, similar to multilingual parents in Canada, participants in this study showed an understanding of the benefits of multilingualism including cognitive, social, educational, and economic advantages (Dagenais 2003, Davis et al. 2021; Masson et al. 2022). One of the parents discussed how their family did some research into IM education and found it to be an attractive option for their child.

He (my husband) said the Gaelic [Irish] schools are really good, great, and our children will have a better, maybe job opportunities when they grown up, because they can choose. Probably there will be more choice for them in the future. And also like, because they are bilingual, for them it's easier, probably, to multitask, and they will probably, it will be for them easier to plan the things, to maybe problem-solving things. It goes, all with multilingual children. (Parent 10)

The analysis revealed that all parents identified IM schooling as a means of gaining linguistic capital for their children which would give them additional educational and employment opportunities (Bourdieu 1991; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Parents also expressed the view that it is easy for children to learn an additional language at a young age and that the process of language learning in one language facilitates the process of learning across languages (Cummins 2021).

What we thought is learning languages in general is fantastic because we need them, and young children are way better at everything. (Parent 13)

It was noted that the parents' own multilingual background and the benefits conferred by this background may have influenced the development of their language learning competences and employment opportunities. This in turn may have influenced their decision to enrol their child in an immersion school.

People say, why do you manage to pick up on these things? I managed to pick up on these things because I learned languages when I was very young, and I had an interest when I was very young. That's the reason why. (Parent 7)

Interestingly, although Irish is a minority language with restricted use in the international world, multilingual parents who chose IM education clearly reported in the interviews that learning Irish as an additional language is a rich learning and knowledge resource. This indicated that the parents perceived that learning a minority language, which is used rarely outside of school (for most learners), is still valuable as it has advantages in terms of cognitive and sociocultural benefits. Language use outside of school need not necessarily be the sole goal of language learning in school, as there are 'invisible' benefits to be gained from learning any additional language.

The ability to switch between languages and what it gives them of additional learning, additional insights into languages, how people think in different ways in different languages is really beneficial. While it's not the most useful language from a European perspective it's nearly the invisible benefits of it. (Parent 1)

However, it is important to recognise that several parents ($n = 5$) reported that they would not have chosen IM primary schooling if their partner, who attended primary or secondary school in the RoI did not have some knowledge of Irish. This meant that their partner had some level of Irish language knowledge, as it is a compulsory subject in schools.

If my partner was French, I would have gone a completely different pathway, because he is Irish and he has the Irish. I knew it still be there, in case, you know, for the support, you know, in case it was, it was needed. (Parent 9)

This finding shows the importance of disseminating information about the suitability of immersion education for students from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds and that policies and practice in schools ensure that parental knowledge of the immersion language is not necessary (Somers 2017, 2018).

Cultural heritage and learning Irish

The cultural aspect of IM education encouraged multilingual parents to enrol their children in an IM school. Several parents reported an interest in Irish language culture as the family

was living in Ireland long term and they wanted to develop an Irish identity for their children that they would be proud of and would like to reinforce. This finding is in line with other research on the reasons why parents chose immersion education for their child in various countries (Dagenais 2003; Davis et al. 2021; Ní Thuairisg and Ó Duibhir 2016; O’Hanlon 2015).

In comparison to other research undertaken on why parents chose IM education for their child, participants in this study placed a greater emphasis on the value of multilingualism and language learning in general rather than a particular interest in Irish/English bilingualism (Mhic Mhathúna and Nic Fhionnlaoich 2021; Ní Thuairisg and Ó Duibhir 2016). However, a small number of parents ($n=4$) reported that their partner had a particular interest in Irish and that this had an impact on the decision to choose an IM school.

And his father regretted that he wasn’t fluent, or he was unable to get more beautiful Irish language. So as a cultural thing, it was mostly his dad that pushed things. (Parent 3)

Positive reputation of IM schools

As identified in other research, good reports about IM schooling from relatives and friends influenced the parents’ decision to send their children to an IM school in this study (Mhic Mhathúna and Nic Fhionnlaoich 2021; Ní Thuairisg and Ó Duibhir 2016; O’Hanlon 2015). One parent gave an example of how the advice of someone that they trusted reassured them about their decision.

I talk to some people that I trust and they all told me that going to Irish school was probably the best thing that had ever happened to their kids. (Parent 2)

As illustrated in the work of Darmody et al. (2012) there are many factors involved when parents choose a school for their children. Outside of linguistic and cultural reasons, parents reported variables that influenced their choice such as: the positive atmosphere of the school, the convenience of the school location, new school buildings and facilities, school policies, quality of education, multi-denominational school ethos ($n=1$) or Christian school ethos ($n=1$). Findings show that parents were intrinsically motivated to enrol their children in IM schools in relation to identity and culture as well as extrinsically motivated in terms of learning language as a way to earn linguistic capital and achieve greater educational, social, and economic capital (Davis et al. 2021; Masson et al. 2022).

The role of the school principal in the school selection process

It is important to note that out of the five families who did not speak Irish or English as a home language, three of the families enrolled their children in an IM school because there was no space available for the children in an EM school. It is also interesting that each of the parents from families who did not speak English as a home language ($n=5$) explained that the principal or a teacher in the school was a convincing factor in their decision to send their child to an IM school. This finding corresponds with those of Mady and Masson (2018) who highlighted the particular importance of school gatekeepers in welcoming multilingual parents and families.

It was a summertime and I was talking with the principal, and it was really nice chat, and he ensure me that I don’t have to worry anything about the language. It’s just a new start, and that

the schools are very, very good and very good education level and he promised me that definitely he will be good in that school. So, the language is not a barrier, because pretty much the young kids they doesn't know Irish as well so everybody's starting from the same kind of level. (Parent 12)

Other multilingual parents also reported that they were reassured by principals about their decision to enrol their children in IM education.

The benefits of learning Irish and of IM education

Parents were asked about the value of learning Irish and the benefits of IM education in their interviews. Parents linked the benefits of IM schooling to the learning of Irish and so the two themes are combined in the reporting of the results. The three sub-themes arising from the analysis were multilingualism (learning an additional language), cultural benefits, and linguistic capital.

Advantages of multilingualism

The opportunity to learn an additional language emerged as a key factor in choosing an IM school for their children and also was identified by parents as a benefit of IM education. Parents reported that their children could easily change from one language to another when speaking Irish, English, and other languages depending on the communication location and with whom they were speaking. Children used their linguistic resources in a dynamic and fluid way to fulfill their communicative needs which would indicate some evidence of translanguaging (García 2009). An interest in language learning, the development of cognitive and metacognitive skills, as well as a positive attitude towards language learning, emerged as the benefits of IM schooling.

I think it's a great, it's a great extra asset to have that extra language. You know it's just the more languages the better. (Parent 9)

A further benefit discussed was that of children being able to learn an additional language more easily, which would be of benefit to students later in their education.

They, like anyone I know that speaks two or three languages, they take up the fourth language with no effort. I see that as a great plus. (Parent 11)

The intercultural dimension of the learning of a range of languages (Baker and Wright 2017; Benzehaf 2023) also emerged as a positive variable, and some parents explained that their children understood that there were various ways to communicate and that this understanding fostered respect for linguistic and cultural diversity.

I think he's quite alert to the fact that different people speak different languages and even neighbours who are different cultural backgrounds. I like that aspect in this kind of society that he's kind of accepting of that. (Parent 6)

It is of note that parents for whom English was not a home language did have initial concerns about their child's language development in English when attending an IM school, but the parents were reassured after speaking with the school principal about their children's progress in school (Mady and Masson 2018).

As we don't speak English at home I would say at some point that I was concerned but then suddenly out of nowhere they started speaking. No clue how it happened but as far as I understand they have very limited English lessons at school but probably on the playground or with some friends (Parent 2).

On the other hand, in families where one parent spoke English, parents were not concerned that immersion would negatively affect their child's English due to the majority status of the language outside of school. *Absolutely no, that's a bunch of nonsense because English is all around (Parent 7).*

Cultural benefits

Parents expressed the view that learning Irish was of cultural importance as it was the country's autochthonous language and that it is worth learning while living in the country.

We came to Ireland to stay here forever, and some areas of the country speak Irish and Ireland invests a lot into Irish language. I think it's a very nice idea to speak native language of the country you are going to spend your life forever. (Parent 2)

It was clear that parents linked knowledge of the Irish language to the Irish identity of their children as further explained by one of the parents.

And she loves it, like about the culture as well to have her and she is Irish, so you know that part is what is important for us. (Parent 8)

Some parents mentioned their children gained a deeper understanding of Ireland's heritage through the IM education system when immersed in the language and culture and that it was also a way for parents to engage with Irish culture.

If both your parents are from foreign languages, you know it's an extra help to integrate yourself in the Irish culture and know more about that even through your children I suppose if you're a parent like you know, because you're going to school with them in a way, you kind of get know about the Irish culture I suppose as well and the Irish language a bit. (Parent 9)

Many multilingual parents expressed the belief that it was regrettable that there was not a greater emphasis placed on the informal use of Irish and more support for Irish in the community. Participants in the Darmody and Daly (2015) survey on attitudes towards Irish also expressed the view that the government should do more to support the Irish language.

Linguistic capital

Many parents identified the benefit of their children having more employment opportunities in the global economy and expressed the view that Irish would be useful to the children if they were seeking positions as a teacher or in the state service.

It's a huge advantage. And I hope the Leaving Cert won't be a problem for her. And I know there's sometimes, you know, if she will decide to work for the public sector or anything. Yeah, it'll be easier probably for her as well. (Parent 5)

This opinion is consistent with research in Wales and Canada (Dagenais 2003; Davis et al. 2019, 2021; O'Hanlon 2015) where parents believed that the use of the immersion language

was a sort of linguistic capital that gave children more opportunities to gain economic and social capital. Some parents also mentioned additional points for Irish in the final state exam as an advantage of IM education as students who complete their exams through Irish receive extra marks (Mac Aogáin et al. 2010).

Multilingual parents' participation

Although previous research has indicated IM parents have felt somewhat excluded from their child's education (Kavanagh and Hickey 2013) if they did not have proficiency in Irish, this was not the case for the multilingual parents in this study. Communication and policies in all the schools were bilingual or in home languages as necessary, and parents did not feel that they needed Irish to participate in their child's schooling.

Everything is through both languages. If you go to the school yourself. They always encourage parents to speak a tiny bit of Irish even like, say, hello, thank you, but they obviously respond to you in English. (Parent 9)

Some parents noted that parents of Irish nationality were also learning Irish so not knowing Irish was not a barrier for them.

I wouldn't separate being multilingual from another family that doesn't have the Irish. Like they do some classes for parents you know for adults, and any problems, you know they always help, and they always support, you know. (Parent 15)

Parents used a variety of online tools for translation and checking pronunciation for their child's Irish reading. Homework was assigned so that children could work independently and although parents had initial concerns, they were reassured by their child's progress in school. Parents were also happy to ask for assistance which indicated the supportive and inclusive policies of the schools. They were satisfied with their children's language development in English and in Irish. There was subtle support in schools for home languages other than Irish or English and although some parents said that they would like the school to support home languages and cultures more, other parents were unsure how this could be facilitated. The number of parents participating from a variety of IM schools was small, so findings cannot be generalised to all IM schools.

Discussion

Today, Ireland is a linguistically and culturally diverse society (CSO, 2017, 2022). This in turn means that there is an opportunity for IM schools to support linguistic and cultural diversity and the teaching and learning of Irish as a part of students' plurilingual repertoires (Piccardo 2013; Little and Kirwan 2019). A distinction has emerged in the literature (Council of Europe, 2001; Cummins 2017; Piccardo 2013) in recent years between the terms multilingualism and plurilingualism. Multilingualism considers linguistic competencies in different languages as more balanced, co-existing and separate. In contrast with this, plurilingualism refers to an individual's capacity to use their linguistic skills in a dynamic, fluid and integrated way across languages to fulfil their communicative needs, and even partial competencies in languages are valued (Council of Europe, 2001; Cummins 2017; Piccardo 2013). A shift to a plurilingual view of IM education would entail a move from

balanced Irish/English bilingualism as the goal of the programme to supporting children's immersion in Irish in a way that also includes and supports a variety of home languages and cultures.

This is the first research study in the RoI that specifically focused on the reasons why multilingual parents choose IM education for their children and their experiences of this form of education to date. In line with previous research in the Irish context, multilingual parents showed a high level of satisfaction with IM education (Mhic Mhathúna and Nic Fhionnlaoich 2021; Ní Thuairisg and Ó Duibhir 2016). The motivating factors for multilingual parents when choosing IM education for their child differ somewhat to those of parents from the RoI, as multilingual parents are more likely to choose this form of education for their children due to the overall benefits of learning another language (e.g. linguistic and cognitive advantages) rather than for opportunity to learn Irish as a language (Mhic Mhathúna and Nic Fhionnlaoich 2021; Ní Thuairisg and Ó Duibhir 2016). This suggests that the multilingual parents in this study understood the advantages of learning and additional languages and the educational and employment opportunities that arise from immersion education (Dagenais 2003; Davis et al. 2021; Masson et al. 2022). Multilingual parents whose children do not attend IM schools may be unaware of the potential benefits of this form of education for their child and also that their child's English language development will not be negatively affected by attending an immersion programme (Lindholm-Leary and Genesee 2014; Mady 2017; Somers 2017).

Parents in this study identified that it was important for their children to learn about and be immersed in the Irish language and culture (Kavanagh, 2014; Mhic Mhathúna and Nic Fhionnlaoich 2021; Ní Thuairisg and Ó Duibhir 2016). This they stated was important as they were going to be living in the RoI long-term and they may have perceived that being immersed in the language and culture may help them 'fit in' better in Irish society (Conteh and Kawashima 2008). The findings suggest that there may be a snowball effect in relation to increasing the number of multilingual students in IM education. This can be seen by the fact that multilingual parents were more likely to enrol their children in an IM school if someone they knew had discussed the positive reputation of the IM school with them, thus giving them reassurance and they were then happy to proceed with the enrolment (Mhic Mhathúna and Nic Fhionnlaoich 2021; Ní Thuairisg and Ó Duibhir 2016; O'Hanlon 2015). In the future, it would be a good idea to examine how this form of student recruitment could be maximised to ensure the participation of children from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds in IM schools.

Not all parents interviewed chose IM education for their children as a first option and some had no other option but to send their child to an IM school due to a lack of availability of spaces in an EM school. Nevertheless, these parents discussed how they were happy and reassured about their decision when they met with the school principal and discussed the suitability of IM education for their child (Mady and Masson 2018). It is also interesting that a group of parents interviewed said they would not have chosen this form of education for their child if their partner did not have some knowledge of Irish. This points to the need to disseminate evidence based information about the suitability of immersion education for learners from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds in a range of languages and across a variety of platforms (Ní Thuairisg and Ó Duibhir 2016). It would be advisable to provide information on the school curriculum, the achievement of learners in English and the teaching of English in schools as well as widely acknowledged benefits of immersion (Ní Thuairisg and Ó Duibhir

2016). Furthermore, it must be ensured that all parents can participate in their children's education (Kavanagh and Hickey 2013; OECD, 2015) regardless of their competence in Irish or English. Parents relayed the importance of regular contact and feedback from the school, particularly when the language of schooling is different from the language at home and all schools must be cognisant of this (Kavanagh 2014; Kavanagh and Hickey 2013).

It was interesting to note that multilingual parents did not feel excluded from participating in their child's education due to their lack of Irish language proficiency when compared to the findings of studies that suggested that parents from the RoI who enrol their children in IM education often feel excluded due to this factor (Kavanagh 2014; Kavanagh and Hickey 2013). This may suggest that multilingual parents are more open to learning new languages and this may be due to their previous experience in doing so (Paradowski and Bator 2018). In order to ensure equality of access to IM schools, it is necessary to establish IM schools in the areas where school places are over-subscribed to provide an opportunity for all families who wish to register their child in an IM school (Darmody et al. 2012; Mhic Mhathúna and Nic Fhionnlaioich 2021; Strickland and Hickey 2016). It is strongly recommended that IM schools and all immersion schools embrace a plurilingual view of language learning that values and promotes the use of all of children's linguistic resources and affirms linguistic and cultural diversity in schools (Cummins 2015; Little and Kirwan 2019). The inclusion of children's home languages in immersion schools can promote critical language awareness across languages for all learners (Dagenais 2008). There is exemplary work in Little and Kirwan (2019) and Cummins (2021) to guide schools including a diversity of languages in language learning. Emphasis should be placed on the benefits of learning multiple languages and on a plurilingual view of immersion (Mady 2017, Swain and Lapkin 2005) rather than a bilingual view which advocates immersion education as a form of education which is most suitable for monolingual learners. Schools and educators have a role to play in challenging inequitable linguistic hierarchies (Cummins 2015). A bilingual view of immersion education may exclude learners from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds (Somers 2017, 2018) and neglect to recognise all of children's languages as capital for learning.

When reviewing the findings of this study, it is important to be mindful that the parent sample is small and not representative of all multilingual parents whose children attend IM schools. As mentioned previously, as there are few multilingual students attending IM schools, there was a challenge in relation to recruiting a high number of participants. However, the thick description of the context and the direct quotes from participants may mean that the findings of this study are transferable to other immersion education contexts, such as those in Canada, Spain, and Wales. They may provide a context for other immersion education contexts particularly in terms of why multilingual parents choose minority language immersion education for their children and how this can be promoted further. In the future, it would be good to see more research undertaken in this area, particularly with a larger sample size and parents with a variety of language backgrounds.

Conclusion

This research investigated multilingual parents' motivation for choosing IM education as well as their perceptions towards learning Irish and IM education. The overarching finding

of the research is that parents associated learning Irish and IM education with the benefits of additional language learning. This is interesting as Irish is a national minority language with relatively limited use outside of education for the majority of learners. Parents viewed IM education as a means for their children to gain linguistic and cultural capital and additional advantages related to multilingualism. No significant challenges emerged for multilingual families in this study. It is of note that there is a reluctance among families for whom English is not a home language to choose IM education and also for some parents to recommend this form of education in this instance. This points to the need for a national campaign to encourage families for whom neither Irish/English is a home language to choose IM education. Findings from this research are relevant to the provision of immersion education for multilingual learners in other jurisdictions.

Acknowledgments

The researchers would like to thank An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta [The Council for Gaeltacht and Irish-medium Education] for funding this research.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix 1

Interview questions

Background information & language practice at home

- Can you tell me a little about your family?
- How many children do you have?
- How long have you lived in Ireland?
- What languages do you speak?
- What languages do you use at home?
- What languages do your children speak?

Language ideologies about language, language education and language learning

- Do you think there is a value in learning Irish?
- How/Why did you choose an Irish-medium school for your child/children?
 - *Did you think of other options in terms of schools to attend?*
 - *Did you get any advice from others about school choices for your children?*
- Can you talk to me about your child/children's experiences of attending an Irish-medium school?
 - *What have been the benefits of attending an Irish-medium school?*
 - *What have been the challenges of attending an Irish-medium school?*
- Did you have any concerns about choosing an Irish-medium school?
- Did you have any concerns that Irish-medium education would affect your child's English language development?
- Has Irish-medium education been successful in developing your child/children's language skills (Irish/English/Home language)?
- Does your child ever need assistance with homework completed through Irish? Who helps them?
- What thoughts do you have about the role of Irish in your child's future education or career?
- Would you encourage other multilingual parents to send their children to an Irish-medium school? Why? Why not?
- Are there challenges around multilingual families sending their children to Irish-medium schools?
- What supports could Irish-medium schools put in place for multilingual families?

Home language learning and school support

- What are your thoughts on your children's learning and using their home language?
- Do you see your home language as an important aspect of your identity, and if so, why?
- Have you been encouraged by any educational institution (school/preschool) in Ireland to continue speaking your home language at home with your child/children?
- Have you received any advice about raising multilingual children from anyone in an educational setting?
- Do you think the school supports your child/children's home language in any way?

Challenges and benefits associated with multilingualism

- What are the challenges and benefits of being multilingual?
- How might Irish-medium schools encourage more multilingual families to choose Irish-medium education?

Closing

Is there anything else you would like to add about children from multilingual families attending Irish-medium schools?

Go raibh míle maith agat as páirt a ghlacadh san agallamh

Thank you very much for taking part in this interview