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Why parents chose to send their children to Irish-medium immersion preschools: learning from parental choice strategies in Celtic countries

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the reasons Irish parents chose to send their children to Irish-medium preschools settings over other forms of early childhood education. The international literature on parental decision making regarding childcare and relevant studies on immersion education in Celtic countries were reviewed. A parental questionnaire, informed by this literature, was distributed through selected immersion settings in Ireland. Social and cognitive development were the main reasons parents cited in regard to early childhood education and an interest in the Irish language and bilingualism along with the good reputation of the immersion preschool were the reasons they chose immersion preschooling. Comparisons were made with the reasons parents chose immersion primary education in Scotland, Wales and Ireland and the findings were broadly similar across the studies. Recommendations include disseminating information about immersion preschools more widely as well as reviewing the impact of the *Education (Admission to Schools) Act* (DES, *Admission to Schools Policy*. Dublin: DES. http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2018/act/14/enacted/en/html, 2018) on enrolment in Irish-medium preschools and primary schools.

KEYWORDS

Irish-medium preschools; parental motivation; social networks; minority languages; early childhood education

Introduction

This study focuses on the reasons parents chose to send their children to Irish-medium preschools in two areas in Ireland, counties Dublin and Cork. In Ireland, there are two official languages, English and Irish, with English as the dominant language in most of the country. Following the foundation of the Irish state in 1922, the revival of the Irish language was central to government policy aiming to 're-Gaelicise the country' (Ó Ceallaigh and Ní Dhonnabháin 2015, 182) with revival efforts relying strongly on the education system (Harris 2007). This policy can be seen in the initial efforts of providing Irish-medium immersion early years education for all, through various forms of immersion education for the most able pupils to a dwindling number of Irish-medium schools by the end of the 1950s, mirroring the priorities and perspectives of Irish society (Dunne 2020).

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Irish remains a community language in the west of the country in the relatively small *Gaeltacht* or Irish-speaking areas, but active use of the language outside these areas remains low. Recent Census figures show that 40% of the population of 4.92 million have the ability to speak Irish, but usage remains mainly within the education system (32%) and only 1.7% state that they use Irish daily outside education (CSO 2017). All children learn Irish as a core curriculum subject throughout their schooling and this practice enjoys wide support, with 64% of respondents in a 2019 survey agreeing that it should remain a core subject on the curriculum (Conradh na Gaeilge 2019).

Groups of parents with a strong interest in the Irish language lobbied the State in the 1960s and 1970s to establish primary schools that would provide early total immersion education in Irish for all pupils, the great majority of whom have English as their first language. All teaching and interactions in such schools are conducted through the target language with very limited use of English (Baker and Wright 2017). The linguistic benefits of this approach are well documented (Baker and Wright 2017; Ó Duibhir 2018), including the development of functional proficiency in the target language by the end of primary school. However, proficiency tends to remain more limited compared to native speakers due to the restricted domains of contact with the target language (Baker and Wright 2017; Ó Duibhir 2018). Achievement in the first language and overall academic achievement is equal or higher in comparison to children educated through their first language.

There are now 150 Irish-medium primary schools outside the Gaeltacht and 109 in *Gaeltacht* regions that also teach through Irish, a total of 8% of schools in the Republic of Ireland (DES 2020). The numbers for preschools are 373 settings in total, representing 10% of settings nationwide (DCYA 2018). Almost 40% of the preschools are sited on the same grounds as Irish-medium primary schools. While there are no structural links between the two sectors, many individual preschools and primary schools enjoy good professional relationships, and connections between both sectors are being strengthened through transitions initiatives such as *Mo Scéal* (My Story), a National Council for Curriculum and Assessment programme (NCCA 2018).

Parents in Ireland can choose where their child attends primary education (usually from age five years). At the time of this study, 41% of Irish-medium primary schools in Dublin and 15% in Cork reported waiting lists (Gaeloideachas 2019). Oversubscribed Irish-medium schools will no longer be allowed to give preference to children who attended Irish-medium preschools with the enactment of the national *Education (Admission to Schools) Act* (DES 2018). This is due to apply to admissions for the school year 2021/22. The only exceptions for priority places are for children from Irish-speaking families, which make up approximately 3% of children attending Irish-medium preschools. Over 64% of Irish-medium preschools also had waiting lists in 2018–2019.

This study explores the reasons parents chose to send their children to Irish-medium preschools over other available choices, in advance of the implementation of the *Education Act* (DES 2018). This study was conducted in spring 2018 and therefore gives baseline data that could be used for comparison in the future.

Parental selection of childcare services

Parents' reasons for choosing childcare and early years education and care are multifaceted and complex (Weber 2011). There are many contextual factors which are

interwoven, including family contexts, the type of settings available in the local community, parental values and beliefs and childcare needs (Chaudry, Henly, and Meyers 2010; Weber 2011). Forry et al. (2013) provide a useful frame of reference for examining the relevant literature. This includes parents' childcare decision-making process, their preferences and priorities in selecting a childcare arrangement and constraints they face in accessing a preferred childcare arrangement. Whether parents were accessing full daycare or sessional care also influenced choice. The current study focuses on sessional care for children (2:8–5 years) as these are the most common forms of Irish-medium preschooling and also meet the parameters of the state-funded preschool education scheme (ECCE, Government of Ireland 2019).

Parents' childcare decision-making process

Many parents in the United States, England, Scotland and Malta base their choice of childcare on informal reports from neighbours, friends and extended family (Forry et al. 2013; McLeod and O'Rourke 2015; Sollars 2017; Stephen et al. 2010). More than 50% did not visit the setting themselves before making their choice (Forry et al. 2013; Sollars 2017). Chaudry, Henly, and Meyers (2010) discuss decision-making processes and describes in some detail the social network framework for decision-making and relate this to decision-making about childcare. Personal networks, consisting of relationships or social ties between and among relatives, friends, neighbours and colleagues can provide information, offer support, confer social status and social recognition and exert influence over their members (Forry et al. 2013, 17). It appears that parents' personal networks and information from these are critical for decision-making (Chaudry, Henly, and Meyers 2010).

Chaudry et al. (2011) found that immigrant families and recent arrivals to a neighbourhood had fewer options for childcare than similar English-speaking families as their personal networks did not provide knowledge about available provision. In relation to the present study, information and prior knowledge about local Irish-medium preschools are a prerequisite for making a choice. Parents' social networks may include people who know about local Irish-medium preschools but other parents may have to rely on internet sources. Information is available from several online sources and agencies and also from inspection reports published by government departments, but access to this information depends on knowledge of its existence. Some information is available through Irish language networks and school communities, but again this depends on families being linked into these networks.

Parents' preferences and priorities in selecting a childcare arrangement

Practical aspects of choosing childcare, such as cost and convenience, are also considered. Parents with higher education or higher incomes tended to prioritise quality features (Peyton et al. 2001). However, their concepts of what exactly constituted quality differed. Some prioritised structural factors such as the childcare centre, staff education and training, staff experience, adult–child ratios and hygiene (Rose and Elicker 2008). Other parents also considered dynamic/interactive quality features such as the relationships between staff and children, relationships among staff and with parents, the

programme and the overall atmosphere in the centre (Chaudry, Henly, and Meyers 2010; Gamble, Ewing, and Wilhelm 2009; Rose and Elicker 2008; Sollars 2017).

Parents of preschool children placed more emphasis on learning activities than parents of babies and toddlers (Gamble, Ewing, and Wilhelm 2009). Research in Ireland and abroad (Forry et al. 2013; Ring et al. 2016; Sollars 2017) has shown that parents valued the social development of children in early years settings, but their concept of the aim of preschooling impacted on their priorities regarding quality. Parents who saw preschool as an opportunity for learning through play, emphasised the importance of play activities, music, placing trust in the staff and individual attention from staff. Parents who saw preschool primarily as preparation for school prioritised the academic reputation of the preschool, school readiness and teaching and learning methods (Chaudry, Henly, and Meyers 2010; Rose and Elicker 2008). There are multiple influences on parental choices around childcare, and these reasons include both structural and dynamic factors.

Research in Scotland, Wales and Ireland

In Scotland, many parents who chose Gaelic-medium preschools for their children have an interest in the Gaelic language (McLeod and O'Rourke 2015; Stephen et al. 2010). Some families had some Gaelic or Irish language connections in their backgrounds or an interest in Scottish heritage. Many were interested in bilingualism, some in Gaelic-English bilingualism, while others were interested in facilitating the acquisition of two languages and the only option available was Gaelic-English bilingualism. Parents in these studies assumed language learning was easier in early childhood and that this would help with learning a third language. A small number of parents had unrealistic ideas about how much language learning could be achieved in one year in an early years setting. Some parents felt that the education standard in Gaelic-medium education was higher than in English-medium schools, with a lower pupil-teacher ratio and that in turn allowed teachers to get to know all the children well. They thought that other parents in Gaelic-medium education would be more interested in education in general and appreciated the benefits of an early start in Gaelic in preschool.

Studies in Wales (Hodges 2012; O'Hanlon 2015) also show that parents cited cultural, educational, economic and personal reasons for sending their children to Welsh-medium primary education. Over 50% of Hodges's small sample in a mixed language area of Wales chose cultural reasons as their main reason, with 34% choosing educational reasons. Both Welsh-speaking and non-Welsh speaking parents emphasised the importance of 'cultural identity and nationhood' (Hodges 2012, 363), often in opposition to 'a globalised generic identity', and thought that Welsh-medium schools had 'higher academic standards, a good reputation, bilingual advantages and commitment of parents and teacher' (Hodges 2012, 365). Many parents were influenced by their children's positive experiences in Welsh-medium preschools and wished their children to continue with their primary school education through Welsh. Social networks also influenced parental decisions, including recommendations from friends and neighbours in addition to bonds formed with other parents in Welsh-medium preschools.

O'Hanlon's (2015) wider study encompassing choice of Gaelic-medium and Welsh-medium primary education summarises the results under four main themes which

resonate with the above Scottish and Welsh studies: cultural heritage, the benefits of bilingualism, the perceived quality of Welsh and Gaelic-medium education and employment opportunities in bilingual contexts. O'Hanlon (2015) also interviewed final-year primary pupils in both Gaelic-medium and Welsh-medium schools and the majority (95%) wished to continue their education through the same language.

Similar reasons for choosing Irish-medium primary education were cited by parents in Ní Thuairisg and Ó Duibhir's report (2016) on the continuity from primary to post-primary Irish-immersion schools. These included an interest in the Irish language, an appreciation of the benefits of bilingualism, the strong educational reputation of the school and good reports from friends and neighbours.

Parents in Ní Thuairisg and Ó Duibhir's survey (2016) were highly motivated to continue with Irish-language immersion education, with 31% having sent their child to an Irish-medium preschool. Parents were prepared to travel some distance to reach the Irish-medium primary school. Over 30% of parents said that primary education through the medium of Irish was the next step on their children's journey from Irish-medium preschool and 68% intended sending their child to Irish-medium post-primary education. Just over 12% of the respondents had attended Irish-medium education themselves.

Parents choosing to send their children to Gaelic, Welsh or Irish-medium preschools had an interest in a specific Celtic language or in bilingualism in general and its advantages. They were therefore motivated by cultural and/or educational reasons in their choice and based on their positive experiences at preschool level, were interested in continuing with immersion education at primary level. This situation is mirrored in other minority/heritage language contexts such as Māori in New Zealand (Loveridge 2010).

Language, culture and identity

As noted above, language, culture and identity have long been intertwined in Ireland and other countries, including the role played by languages in the past and in the various movements to gain political freedom. In a study of adult attitudes to Irish, when asked if Ireland would lose its identity as a separate culture without the Irish language, 64% agreed or strongly agreed (Darmody and Daly 2015). The central role of the Irish language continues to influence the shaping of identity in all parts of Ireland today (Crowley 2016, 198).

Identity, both individual and group, is at the heart of the person and anchors them to their past (Edwards 2009, 2). There are many facets to identity formation but one of the most powerful anchors is that of language. Language carries a symbolic charge which makes it an important component in individual and group identity according to Edwards (2009, 5). People can hold multiple identities that shift and change over time and circumstances, but the core tenets of personal and group identity can remain relatively stable. Joseph (2016, 19) argued that language and identity is a topic in which contemporary perspectives cannot be neatly separated from historical ones. Identity is grounded in beliefs about the past: about heritage and ancestry. 'Language is one of the most powerful signifiers of belonging because it is through language that personal connections with people and places are named, heritage and ancestry recorded and passed on, and beliefs developed and ritualised' (Joseph 2016, 19).

Edwards (2009, 251) states that it is possible to hold allegiances towards a language even in the absence of personal bilingualism. He cites the attachment that Welsh and Irish people feel towards a language they no longer possess as demonstrating the continuing power of something intangible and symbolic. Parents may not be fluent speakers of Irish but wish their children to acquire the language at an early age.

Ethnic and national identity

Ethnic identity is defined by Edwards (2009, 162) as 'allegiance to a group with which one has ancestral links'. Ethnicity and nationalism are linked and share a common sense of belonging to a defined group. Edwards (2009) holds that the main difference is one of scale and not of principle, with its belief in a shared ancestry and desire for political autonomy. A national language remains one of the pillars of a modern nation and the promotion of that language part of the national cause. This in turn confers language rights on speakers of those languages, rights to learn the language(s) and to use the languages in dealings with the state, the educational system for example. The Irish language retains a symbolic cultural importance for most Irish people, due in part to decades of promotional activities by the state since 1922 (Walsh 2020, 22). While the Irish language is 'a vehicle of cultural expression' (Ó Ceallaigh and Ní Dhonnabháin 2015, 180), the complicated history of the language is reflected in a lack of active commitment, evidenced in the low levels of daily use. The majority of the population hold positive attitudes and a belief that Irish is important both as part of the identity and as an element of Irish education, however people look to others to carry this out (McCubbin 2010).

A one-dimensional essentialist view of ethnic identity is contested by Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) and Lytra (2016) who reminded readers that identities are many faceted and are not necessarily fixed and immutable. In the Irish context this fluidity is particularly relevant, as most native speakers of Irish are balanced bilinguals, with equal access to Irish and English communication skills (Flynn 2013), and therefore a fixed Irish language culture and identity in isolation from Irish-English bilinguals no longer exists. According to Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004, 14) language supplies the words and terms with which identities are constructed and negotiated. Identities are embedded within power relations and speaking high status languages confers symbolic power on that speaker in Bourdieu's terms. Constructionist perspectives view language and ethnicity as more fluid and can accommodate hybrid, ethnic identities, including multilingual repertoires. However, the two perspectives are not necessarily exclusive of one another and the high status attributed to Irish-medium preschools and primary schools can be considered as a pull-factor in Irish-medium education.

Methodology

The authors were interested in investigating the reasons parents chose to send their children to Irish immersion early years education. In collaboration with *Gaeloideachas*, the agency for Irish-medium education, a research project was planned to set down a baseline at a time before proposed changes to admission to schools policy would be implemented with a possible effect on choice of preschool. Institutional ethical approval was received in advance and full cognisance was taken of ethical principles in the study, recognising the

rights of the adults to participate or not; to be fully informed about the focus of the study; to give informed consent and confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed (Bertram et al. 2015). No children were involved as the focus of the study was on the parents' motivation. A questionnaire was sent to Irish-medium preschools in counties Dublin and Cork in spring 2018 to explore parents' use of Irish at home, their own experience of Irish-medium education and their reasons for sending their child to an Irish-medium preschool. The questionnaire was designed to be comparable to that used in the primary school study by Ní Thuairisg and Ó Duibhir (2016). Most questions were multiple choice with one open-ended question at the end, where parents could add a comment about choosing an Irish-medium preschool for their child. Information letters and consent forms were distributed along with the questionnaire.

Copies of the questionnaire in Irish and in English were sent to managers of all Irish-medium preschools in Dublin (56) and Cork (26) to distribute to parents, a total of 82 settings. It was felt that a broad representation of parents' views would be obtained from a variety of urban, rural and socio-economic backgrounds through this sampling approach. It was not possible to ascertain how many parents were potentially involved. Of the 156 responses, 93 (60%) were completed by parents in Dublin and 63 (40%) by parents in Cork. The Irish language version of the survey was completed by 38 respondents (24%), showing both active interest and competence in the language. The majority, 118 (76%) completed the survey in English, but they voiced positive attitudes towards the Irish language.

Only questions relevant to the focus of the study were asked. It was interesting however that many respondents chose to make positive comments about their experience of the naíonra in the open comment section of the questionnaire. The results of the study were communicated to practitioners at a seminar and through a newsletter.

Forry et al.'s (2013) framework was used to structure the data analysis and comparisons were drawn with relevant studies in Ireland, Scotland and Wales. This study however remains a small-scale one and although saturation was reached with many of the same responses coming through, a wider study would be needed before it would be possible to make generalisations about the results.

Findings and discussion

Parents experience of Irish in the home and school

One of the most interesting facts to emerge from the data is the strong link or continuity between parents' own experiences of Irish-medium education and their interest in providing this opportunity for their children. Many of the participants reported that they had experience of Irish in their own homes when they were growing up, ranging from 54% who said they had experienced some Irish at home to 3% who were raised through Irish only. A surprising 21% had attended an Irish-medium primary school and 19% had attended post-primary education through Irish, as when they were at school, roughly 25–30 years ago, only approximately 2% of schools at both primary and secondary were Irish-medium schools (Table 1).

This shows the potential beneficial effect of wide access to Irish-medium education and the importance of continuity of this form of education at all levels. Irish does

Table 1. Provision of Irish-medium education (1987, 1992).

	Primary schools			Secondary schools		
Year	Irish-medium	Total number	%	Irish-medium	Total number	%
1987	68	3269	2	15	819	1.8
1992	75	3209	2.3	14	789	1.8

appear to be transmitted to a significant extent through the Irish-medium education system; a feature noted earlier by Ó Riagáin (1988) but still valid today.

A survey of language backgrounds for Irish-medium preschools in 2018–2019 showed that 3% of the children spoke a language other than Irish or English at home (Gaeloideachas 2019). Our survey figures were lower, with two Spanish speaking parents and one Hungarian, giving slightly under 2% of total survey responses. It is of note that the most populous immigrant group, Polish people (CSO 2017), did not feature in the study respondents. While the reasons for this were beyond the scope of this study, it seems to echo Chaudry et al. (2011) who noted a lack of knowledge within immigrant families of the available provision.

Parents' language levels

Over 64% of the parents said they had low-medium levels of Irish, i.e. they could use simple sentences and understand parts of conversations. Just over 33% said they had medium-high levels of Irish and could understand most conversations or had native speaker-like ability. Most parents (86%) said they spoke mainly English at home with some Irish words and phrases and just 7% said they spoke mainly or only Irish. The two Spanish speakers spoke Spanish to their children. In other words, even when parental ability is present, usage of Irish remained at a low level, a fact that is mirrored in Census 2016 data (CSO 2017).

Reasons why parents chose to send their children to an Irish-medium preschool

The reasons parents chose to send their children to an Irish-medium preschool are outlined in Table 2.

Table 3 clearly shows that parents fully intended to continue with their child's education through Irish and that their reasons included the high priority they placed on

Table 2. Reasons why parents chose to send their children to an Irish-medium preschool.

Reason	Percentage (%)
Social development	95
Cognitive development	87
Continuing to Irish-medium primary school	94
I wanted my child to have Irish	81
I am interested in Irish	74
The setting had a good reputation	73
I wanted my child to be bilingual	62
I heard good reports from friends and neighbours	49
My child's sister or brother attended this setting	35
It would be easier to get a place in the Irish-medium primary school	27
The setting was convenient	24

Table 3. Parental expectations regarding acquisition of Irish.

Parental language expectation	Percentage (%)
Understand Irish used in the Irish-medium preschool	74
Understand Irish words	52
Know Irish rhymes and songs	51
Know Irish phrases	51
Use more complex Irish	19

social and cognitive development as well as language related reasons. They wanted their child to acquire Irish (81%), as they themselves (74%). were interested in the language and culture as discussed by Edwards (2009) and Walsh (2020). The good reputation of the Irish-medium preschool was significant and almost half had heard good reports from friends and neighbours about the particular setting. This mirrors the importance parents in other studies (Chaudry, Henly, and Meyers 2010; Forry et al. 2013; McLeod and O'Rourke 2015; Stephen et al. 2010) placed on personal recommendations within their social networks. In our study, the values and beliefs of family and parents' personal experience of Irish-medium education can be seen to have played a significant part in deciding to set their child on the same path of Irish-medium education.

Parents' expectations of their children's progress in Irish

After one year, 74% of parents expected that their children would understand the Irish used by the educators, i.e. manage to participate in the interactions and activities of the preschool. Slightly over half (52%) thought that their children would know some Irish vocabulary, be able to sing songs or recite rhymes and use formulaic utterances. Anecdotally, educators say this is the usual type of progress that most children make. About 20% thought that their children would be able to use more complex Irish and one parent said her child was already fluent.

Stephen et al. (2010) showed that some parents in Scotland had unrealistic expectations of language acquisition and in other cases wanted bilingualism rather than Scots Gaelic *per se*. Many of the parents in the current study had their own experience of Irish-medium education to draw on, through Irish-medium education or through learning Irish as a subject in school. This meant their expectations were grounded in experience and were, therefore, more realistic.

Praise for educators

As noted above, the good reputation of the setting was an important factor in parents' decision-making and their own experience bore out these good reports from others. We deliberately did not ask a question about parents' level of satisfaction with the Irish-medium preschool as this study is about parents' motivation and not an evaluation. However, parents made many positive remarks in the 'Other comments' section of the questionnaire, including:

> Alongside my interest in learning the language, the staff of the Irish-medium preschool are what attracted me most. The child and their happiness is most important to them and this is how they learn the language so well.

All the staff are fabulous. They are so kind and really caring. My children have learned lots of Irish here in a fun, loving way.

I prefer the focus of the Irish-medium preschool on play, interaction and communication.

These comments show the important role that staff play and how a nurturing, caring and child-centred approach to the holistic development of the child is valued by parents. It is interesting that so many parents noted that this approach translates into learning Irish in a fun and loving way and that the pedagogical approach encompasses both nurturing and facilitating language learning. Ellis (2019) discussed the importance of child-centred language learning and how appropriate training must be offered to and implemented by teachers of young children. Teacher beliefs and attitudes are fundamental to how educators interact with and create learning opportunities for children.

Policy changes: education (admission to school) act 2018 and two years ECCE scheme

One of the reasons for undertaking this study was to establish a baseline of parental motivations regarding sending their child to an Irish-medium preschool. Arrangements were being made for implementing the provisions of the *Education (Admission to School) Act* (DES 2018) which defined the criteria for allocating places in oversubscribed primary schools. Preference can no longer be given to children who had attended an Irish-medium preschool as had previously been the case. The new criteria will apply in respect of applications made for admission to primary schools for the school year 2021/2022. Commentators have raised the question of whether parents sent their children to Irish-medium preschools in the past to gain preferential admission to Irish-medium primary schools at a time when priority could be given to such children. We intend to conduct a follow-up study on parental motivation when the policy is fully implemented. The parents in this study showed genuine interest in the Irish language but 94% did wish to send their children to Irish-medium primary school and had this in mind when they enrolled their child in the preschool.

Another recent policy development is the commencement of two years free preschool education from September 2018 (Government of Ireland 2019). One year's free preschool education was available from 2010 but now all parents can avail of two years part-time education, starting from age 2:8 to school starting age. This substantial period offers real possibilities for second language development. However, the two years can be spent in different preschools if parents wish. We asked the survey parents whether they intended to send their child to the Irish-medium preschool for one or two years. Thirty-nine percent said they would send the child for one year and 60% intended sending the child for two years. As the two-year scheme was only beginning at the time of the survey, the impact was not evident. It will be interesting in the follow-up study to see if any movement between settings occurs and which direction it moves in. In addition to the language-related comments, some survey parents referred to getting a head start in learning Irish before attending an Irish-medium or other primary school and to making the transition to school so much easier. This links back to the importance of Irish in the wider school system and connections between the Irish language and school.

Conclusion

The findings of this study show the role Irish-medium preschool education can play as a means of fostering an interest in the language, facilitating the use of some Irish in the home and then sending the children on to Irish-medium primary education. This may not automatically translate into highly proficient speakers (Ó Duibhir 2018), but it is a form of intergenerational transmission supported by the Irish-medium school system. Assertions have been made that Irish-medium education is elitist and that attendance at Irish-medium preschools is an easy entry route to prestigious primary schools (see discussion in Kavanagh and Hickey 2013; Watson and Nic Ghiolla Phádraig 2011) but this survey shows that there is genuine interest in the Irish language, that it is based to a large extent on personal experience and that the parents' attitudes towards the language are very positive.

It is striking how many similarities there are among parents who send their children to minority language preschool provision across the studies discussed in this paper. Factors such as an interest in the language in question, cultural and heritage values, the benefits of bilingualism, the highly regarded reputation of Irish, Gaelic and Welsh-medium preschools and schools and the influence of parents' social networks all featured in the studies consulted. This new study contributes to the field, by showing that Irish-medium preschools are influenced by many of the same factors. The studies show the important role the education system plays in maintaining minority languages, from early years through to post-primary schooling, and also support the desirability of continuity in learning through that language at all levels of education. This importance applies to minority language situations, as just discussed, but it is also likely to apply to foreign language learning. If children are offered the opportunity to learn a second language from the early years, they can develop a proficiency in that language, but more importantly, they can develop positive attitudes toward the particular language and language learning in general. It is clear from the parents' comments in this study that age-appropriate pedagogical approaches are key and other studies show that out-of-school opportunities are also necessary to promote minoritized languages (Muñoz, Cadierno, and Casas 2018). High quality teacher education in immersion and foreign language pedagogy is necessary in order to provide appropriate high-quality language learning for young children and must be supported by policy and resources at national level.

From a policy perspective, it is clear that more attention should be paid to the importance of social networks and that State and support agencies should seek to leverage networks in Irish-medium preschools and schools to disseminate information about available provision. No parent mentioned official inspection reports, and this leads us to conclude that there is an information gap about Irish-medium preschool provision for those whose social networks do not provide this information or who do not know how to find it on the internet.

The children's language journey in Ireland now begins with the option of two years preschooling and this clearly has a role to play in early acquisition of Irish as a second language. It is therefore important to include the early years in any discussion of Irish-medium education and education through other minority languages in similar circumstances.

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