

Supporting the Parents of Students with Irish Literacy Difficulties in Gaeltacht Schools

International research states that parental involvement in education can impact positively on a child's academic, social, and emotional development. This study investigated the strategies used in Gaeltacht schools to support the parents of students with early Irish literacy difficulties. This is particularly important as students in Gaeltacht schools are fully immersed in the Irish language for the first two years of their primary education (age 4-6). They do not undertake formal English literacy until first class (approximately age 7-8). Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with four special education teachers from Gaeltacht primary schools in the province of Ulster, in the Republic of Ireland. The findings suggest that if the home language of the student, is different to that of the language of instruction and communication of the school, this can pose difficulties for parents in relation to involvement in their child's education. The strategies schools and teachers implement to address the challenges that they face in this area are discussed in this paper. Following this, recommendations are made as to how parents in these schools can be supported further.

Keywords: parents, literacy difficulties, challenges, Irish, Gaeltacht

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INTRODUCTION

The focus of this study is to investigate the strategies used in Gaeltacht schools to support the parents of students with early Irish literacy difficulties. For the purpose of this study early literacy difficulties are defined as, having difficulties with speaking, and listening, knowing letters, pronouncing letter sounds, and sounding out words (National Council for Special Education (NCSE), 2013). There are 105 primary schools in Gaeltacht areas in the Republic of Ireland, with approximately

7,360 students enrolled (Gaeloideachas, 2023). In these schools, all subjects are taught through the medium of Irish, except for English literacy (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2016). Students start formal literacy instruction in first class (age 7-8) after two years full immersion in the Irish language (DES, 2016). Traditionally, Irish was the first language of most residents in Gaeltacht areas (Údarás na Gaeltachta, 2023). However, over the last few decades, there has been much cultural and linguistic diversity in these areas, with more families living in the Gaeltacht coming from homes where a language other than Irish is their first language (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2023). For example, statistics from the 2016 census state that 63,664 (66.3%) of those living in the Gaeltacht indicated that they could speak Irish. (CSO, 2023). Maintaining and securing the vitality of the Gaeltacht and Irish language is of enormous social, linguistic, educational, cultural, and economic importance (DES, 2016). Schools play an essential role in this maintenance. Gaeltacht schools are being supported by the *Scéim Aitheantais Scoileanna Gaeltachta* (Gaeltacht schools recognition scheme), which aims to improve language outcomes for children in these schools (DES, 2016).

As mentioned previously, with the implementation of the early Irish immersion education model in these schools, the teaching of English language and literacy cannot be commenced until first class (age 7-8). Due to this, early intervention in literacy now happens only through Irish. This means that the identification of students with early literacy difficulties, literacy interventions, teaching strategies, and resources must be undertaken through Irish literacy first. Unfortunately, research has shown that there are limited resources in these areas, and this can pose as a challenge for teachers and schools. This study investigated the role of special education teachers (SET, N=4) in supporting parents who have children with early Irish literacy difficulties enrolled in Gaeltacht schools. In this way, the researcher was enabled to produce evidence-based research that presents a picture of current issues in this area more than five years on from the introduction of the Gaeltacht Education policy (DES, 2016).

Parental Involvement and Support

Parental involvement in education is crucial for the overall academic success and well-being of students (Castro et al., 2015; Fan & Chen, 2001; Kim, 2022). Research consistently shows that when parents are actively engaged in their children's education, students tend to perform better academically, have improved behaviour, and develop better social skills (Castro et al., 2015; Kim, 2022). Parents who are involved in their child's education can provide additional support at home, helping with homework, reading, and other learning activities (Castro et al., 2015; Fan & Chen, 2001, Kim, 2022). This reinforcement of learning outside of school

can lead to improved academic performance. When parents show an interest in their child's education, it demonstrates that education is important and valued. This can foster a positive attitude towards learning and motivate students to reach their potential (Castro et al., 2015; Fan & Chen, 2001, Kim, 2022). Effective communication between parents and teachers allows for a better understanding of a child's strengths, weaknesses, and learning style (Castro et al., 2015; Fan & Chen, 2001, Kim, 2022). This collaboration enables teachers to tailor their instruction to better meet the child's needs. For students from diverse backgrounds, parental involvement can bridge cultural and linguistic gaps between the home and school. Parents can contribute valuable insights into their child's background, helping teachers create a more inclusive learning environment (MacPhee et al., 2017; Peterson & Heyward, 2007). Engaged parents are more likely to advocate for their child's needs and educational rights (Goldman & Burke, 2017). This can be particularly important for students with learning difficulties or special educational needs (SEN) (Goldman & Burke, 2017; Lasky & Karge, 2011).

Research on parental involvement in immersion education programmes, identified that low parental proficiency in the school's language of instruction is a barrier to their participation (Ee, 2017; Kavanagh & Hickey, 2013a, 2013b; Turney & Kao, 2009; Wesley & Baig, 2012). In the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland it was also found that some parents find it difficult to be involved in their child's Irish immersion education due to lack of proficiency in Irish (Kavanagh & Hickey, 2013a, 2013b; Ní Chinnéide, 2009; Ó Duibhir et al., 2015). This was referenced by parents of children with SEN, who felt that they were unable to help their child academically and this in turn caused them anxiety and concern (Kavanagh, 2013a, 2013b; Ó Duibhir et al., 2015). Other barriers identified to parental involvement in Irish immersion education include: children's resistance to parental involvement, practical issues (e.g. time constraints), lack of awareness around resources and supports, dissatisfaction with the supports offered, and a perceived lack of invitations/opportunities for involvement (Kavanagh & Hickey, 2013a, 2013b).

METHODOLOGY

Semi-structured interviews with four practising SET teachers in Gaeltacht schools were conducted. The purpose of these interviews was to investigate the attitudes and perspectives of these teachers around providing support to parents of children with early Irish literacy difficulties (Powney & Watts, 2018). The research questions addressed within this study were (a) what practices are in place to support the parents of students with early literacy difficulties in Gaeltacht schools? and (b)

what are the challenges faced by Gaeltacht schools when supporting parents in this area? Each teacher was asked what practices were in place in their school to support parents of struggling readers.

Interview questions were piloted with two primary Gaeltacht teachers and adaptations were made to the interview questions as required in terms of terminology afterwards (Majid et al., 2017). The question themes are outlined in Table 1 below, and the research that influenced the development of the questions is outlined. This study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee, Dublin City University.

Table 1: The Design and Nature of Interview Questions with Reference to Literature

Interview themes	Literature that influenced interview questions developed
The teachers working in SEN in Gaeltacht schools	DES, 2016 Ní Chinnéide, 2009
The perceived advantages of Irish Immersion education for students with Irish literacy difficulties	Ó Giollagain, 2007 Ó Laoire & Harris, 2006
The challenges experienced by teachers when supporting students with early Irish literacy difficulties	Barnes, 2017 Ní Chiarúain, 2009
Strategies and resources used by teachers to support students with literacy difficulties	Andrews, 2020 National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), 2019
Strategies used to support parents of students experiencing Irish literacy difficulties	Kavanagh & Hickey 2013a, 2013b

Data Analysis

Data from the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The first step, familiarisation, involved the researcher transcribing each interview and reflecting on the answers to the related questions. This allowed the researcher to familiarise themselves with the data. The process of reading and rereading the interview answers aided the process of familiarisation. Notes were made highlighting data that would be pertinent to the study. Subsequently, the data were coded using shorthand labels to describe the content. The researcher was concerned with addressing specific research questions and analysed the data with this in mind. Then the researcher reviewed the created codes, identified patterns, and generated broad themes. A theme is defined here as a pattern that captures something significant or interesting about the data or research question. These

themes were then reviewed and named. The review involved reflecting on whether the data supported these themes, whether themes overlapped, whether some themes needed to be dealt with separately, or whether new themes had emerged that were not reflected in the research question. The final stage of the process in the thematic analysis is the final findings and discussion.

Participant Profiles

All the SET teachers (N=4) interviewed taught in rural Gaeltacht schools in Ulster. As shown in Table 2, three teachers were full-time SETs. These were based in only one school, while one teacher was a shared SET between several schools (number of schools shared with omitted for anonymity purposes). All teachers had at least ten years of experience in the classroom before starting work as a SET. Numbers are assigned to the participants for clarity and anonymity as per the ethical approval application. Further information on the profiles of the teachers is outlined in Table 2 below. A limitation of this study is the small number of interviewees; however, this study was undertaken during the Covid-19 pandemic and teachers were under additional pressure at this time due to restrictions (Minihan et al., 2022). The interviews for this study were conducted via Zoom due to travel restrictions. This may have negatively impacted on the participant rates as there were no opportunities for face-to-face meetings.

Table 2: Participant Profile

	Shared SET position	No. of years of teaching experience	School Size
T1	Yes	13	Shared between several schools
T2	No	33	Enrolment 100
T3	No	20	Enrolment 79
T4	No	15	Enrolment 25

FINDINGS

The findings presented relate to the home languages of the students enrolled in Gaeltacht schools and the challenges that this presents in relation to supporting students and parents. Following this, the supports provided by schools to parents of students with early Irish literacy difficulties in Gaeltacht schools are discussed. The key findings of the study are, that when Irish is not spoken as a language in the home, this can pose as a challenge for parental involvement, particularly in relation to completing homework. Providing parents with opportunities to gain

language fluency in Irish is helpful and may help them overcome this barrier, and there is a value in relation to providing specific supports to parents in Irish literacy (e.g. access to appropriate resources).

The Home Languages of Students

Every teacher interviewed (N=4) mentioned the challenge that Irish not being spoken as a home language poses for parental involvement (CSO, 2023). This can be a challenge for parents when supporting their child with homework. It also means that exposure to the Irish language is confined to the school setting (Kavanagh & Hickey, 2013a, 2013b; Ó Duibhir et al., 2015). *“The challenge of not having the language in the home is certainly one” (T4)*. Another teacher discussed how this lack of Irish at home was challenging for them in terms of children undertaking their homework. *“Parents find it challenging if they don’t have Irish at home, with homework especially” (T2)*. Another teacher reported that if the child’s parents are fluent, that is an advantage. *“If there is Irish in the home things are a lot easier. And if they don’t have Irish, it makes things more difficult” (T3)*. This teacher also discussed how this lack of exposure to the Irish language at home may lead to a teacher questioning whether students have a language/learning difficulty or whether the delay in their development of proficiency in using the Irish language is due to their lack of exposure to the Irish language at home (Andrews, 2020; Barnes, 2017). *“If you observe a child that has a difficulty that you cannot define as yet, you are left with the question is it a language issue or is there something else going on” (T3)*.

It is therefore clear that the findings of this study support previous research evidence that more students in Gaeltacht schools are now coming from homes where Irish is not their first language (Ó Giollagáin, 2007). This would align with previous research which states that this linguistic diversity and complexity, coupled with the increased use of English in Gaeltacht communities, presents severe and significant challenges for the Gaeltacht education system (Ó Ceallaigh & Ní Dhonnabháin, 2015). The perennial challenge persists in transferring competence in a minority language acquired in school to the home and community (Ní Thuairisg & Ó Duibhir, 2016).

Strategies Used to Support Parents of Students Experiencing Irish Literacy Difficulties

In the interviews, all the teachers (N=4) quoted regular communication with the home as the method used the most to support parents (Castro et al., 2015; Fan & Chen, 2001; Kim, 2022). *“Regular communication with parents is very important and we do that here. We survey the parents to find out what kind of help they*

might need to see if we can meet that need” (T3). Irish classes for parents were also reported by all interviewees as a positive means to support parents in their endeavours to help their children (Kavanagh & Hickey, 2013a, 2013b). In the interviews, the use of the Seesaw app that gained popularity during the school closures remained popular with parents and teachers discussed its use as a method for supporting parents. “Sending recordings home of Irish reading is also done. During the lockdowns, we used Seesaw to communicate with the children and to communicate with the children and their parents, and that proved to be effective” (T4). One teacher also discussed how they devised booklets with themes and vocabulary that were covered in classes each month. These booklets were disseminated to the homes in advance.

“A booklet is sent home that covers the different themes in the Irish curriculum as the themes come up... In that booklet there are translations of the words that the children will be coming across, with English translations. So that’s some help to them. At the beginning of the year also we sent home a booklet of phrases that can be used daily and weekly in the home” (T1).

It is clear from the findings that there is a keen awareness of the need to support parents in their efforts and that schools are doing a lot in this regard (Kavanagh, 2013). Communication with the home is central to supporting parents, and the schools of participants in this study, were proactive in this (Kavanagh, 2013; Ó Duibhir et al., 2015).

IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS FOR FUTURE PRACTICE

Much research has been conducted relating to how to support parents in the education of their child learning through the majority language of the community (Castro et al., 2015; Fan & Chen, 2001; Kim, 2022). Some limited research exists around supporting parents of students in minority language/immersion education (Ee, 2017; Kavanagh & Hickey, 2013a, 2013b; Ó Duibhir et al., 2015; Turney & Kao, 2009; Wesley & Baig, 2012). The implications of this study may be important for future policy and practice (DES, 2016). Supporting parents of students with early literacy difficulties in immersion education requires a collaborative and multifaceted approach (Kavanagh & Hickey, 2013a, 2013b; Wesley & Baig, 2012). It is important for teachers in all forms of education, not alone immersion education, to maintain open lines of regular communication with parents (Castro et al., 2015; Fan & Chen, 2001; Kim, 2022). Within this communication, it is recommended that teachers provide updates to parents on their child’s progress, challenges, and the strategies being implemented to meet their educational needs

(NEPS, 2019). This enables parents to stay informed and involved in their child's education.

It would be beneficial for schools and teachers to organise workshops or seminars for parents to understand the immersion education approach, Irish literacy development, and strategies that they can implement to support their child's learning at home (Kavanagh, 2013, Kavanagh & Hickey, 2013a, 2013b). These workshops can provide practical tips for parents to reinforce literacy skills (Barnes, 2017; Kavanagh, 2013). Parents may benefit from being provided with resources, such as reading lists, websites, and apps that can support literacy development (Kavanagh, 2013a, 2013b). These resources and lists can be tailored to the immersion education context and the child's specific needs. Collaboration with parents to create individualised learning plans for students with literacy difficulties is of paramount importance (NCSE, 2006). Parents should be involved in the development of these plans to outline specific goals, strategies, and benchmarks for progress. It is important to schedule regular meetings with parents to discuss their child's progress, strengths, and areas needing improvement (NCSE, 2006). This creates a platform for parents to share their observations and concerns as well. Involving parents in problem-solving discussions regarding their child's literacy difficulties is also recommended to collaboratively explore strategies to address challenges both in the classroom and at home (NCSE, 2006, NEPS, 2019).

It may be beneficial for teachers and schools to suggest activities that parents can do with their child at home to enhance Irish literacy skills, such as reading aloud, storytelling, and engaging in language-rich conversations (Andrews, 2020; Barnes, 2017, Kavanagh & Hickey, 2013a, 2013b). Schools could create a support group or online forum for parents of students with literacy difficulties. This platform would facilitate information sharing, idea exchange, and emotional support (Andrews, 2020; Kavanagh, 2013). With recent research suggesting the linguistic and cultural changes in the Gaeltacht areas over the last few decades, it is recommended that schools implement a multilingual approach (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011). This involves providing guidance to parents on how to support their child's literacy development in the immersion language while also nurturing skills in the child's native language (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011).

CONCLUSION

It is clear from the findings of research in this area that the linguistic integrity of Gaeltacht areas has changed (CS0, 2013). The fact that students are enrolling in

Gaeltacht schools from more homes where Irish is not their first language may pose a challenge for teachers and parents. Gaeltacht schools are implementing many positive strategies to support parents, particularly those of children with literacy difficulties. Nevertheless, with the increased diversity in these areas it is important for teachers and schools to consider implementing some of the recommendations in terms of further supporting parents outlined above.

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