



Parents' Experiences of a Language-Focused Home Visiting Scheme in Ireland

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ABSTRACT

This article reports parents' experiences of the *Tús Maith* (Good Start) Home Visiting Scheme in South-West Ireland. The goal of *Tús Maith* is to support parents who wish to speak Irish to their children at home in the Kerry Gaeltacht an Irish-speaking heartland area. Home visitors spend an hour a week, over a period of six weeks, interacting with children and parents with varying levels of competency in Irish. Home visitors who are native speakers of Irish offer individualised guidance on how to promote the use of Irish as a home language, while encouraging families to engage in activities and events organised through Irish in the local community. This paper reports findings from four focus groups with parents ($n = 22$). A thematic analysis of qualitative findings reveal that home visits supported parents by: offering targeted linguistic support focused on language enrichment/learning; providing access to social networks through Irish; creating a designated time to focus on Irish in the home; and promoting the local dialect of Irish. It emerged that the home visiting scheme reaffirmed parents' decision to speak Irish in cases where Irish was the home language, while motivating and encouraging parents with varying levels of proficiency in Irish to incorporate Irish into their daily language use. Challenges emerge in terms of assessing outcomes over a limited period of time, along with encouraging more proficient speakers of Irish to engage with the scheme. Home visits emerge as a potentially effective intervention to support the use of minoritized languages at home.

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Although Irish is recognised as the first official language of the Republic of Ireland, it is a minority language, spoken by 1.7% of the population on a daily basis outside of the education system (Central Statistics Office, 2017). Similar to other Celtic languages, such as Breton, Cornish, Manx, Scottish Gaelic and Welsh, Irish exists in a multilingual society, alongside a globally dominant language, and relies on a relatively small pool of speakers for its survival as a community language (Ó Murchadha & Migge, 2017). The Gaeltacht refers to geographically defined areas in Ireland, mostly along the western seaboard, where Irish was traditionally spoken as the vernacular of the local community. A minority of the population in Gaeltacht areas (21.4%), are now reported to speak Irish on a daily basis outside of school, a figure which shows a 11% decrease in daily Irish speakers in the Gaeltacht over a five-year period (Central Statistics Office, 2017). The rate of intergenerational transmission of Irish is in steep decline (Ó Giollagáin et al., 2007), and recent reports show that the standard of English of children who are native speakers of Irish in the Gaeltacht now surpasses their standard of Irish (Péterváry et al., 2014). Similar to minority language children in other contexts (Smith-Christmas, 2020), the language of socialisation among Irish-speaking children and their peers is mainly English (Hickey, 2007; Péterváry et al., 2014). There is a wide variance in children's level of exposure to Irish at home and in the community and the language shows convergence with English. Some morphosyntactic elements of Irish, such as gender marking are no longer successfully acquired by children, even those with the most home exposure to Irish (Nic Fhlannchadha & Hickey, 2017, 2019). First and second language young adult speakers of Irish also struggle with morphosyntactic accuracy (Nic Fhlannchadha & Hickey, 2017). Irish is no longer widely used socially among the younger generations and it is predicted by some researchers that without an innovative intervention, Irish will cease to exist as a community language in even the most dominant Irish speaking Gaeltacht areas, within the next ten years (Ó Giollagáin & Charlton, 2015).

The issue of intergenerational transmission of Irish in the Gaeltacht has been a matter of concern for many years, several generations in fact. Ó Riagáin (1992) charted the impact of forces outside the immediate family in his major survey *Language Maintenance and Language Shift in the Corca Dhuibhne Gaeltacht* and identified the importance of changing social network patterns in the 1960s and 1970s. He posited that greater economic prosperity at that time brought more people into contact with those living in a wider geographical area and that this applied in particular to the relatively isolated area of West Kerry (Ó Riagáin, 1992). People from the Irish-speaking areas had more contact with the service town of An Daingean (Dingle) in particular and other areas in Ireland and abroad and simultaneously more English speakers formed contacts with the formerly Irish-speaking networks in the west, particularly, though not solely, through marriage. Ó Riagáin (1992) describes this as one of the main factors responsible for the decline in home bilingualism in West Kerry. His research found that if one parent or both parents have limited proficiency in Irish, it was highly probable that English would be the language of the household. Additionally, even when both parents had a high level of proficiency, Irish was not necessarily the language used. Already in 1992, the date of his research, a shift could be seen in the number of Irish-speaking households moving to using more English, particularly by younger parents, with an overall intergenerational decline of 40% between respondents' families and their own childhood homes. Ó Riagáin (1992) found that the greatest decline in West Kerry was in the post-1960 period and that migration levels could account for this, with 81% of marriages containing a partner who had lived outside the area. He concluded that this leads to a decline in the number of competent bilinguals, but that families with joint high levels of ability continue to reproduce summarily competent Irish speakers.

Ó Riagáin (1992) concluded that attitudes towards the socialisation of children through Irish were weakening by the 1990s and he noted that some older respondents to his survey expressed negative feelings towards Irish. Some had had negative experiences in the past themselves using Irish in official and other business and were afraid their children would suffer if they did not speak English well. These feelings are similar to those held by one of the Scottish participants in Smith-Christmas and NicLeòid's (2020) research. Lack of confidence in speaking the minority language, including a lack of grammatical knowledge and not knowing

the appropriate register for talking with young children were some of the reasons the Scottish mother did not speak Gaelic with her child.

The importance of intergenerational language transmission is recognised as one of the most significant factors in language maintenance and revitalisation. Fishman (1991) professed that all other efforts to maintain or revive a language in wider society are inept, without the passing on of the language from one generation to the next in the home. Studies have shown that maximised linguistic input in the minority language at home, strongly correlates with high levels of linguistic proficiency, over and above the proficiency level achieved from schooling (Gathercole & Thomas, 2009). Although a vast body of research and literature has focused on language loss, language shift, and the gradual loss of linguistic diversity, far less attention has been paid to describing successful minority language transmission (Ó Murchadha & Migge, 2017), or examining interventions that could support parents in minority language transmission in the home. This paper illuminates how the *Tús Maith* (Good Start) home visiting scheme in the Kerry Gaeltacht in South-West Ireland, supports parents who wish to use Irish as a home language. The authors of this paper are not aware of any similar programme, and findings reported here may be of interest to scholars and language planners in other jurisdictions, who are concerned with promoting minority language home transmission. The *Tús Maith* home visiting scheme is also unique in that it functions as part of a broader programme, described below, the goal of which is to promote Irish as both a home and as a community language.

TÚS MAITH PROGRAMME

Tús Maith is a coordinated linguistic support programme for families who wish to speak Irish to their children in the Kerry Gaeltacht in South-West Ireland. *Tús Maith* organises a wide variety of activities through Irish, including playgroups for toddlers and babies, *Scléip an tSathairn* [Fun Saturday], occasional events throughout the year, along with a variety of classes (cooking, drama, art, yoga) for children, and Irish language classes for parents. *Tús Maith* adopts an inclusive ethos, catering to the linguistic needs of parents and children with varying levels of competency in Irish. The home visiting scheme is an integral part of *Tús Maith*, as home visitors provide information about the full range of activities and events organised through Irish and encourage familial participation. Home visitors also facilitate playgroups, providing parents with the opportunity to meet and get to know the home visitor before engaging with visits. Opportunities to participate in a speech community is recognised as a major motivating factor in minority language use and maintenance (Nesteruk, 2010; Velázquez, et al., 2015). *Tús Maith* is a coordinated effort to promote Irish at home and in the community, and opportunities to participate in social networks through Irish, thus motivating families to use Irish inside and outside the home and to form friendship groups with other Irish-speaking families. The vision of *Tús Maith* is to have a reciprocal effect on strengthening Irish as a home and as a community language (Smith-Christmas & Ruiséal, 2019).

There is a substantive research base which indicates the effectiveness of home visits as a means of providing personalised targeted parental support to parents in the convenience of their own home (Roggman et al., 2001). Home visits are generally based on the premise that parents learn by observing or taking part in the home visitor's interactions with the child/children, thus enabling them to implement the good practice modelled by the home visitor following the visit and into the future (ParentChild+, n.d.). Home Visitors in the *Tús Maith* programme are employed by *Oidhreacht Chorca Dhuibhne*, a community-based Irish language organisation funded by the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (www.chg.gov.ie). Home visitors visit families in the *Corca Dhuibhne* Corkaguiny Gaeltacht region of West Kerry, and in the *Uíbh Ráthach* Iveragh Gaeltacht region in South Kerry. The West Kerry Gaeltacht has a population of 1,928 (aged 3+), 28.7% of whom are daily Irish speakers outside of the education system (Central Statistics Office, 2017). The population in South Kerry is 1,753, where 6.9% of the population (aged 3+), are reported to use Irish on a daily basis outside of school (Central Statistics Office, 2017). For comparative purposes, only 1.7% of the national population reported that they used Irish daily outside the education system (Central Statistics Office, 2017).

In 2019, there were three home visitors working in *Corca Dhuibhne*, with one vacancy advertised, and there was one home visitor working in *Uíbh Ráthach*. Home visitors visit families for one hour per week over a period of six weeks throughout the school year from September to June.

Families may also opt to avail of a second session of six home visits, if the demand allows for this. Home visitors visit families with children from birth to 12 years, starting with the youngest children, but including older siblings. Typically, home visitors are local native speakers of Irish who speak a rich form of the local dialect and have experience of raising their own children through Irish. All home visitors have also engaged in a professional development course which awards them with a certification to work in the specialised area of home language support. Home visitors spend an hour interacting with the children, talking to them, reading, playing games and sharing Irish language resources. Support is tailored to suit the linguistic needs of families, where Irish may be the home language, where one parent may speak Irish or have proficiency in Irish, as well as parents with little competency in Irish. There were 2,575 family visits in *Corca Dhuibhne* and 828 family visits in *Uíbh Ráthach* in the period 2014–2018. Analysis reveals that 12% of families in the Corca Dhuibhne community availed of the scheme.

Gaeltacht regions have been organised into distinct language planning districts. Home visitors visit families in the language planning districts of West and South Kerry. The status of Irish in West Kerry is stronger but in South Kerry it is very vulnerable, with very limited daily use as a home or as a community language (Grant, 2019). In West Kerry home visitors tailor their support towards language enrichment or learning, as is appropriate to the family. The focus of home visits in South Kerry is on language learning and promoting the use of Irish in the home. Language planning policies in both South and West Kerry cite the importance of the home visiting scheme as a way to promote familial awareness of language planning, and promote strategies for learning and using Irish at home (Comharchumann Forbartha Uíbh Ráthaigh, 2017; Oidhreacht Chorca Dhuibhne, 2018). Language planning policies in both areas aim to increase the number of families availing of the home visiting scheme.

In 2019, the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (www.chg.gov.ie) commissioned an evaluation of the *Tús Maith* programme, primarily to assess the benefits and cost effectiveness of the home visiting scheme. The qualitative data reported here from focus groups with parents (n = 22) were gathered as part of this broader evaluation.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Fishman (1991, p. 20) proffers the view that the family is where “the bulk of language socialisation, identity socialisation, and commitment socialisation generally takes place”. Family language policy (Curd-Christiansen, 2018; King et al., 2008; Spolsky, 2012) has emerged as an important framework in the literature in recent years as researchers try to analyse and understand patterns of language use in families, and why some families are more successful at transmitting a minority language than others. Curdt-Christiansen (2018) elucidates that family language policy can be defined “as explicit and overt as well as implicit and covert language planning by family members in relation to language choice and literacy practices within home domains and among family members” (Curd-Christiansen, 2018, p. 420). Family language policy therefore is complicated and multifaceted, arising out of the interactions between caregivers and children in the home and their wider social and cultural contexts (Fogle & King, 2013). It is important to note that language use within bilingual families is often more fluid than rigid, as families respond to the needs of children and various domains of language use in everyday life (García, 2009).

Spolsky (2009) designed an analytical framework to assess family language policy which comprises three interrelated components: ideology: parents’ beliefs and attitudes towards the language; practice: the actual practice of language use in the home; and management: strategies employed to enforce the particular language policy in the family. Linguistic ideologies, practices and management strategies are impacted by parents’ linguistic ability and the resources available to them (Curd-Christiansen, 2018). Families do not exist in a vacuum, and language practices in families are heavily impacted by the sociolinguistic, socio-political, sociocultural, and socioeconomic context in which the family lives (Curd-Christiansen, 2018). External forces affect internal family language use, and families’ language use may also impact on the external environment. *Tús Maith* aims to promote Irish as both a home and a community language, through strengthening the use of Irish in the home and encouraging social networking through Irish in the local community (Smith-Christmas & Ruiséal, 2019).

Parents are shown to be more likely to transmit a minority language when both parents are competent speakers of the language, when parents have a positive attitude towards bilingualism, and when it is important to their identity (Ó Riagáin, 1992; Evas et al., 2017). It is noteworthy that parents' positive attitude towards the minority language is very often mismatched to their actual language practice at home (Ó hÍfearnáin, 2013; Schwartz, 2008). Ó hÍfearnáin (2007, 2013), for example, showed that parents who were in favour of their children achieving a high level of English/Irish bilingualism were unsure how to achieve this, and that many parents worried that speaking Irish at home could disadvantage their children in regard to achieving a high level of proficiency in English. Parents who spoke English to their children at home, expressed disappointment in later years about their children's level of proficiency in Irish, while all children had achieved a high level of competency in the majority language (Ó hÍfearnáin, 2013). Research shows that achieving a high level of competency in a minority language requires maximal input in the home (De Houwer, 2009; Nic Fhlannchadha & Hickey, 2019; Ó hÍfearnáin, 2013). O'Toole and Hickey (2017) showed that the vocabulary development of preschool children in Irish was strongly affected by parental input, and in line with Gathercole and Thomas (2009) argued that a critical mass of input is needed to optimize acquisition of a minority language. However, families' decision to speak or not speak a minority language can be made consciously or unconsciously and varies widely across families (Baker & Wright, 2017; De Houwer, 2009).

Home visiting programmes have evidenced great success internationally in different spheres. Home visits facilitate personalised and tailored support, without the inconvenience of organising travel or childcare (Sweet & Appelbaum, 2004). Home visits have been successful, for example, in developing children's early literacy and numeracy skills, which has led to increased levels of educational attainment for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Parentchild+, n.d.). Suskind et al. (2016) report on a home visiting programme in the USA which focused on working with parents to advance the language development of children under 3, over an eight-week period. Parents reported changes in their linguistic engagement with children as a result of the home visits in terms of using a broader vocabulary, using longer and more complicated sentences, and reading more stories with their children.

In a minority language context, home visits were part of the 'Twf', [Growth] scheme in Wales (Edwards & Newcombe, 2006; Irvine et al., 2008). The *Tús Maith* home visiting scheme was initially modelled on elements of Twf. As part of the Twf scheme, health visitors and midwives shared information about the social, cognitive and academic benefits of bilingualism with parents before and after the birth of their child. Twf materials were distributed to all expectant mothers and health visitors were required to discuss family language planning at the child's eight-month developmental check-up. Parents who participated in the scheme reported that Twf supported their decision to speak Welsh at home and send their child/children to Welsh-medium schools (Edwards & Newcombe, 2006). Parents were more likely to speak Welsh when they had high levels of proficiency, a positive attitude to bilingualism and as well as positive Welsh identity. In another minority language context, the Francophone education board in New Brunswick, Canada organises home visits for children between 3.5–5 years of age as an early intervention with the goal of promoting French language and culture (Bourgeois, 2010). The *Tús Maith* programme is unique in that it offers individualised linguistic support to families where children range in age from birth to 12 years of age.

Tús Maith and its home visiting programme have been explored in previous qualitative research (Ó hÍfearnáin, 2013; Smith-Christmas & Ruiséal, 2019; Ni Chathail, 2019). Smith-Christmas and Ruiséal (2019) developed the model of *saibhreas* [richness] to encapsulate the goals of *Tús Maith*. *Saibhreas* comprises of three integrated components: (i) local; (ii) competent; and (iii) affective, meaning that *Tús Maith* seeks to promote the local dialect of Irish, to support children and families in achieving competency in Irish and in fostering a positive attitude towards using the language. This adds the dimension of local to existing models by highlighting the connection with the local dialect of Irish and the physical locality. Ó hÍfearnáin's (2013) evaluation of the *Tús Maith* home visiting scheme focused in particular on its potential to support parents in adopting an all-Irish language policy and in preserving local knowledge of Irish idiom, vocabulary and structure that might otherwise be lost. Based on an interview with the coordinator and project workers of the programme in 2011, Ó hÍfearnáin suggests that the home visiting programme should focus in particular on parents with the ability to speak Irish

to their children. As will be discussed later, the attractiveness or otherwise of the programme to competent Irish-speaking parents remains an issue. Ní Chathail (2019) gathered data on the *Tús Maith* programme through questionnaires (n = 40). It emerged that the home visiting programme was valuable in offering targeted linguistic support to parents with varying linguistic ability in Irish and in forging links between the use of Irish at home and in the community.

Smith-Christmas and NicLeòid's (2020) study of the use of child-directed speech in Gaelic by two mothers in the Outer Hebrides in Scotland is relevant to the current discussion. One mother was a new speaker (McLeod & O'Rourke, 2015) of Gaelic who did not acquire the language growing up in the home but had achieved sufficient proficiency to actively use Gaelic in her daily life. The second mother was a latent speaker of Gaelic and although she herself was raised partly through Gaelic she used Gaelic on a limited basis only with her child. The study shows how lack of linguistic competence negatively impacted on both mothers' use of child-directed speech in Gaelic yet how the new speaker mother through securing linguistic support succeeded in adopting a pro-Gaelic family language policy and speaking Gaelic to her child. Smith-Christmas and NicLeòid argue that family language policies could be transformed to pro-Gaelic family language policy if parents were to receive targeted linguistic support. The potential of the *Tús Maith* programme is explicitly highlighted in the paper as a coordinated and targeted approach to promoting minority language use at home and in the community which has the potential to facilitate parents' ideological transformation. Having considered themes relevant to family language policy as well as the merits of home visits in an international context, the methodology of the current study is now outlined in relation to exploring the benefits and challenges of the *Tús Maith* home visiting scheme in supporting parents' use of Irish in the home.

METHODOLOGY

Holliday (2015) holds that the outcomes of research will be influenced by researcher beliefs. The three researchers on this project have a strong belief in the importance of the Irish language as a significant part of Irish culture and view the Gaeltacht as a living community that uses the language on a daily basis, while recognising that Gaeltacht families may choose to speak Irish, English or bilingual use of both within the family. They are also experienced researchers in the field of language and education and strive to uphold the principles of good research, bearing in mind ethical considerations, objectivity and evidence-based outcomes. Two of the researchers were familiar with some of the personnel and the area involved, having previously worked there in a professional capacity. This did not confer insider status on them in a tightknit community but increased their ability to understand the processes involved. They were also mindful of the ultimate outcome of the study, an evaluation of the current scheme and what needed to be considered if the home visiting scheme were to be expanded to other Gaeltacht regions.

A range of research methods were used in the various sections of the evaluation study, qualitative methods to access the views of parents and home visitors, quantitative methods to review the financial aspects of the scheme. Focus groups with parents were deemed to be the most appropriate method of data collection to examine the effectiveness of the scheme in supporting parents to speak Irish with their children. Direct observations of home visits were deemed to be too intrusive as personal matters are often discussed during visits (Roggman et al., 2001). Four focus groups were organised (total number of parents = 22), three in *Corca Dhuibhne* and one in *Uíbh Ráthach*. Participants for the focus groups were recruited by the project coordinator and interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and were audio recorded. Each of the 22 parents represented a different family. The participants had a range of language backgrounds and practices. Some participants spoke mainly Irish at home, some were in families where one parent was a fluent speaker and the other spoke mainly English and some were in families where one parent was more interested than the other in learning the language. A breakdown of the number of participants and family language practice is presented in [Table 1](#). This variety ensured that a range of views and experiences were captured in the discussions. One of the focus groups was conducted mainly through Irish, but the participants at the other three groups said they preferred using mainly English to express their views.

FOCUS GROUP	NO. OF PARTICIPANTS	IRISH AS MAIN FAMILY LANGUAGE	MIXTURE OF IRISH AND ENGLISH
Group 1: Corca Dhuibhne	3	0	3
Group 2: Corca Dhuibhne	5	1	4
Group 3: Corca Dhuibhne	7	2	5
Group 3: Uíbh Ráthach	7	0	7
Total	22	3	19

Table 1 Number of participants in focus groups and family language practice.

A semi-structured approach was adopted, with prepared questions on the views of parents on the organisation of the visits, the conduct and content of the visits and whether information on Irish-medium events for families in the area was offered. More open questions were also asked on how the visits supported the speaking of Irish in the home, challenges in speaking Irish with their children and any suggestions they might have for the future of the scheme. Cohen et al. (2018) highlighted the potential of focus groups to create synergies among themselves, with participants stimulating discussion and raising new issues and this was the case in these focus groups. One of the significant contributions that emerged from the focus groups was about trust and how important it was for families to be able to trust the home visitor who was interacting with their children in their home. All focus groups and interviews took place in local community centres and were arranged at times that suited the participants. The nature of the research was explained, and informed consent was given in writing. Confidentiality and anonymity were promised as far as was possible in a small community.

Ethical approval was received from Dublin City University (Ref: DCUREC/2019_109) first for the outline of questions and subsequently for the more detailed questions (Cohen et al., 2018). Direct quotations were selected to reflect the authentic views of the participants but no names are used in the reporting of data. As the communities are small and localised the researchers wanted to protect the identity of the participants as much as possible.

Recordings were transcribed and augmented by field notes and the resultant transcriptions were coded to identify themes. The data was then collated first into subthemes of coordinated language support at home and in the community; local dialect and knowledge of language; individualised and targeted linguistic support; socialisation through Irish; child-directed speech; education; convenience; prioritisation of Irish; recruitment of Irish-speaking parents; and measurement of impact. These subthemes were then categorised under the two broad overarching themes of Benefits and Challenges. Care was taken to maintain context and cohesion and to be objective. These themes will be discussed in the next section on the benefits and challenges of the home visiting scheme.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The review of literature revealed that the *Tús Maith* scheme is quite unique with its focus on the whole family and on the use of Irish as a minoritized language in dispersed rural communities. The parent participants in the study reported both benefits and challenges to the scheme which are described in this section.

BENEFITS OF THE HOME VISITING SCHEME

The home visiting scheme is at the heart of an integrated system of language supports for families and offers families a way into the Irish-speaking community and opportunities for socialising children through Irish. The scheme therefore supports the speaking of Irish both at home and in the community. It also fosters a sense of belonging to the community with parents saying some of the resources showed places of interest in the local area that they as newcomers had not known about. As noted by Curdt-Christiansen (2016, 2018), family and community exert influence on each other and factors that influence one domain can also influence the other. In this case, parents' increased use of Irish at home and their engagement in Irish speaking activities as a result of home visits, has the potential to positively impact on the sociolinguistic landscape in Corca Dhuibhne. Although there has been a continued decline

in the number of daily speakers of Irish (Central Statistics Office, 2017), the decline may have been greater if it were not for *Tús Maith*.

The emphasis on the local dialect evident in Smith-Christmas and Ruiseál's (2019) research was also evident in the parents' views in the current research. Parents reported that the home visitors were highly competent in the local dialect and in speaking a register suitable for use with young children in the home; they imparted knowledge about the local area and family events conducted through Irish, and home visits bolstered positive attitudes towards the language in the children and parents themselves through recreational activities through Irish. As one parent said:

This wasn't more school Irish, this was fun at home with their Mam and brothers and sisters and wasn't scary.

The language of socialisation among young children in a minority context weighs heavily in favour of the majority language (Hickey, 2007; Péterváry et al., 2014; Smith-Christmas, 2020). Home visits support the use of Irish with peers in the home and children's engagement in social networks through Irish. Further research could explore children's active use of Irish at *Tús Maith* activities, particularly with their peers.

In keeping with previous research (Roggman et al., 2001), it emerged that the convenience and comfort of the home setting provided a unique opportunity to offer individualised support to families according to their linguistic needs of language enrichment or learning. The programme appeared to be most popular in families where one parent was a native or fluent speaker of Irish and the other parent not. One parent described the opportunities the scheme created to broaden out the number of Irish speakers the children interacted with and how important it was for her that the children would meet other Irish speakers besides herself.

Nuair a thagann duine isteach agus tuigean siad go bhfuil Gaelainn acu ní mhothaíonn tú i d'amadán a thuilleadh so it's just an tacaíocht san agus chomh maith leis sin go dtuigfidís go bhfuil an Ghaeilinn ag níos mó ná agamsa agus a muintir, chun an ciorcal san a leathnú, is dócha gur tacaíocht mhór é domsa.

[When someone comes in and they understand that the children have Irish you don't feel foolish anymore so it's just that support, and also that they'd (the children) understand that more people have Irish than me and their family, to broaden the circle, I suppose that was a big support for me.]

Findings concur with Place and Hoff's (2011) view that exposure to multiple speakers, especially native speakers is an important factor in vocabulary development. The home visitors were all native speakers of Irish and contact with them is likely to increase the families' acquisition of authentic and localised versions of the target language.

Home visits also supported parents with little proficiency in Irish, as well as parents who were fluent speakers but didn't speak Irish to their children. Parents explained that the home visits motivated them and gave them more confidence to make a greater effort to speak Irish at home.

It just reminds you, you know when there's someone coming in every week and you don't come from an Irish-speaking background, you know you might want to speak a few words and it just helps that little bit and for my kids to hear Irish spoken.

Tuigean mo bhean chéile an Ghaeilge agus tá sí ábalta í a labhairt ach níl an muinín aici. Sin an fáth gur thosaíomar i mbliana é chun saghas boost eile a thabhairt.

[My wife understands Irish and she's able to speak it but she doesn't have the confidence. That's why we started it this year to give it some kind of extra boost.]

Parents' lack of confidence in using child directed speech in a minority language can impact on language use at home (Smith-Christmas & NicLeòid, 2020). The individualised and targeted support provided by home visitors support a pro-Irish speaking family language policy where parents increased or maintained their use of Irish.

The home visitors were also able to supply terms and vocabulary for everyday use of Irish in the home in the local dialect, 'motherese in Irish' is how one home visitor explained her use

of Irish. Some parents were keen to acquire these words and phrases and to use them with their children between visits. They also appreciated the practical strategies the home visitors suggested such as speaking Irish at one meal per day when nobody was rushed or playing Irish-language CDs in the car. Parents reported that the visits connected the use of Irish with enjoyable activities outside of school and that they could continue to engage in the activities with children following the visits. In such a way, the home visits succeeded in influencing parent and child interactions (Fogle & King, 2013), and family language policy to some extent (Curdtt-Christiansen, 2018).

Mar cé go bhfuil sé á labhairt agamsa agus ar scoil, b'in teanga mham agus teanga na scoile seachas teanga labhartha nó teanga gníomhaíochtaí.

[Because I speak Irish and they speak Irish at school they think, that's mam's language and the school language not a language that's actually spoken or used during activities.]

Tríd na rannta bhíomar ag foghlaim conas an Ghaeilinn a spreagadh iontu mar bhí muid in ann na rannta na hamhráin na cluichí a imirt leo nuair nach raibh an cuairteoir baile ann.

[Through the rhymes we were learning how to encourage Gaelainn (Irish) in the children and we were able to continue with the rhymes, songs and games when the visitor wasn't there.]

It wasn't just a language class. She came to the house to, like naturally, bring it to the kids.

In many cases the balance of language input in the children's language exposure at home (Unsworth, 2016) would be heavily in favour of English. Some parents who spoke Irish at home described the challenge of encouraging children to speak Irish and how they often replied in English. While recognising that understanding Irish is a very important step in acquiring a language, they were nevertheless disheartened by their children's lack of active use of Irish. The home visitor affirmed and bolstered their confidence in speaking Irish as they recognised the effort that they had to put into it. The home visitors had raised their own families through the language and understood in very practical terms how much effort was involved. Irish-speaking families who did receive visits reported that they were very happy with the support and the encouragement it gave them to continue speaking Irish at home.

Thug sé muinín domsa chomh maith creidiúint go raibh an rud ceart déanta agamsa, tá jab ceart á dhéanamh agat.

[It gave me confidence that I was doing the right thing, that I was doing a proper job.]

The Irish-speaking families were happy to avail of other aspects of the larger *Tús Maith* scheme such as *Scléip an tSathairn* or Saturday clubs for children and community celebrations such as Halloween, Christmas and Easter.

In her study of Chinese-English bilingual families in Singapore, Curdtt-Christiansen (2016) also found that family language policies are constantly interacting with and shaped by the national language policy and the language-in-education policy. The Department of Education and Skills (2016) published a Gaeltacht education policy to increase the use and knowledge of Irish as a community language in Gaeltacht areas in order "to maintain and secure the vitality of Gaeltacht areas as the home of Irish-speaking communities and promoting the future use of Irish as a living indigenous language" (Department of Education and Skills, 2016, p. 6). The policy includes the provision of total immersion education in Irish for children at primary level in Gaeltacht regions where schools opt into the scheme. All Gaeltacht primary schools have now opted in and children will be educated entirely through the Irish language for the first two years of primary education, when they are aged five and six years.

Newcomer parents may not be aware of this type of provision when they settle in Gaeltacht communities. Some parents recognised that the home visits provided an opportunity for children to acquire a basic understanding of Irish at home before they enter early years' settings or primary schools.

It gave them a head start coming from an English speaking (home), they went in knowing stuff. They didn't get thrown into this class not knowing what was going on. They had their Irish going into school. It made it easier on them.

Supporting parents through home visits may facilitate more engagement in their children's education. Kavanagh and Hickey (2013) found that parents' lack of linguistic competence in Irish can act as a barrier to their engagement with their children's Irish-medium education and their capacity to help with the children's homework in Irish. As Unsworth (2016) has noted, schools and early childhood settings play a vital role as a source of more academic type of input in the minority language. Home visits can support the children's linguistic foundation in Irish and links between home, early years' settings and school.

Visiting families in their homes can be a sensitive issue and it can make it difficult to recruit parents as a result. Notwithstanding this, home visits were popular with busy parents.

Chruthaigh sé uair an chloig ina raibh orm agus ar dhuine fásta eile a bheith suite i dteannta na leanaí seachas a bheith ag scuabadh na bprátaí nó ag scuabadh an urláir so chaitheamar am le chéile a bhí ana-chompordach agus dhein sé sin an-difriocht, bíonn muid róghnóthach le gach saghas rud a bhíonn ar siúl so thóg sé sin isteach chomh maith.

[It created one hour that myself and another adult had to sit down with the children instead of scrubbing potatoes or scrubbing the floor, so we spent time together that was really comfortable and that really made a difference. We're too busy with every kind of thing that's happening these days, so it brought that in as well.]

CHALLENGES OF THE HOME VISITING SCHEME

Many parents expressed the view that a one-hour per week visit over six weeks was insufficient to significantly influence the language practice in their homes. For example, one parent commented: *I needed more of it. It was really doing a lot.*

This echoes the findings of Suskind et al. (2016) who found that an eight-week intervention was too short and proposed a minimum of 12 weeks to enable parents to develop home language behaviours with their children and that this period should be followed by regular telephone contact. Many parents were very satisfied with the range of activities that took place during the visit. Some parents who were fortunate to have a second series of visits expressed the opinion that there could be greater variety in the activities.

In certain cases, parents were unclear as to their role during the visits. Some parents who participated in the visits were present rather than being actively involved. If the purpose of the visits is to influence linguistic behaviour in the home then it is essential that parents play an active role in the visit (National College of Ireland, 2019; ParentChild+, n.d; Suskind et al., 2016).

Parents may have the linguistic capacity to speak Irish to their children but choose not to as they hold the view that their children will learn sufficient Irish in school and that English is more important (Ó hÍfearnáin, 2013; Ó Riagáin, 1997). It is noteworthy that less than 15% of families availing of the scheme were primarily Irish speaking. This is similar to the figures published by Ó hÍfearnáin in 2013. Families with the competence to bring up their children through Irish have the greatest potential for language maintenance and children achieving high levels of proficiency in the language (Gathercole & Thomas, 2009; Nic Fhlannchadha & Hickey, 2019; O'Toole & Hickey, 2017).

When pressed by the current researchers, some of those parents said they did not need visits as they already spoke Irish and were proficient speakers. This might indicate a misunderstanding of the purpose of visits and programme goals or that they do not find the structure of the visits attractive. In the future, home visitors could engage parents in more discussion about language choices, exposure to the language and information about the benefits of bilingualism, as was facilitated in the Twf programme (Edwards & Newcombe, 2006). The emphasis could shift to more vocabulary enrichment; more local knowledge about nature, historical sites, archaeology in what is a very rich archaeological landscape; reading more advanced books on topics of

interest to the children or playing Irish versions of online resources. Targeted advertisement at proficient Irish-speakers would be worthwhile.

While there is extensive research evidence for the long-term effectiveness of home visits on the educational attainment of children in the education system (National College of Ireland, 2019; ParentChild+, n.d.), measuring the impact on family language practice is very challenging. In light of the specialised nature of the provision provided to parents in the present study we were dependent on the opinions expressed by parents to try to gauge the scheme's effectiveness. Given that parents were being given a free service in their own home, they were less likely to be critical of it. Together with the qualitative data of the Smith-Christmas and Ruiséal (2019), Ní Chathail (2019) and other studies, we were dependent on the opinions of the parents who participated in the study. The most concrete examples that pointed to the scheme's influence on language practice were the parents who reported that their children continued to speak Irish after the home visitor had left and that this influence lasted for a number of days. A recommendation to build on the effectiveness of the scheme would be to agree specific, achievable and measurable targets with families and to extend the time period of home visits to allow for more ambitious outcomes. Additional professional development for the home visitors in language maintenance and development together with educational input on more challenging language-focused activities for children could enhance the programme on offer to both learners and competent speakers of Irish.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the home visits can be seen to provide flexible, localised support for parents with a range of proficiency in Irish, as they provided set times for the use of Irish during visits, support for increased use of Irish at home, and laid the foundation for further socialisation through the language. The home visits provided individualised targeted support for parents and children in their own home. We would concur with previous studies (Raikes et al., 2006; Suskind et al., 2016) that the number of visits needs to be extended to perhaps 12 over a three-month period. There is a need to continually upskill the home visitors regarding their own language skills, communication with parents and appropriate language and literacy activities with children. Although the home visits impacted on family language practice to some extent, language ideology (Curd-Christiansen, 2018; Spolsky, 2009), for example, remains under-articulated and further exploration of the home visitors' and families' ideology would add depth to the practical steps outlined above.

These combined measures, containing both national policy and local community involvement aim to support the maintenance and enrichment of Irish in Gaeltacht areas and exemplify the state's approach to language planning, as noted by Ó hIfearnáin (2013). Following Curdt-Christiansen's (2018) interdisciplinary family language policy framework, it can be anticipated that the sociolinguistic context of the immersion approach in the school will impact on the language practices of the home as parents will wish to ensure their children are able to at least understand Irish when they start preschool and school. The local initiatives provided by *Tús Maith* including the home visiting programme and the supports to be made available under the language planning schemes, should provide fertile ground for the language to grow in family and community contexts.

This study also shows that additional preplanning would benefit the implementation of future schemes as baselines regarding language use in the home could be identified and future progress determined from an objective base. The wider significance of this study is that it shows the importance of medium-term supports for the use of a minoritized language such as Irish but that this must be in the context of community supports and local networks of target-language speakers. The home visits offered a way into the Irish-speaking community through trusted local individuals thus providing reciprocal links between the various elements of language support and laying the foundation for future development. Expanding the current scheme to other Gaeltacht and minority language communities may therefore be of benefit to the families and to the maintenance and development of the Irish language and other minoritized languages.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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