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Parents' experiences of a language-focused Home Visiting scheme in Ireland

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Title: 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 three 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.

Introduction

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). Irish is taught as a compulsory subject in all schools in the Republic of Ireland and the growth of Irish-medium education, which now accounts for almost 8% of all primary schools (Department of Education & Skills, 2020), has succeeded in producing a new generation of Irish speakers who are communicatively proficient in the language (Author, XXXX). The ability to speak Irish, however, has not translated to use of Irish in the wider society outside of the context of schooling (Author, XXXX; Ó Murchadha & Migge, 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 (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. 21.4% of the population in *Gaeltacht* areas 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, Mac Donnacha, Ní Chualáin, Ní Shéaghda & Ó Brien, 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, Ó Curnáin, Ó Giollagáin & Sheahan, 2014). Irish is no longer used socially among the younger generations and 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).

Intergenerational language transmission is recognised as the cornerstone of language maintenance and revitalisation. Fishman (1991) professed that all other efforts to maintain or revive a language in wider society will be 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 home transmission of minority languages. 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 and home visits**

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. The Kerry *Gaeltacht* is divided into two

regions, *Corca Dhuibhne* (Corkaguiny) in West Kerry and *Uíbh Ráthach* (Iveragh) in South Kerry. As shown in Table 1, the *Corca Dhuibhne Gaeltacht* has a population of 1,928, 28.7% of whom (aged 3+) 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). Regions within broader districts are classified into categories: A, B, C, according to the daily use of Irish (Ó Giollagáin et al., 2007). *Gaeltacht* category A entails that more the 67% of the population (aged 3+) are daily Irish speakers outside of the education system. Category B defines areas in which 44%– 66% of the population (aged 3+) use Irish as a daily language outside of school. Category C is the weakest category of Irish language use, with less than 44% of the population (aged 3+) identifying as daily Irish speakers and where English has a strong presence as a community language. The West Kerry *Gaeltacht* comprises five regions in category A (the strongest Irish speaking category), five regions in category B and four regions in Category C (the weakest category). The *South Kerry Gaeltacht* comprises one region in *Gaeltacht* Category B and 11 regions in *Gaeltacht* Category C. It is clear then that the status of Irish in *Uíbh Ráthach* is very vulnerable and has limited daily use as a home or as a community language (Grant, 2019). The focus of home visits in *Uíbh Ráthach* is on language learning and promoting the use of Irish in the home. While the Irish language is more widely spoken in *Corca Dhuibhne*, it is by far the weaker community language.

Table 1. Daily speakers of Irish by *Gaeltacht* region

	Population	Daily speakers of Irish (aged 3+)	Regions in Categories by % daily speakers		
			A (>67%)	B (44%– 67%)	C (<44%)
West Kerry	1,928	28.7%	5	5	4
<i>Corca Dhuibhne</i>					
South Kerry	1,753	6.9%		1	11

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). It does this by organising a wide variety of activities through Irish, including playgroups for babies and toddlers, *Scléip an tSathairn* (Fun Saturday), occasional events throughout the year, along with a variety of classes (cookery, 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, which is the focus of the present study, is an integral part of *Tús Maith*, as home visitors provide information about the full range of activities and events organised through Irish in the locality and encourage familial participation. Home visitors in *Corca Dhuibhne* also facilitate playgroups, providing parents and children with the opportunity to meet and get to know the home visitor before engaging with visits. Opportunities to participate in a speech community are recognised as a major motivating factor in minority language use and maintenance (Nesteruk, 2010; Velázquez, Garrido & Millán, 2015).

Home visitors visit families with children from birth to 12 years throughout the school year from September to June spending one hour per week with each family over a period of six weeks. Families may also opt to avail of a second session of six home visits if the demand allows for this. 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. 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 engaged in a professional development course which awards them with a certification to work in the specialised area of home language support. They are employed by

Oidhreacht Chorca Dhuibhne which is a community-based Irish language organisation funded by the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (www.chg.gov.ie). When at full complement, there are four home visitors in *Corca Dhuibhne* and one home visitor working in *Uíbh Ráthach*. There were 2,575 family visits in *Corca Dhuibhne* and 828 family visits in *Uíbh Ráthach* in the period 2014-2018. Analysis reveals that an average of 16% of families per annum availed of the scheme.

The focus of home visits in *Uíbh Ráthach* is on language learning and promoting the use of Irish in the home. In *Corca Dhuibhne* home visitors tailor their support towards language enrichment or learning, as is appropriate to the family. Language planning policies in both *Corca Dhuibhne* and *Uíbh Ráthach* 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 (Comhchoiste Ghaeltacht Uíbh Ráthaigh, 2017; Oidhreacht Chorca Dhuibhne, 2018). Language planning policies in both areas aim to increase the use of Irish in the home and 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 from focus groups with parents (n=22), reported here were gathered as part of this broader evaluation. The next section of the paper provides a brief review of relevant literature pertaining to: family language policy, intergenerational transmission of minority languages, home visiting as an intervention and home visits as an initiative to support minority languages.

Review of literature

Fishman (1991, p. 20) proffers that the family is where “the bulk of language socialisation, identity socialisation, and commitment socialisation generally takes place”. Family language policy (FLP)

(Curdt-Christiansen, 2018; King, Fogle & Logan-Terry, 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 FLP 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” (p. 420). FLP therefore is complicated and multifaceted, arising out of the interactions between caregivers and children (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 (García, 2009).

Spolsky (2009) designed an analytical framework to assess FLP which comprises three interrelated components: i) ideology: parents’ beliefs and attitudes towards the language; ii) practice: the actual practice of language use in the home; and iii) management: strategies employed to enforce the particular language policy in the family. Spolsky (2019, p. 326) recently added “self-management” which he described as “the attempt of speakers to modify their own linguistic proficiency and repertoire”. Curdt-Christiansen (2018) built on these components in creating an interdisciplinary framework for FLP. As can be seen in Figure 1, linguistic ideologies, practices and management strategies are impacted on by parents’ linguistic ability and the resources available to them (Curdt-Christiansen, 2018). Families do not exist in a vacuum, and language practices in families are heavily impacted on by the sociolinguistic, socio-political, sociocultural, and socioeconomic context in which the family lives (*ibid*). External forces affect internal family use, and families’ language use may also impact on the external environment.

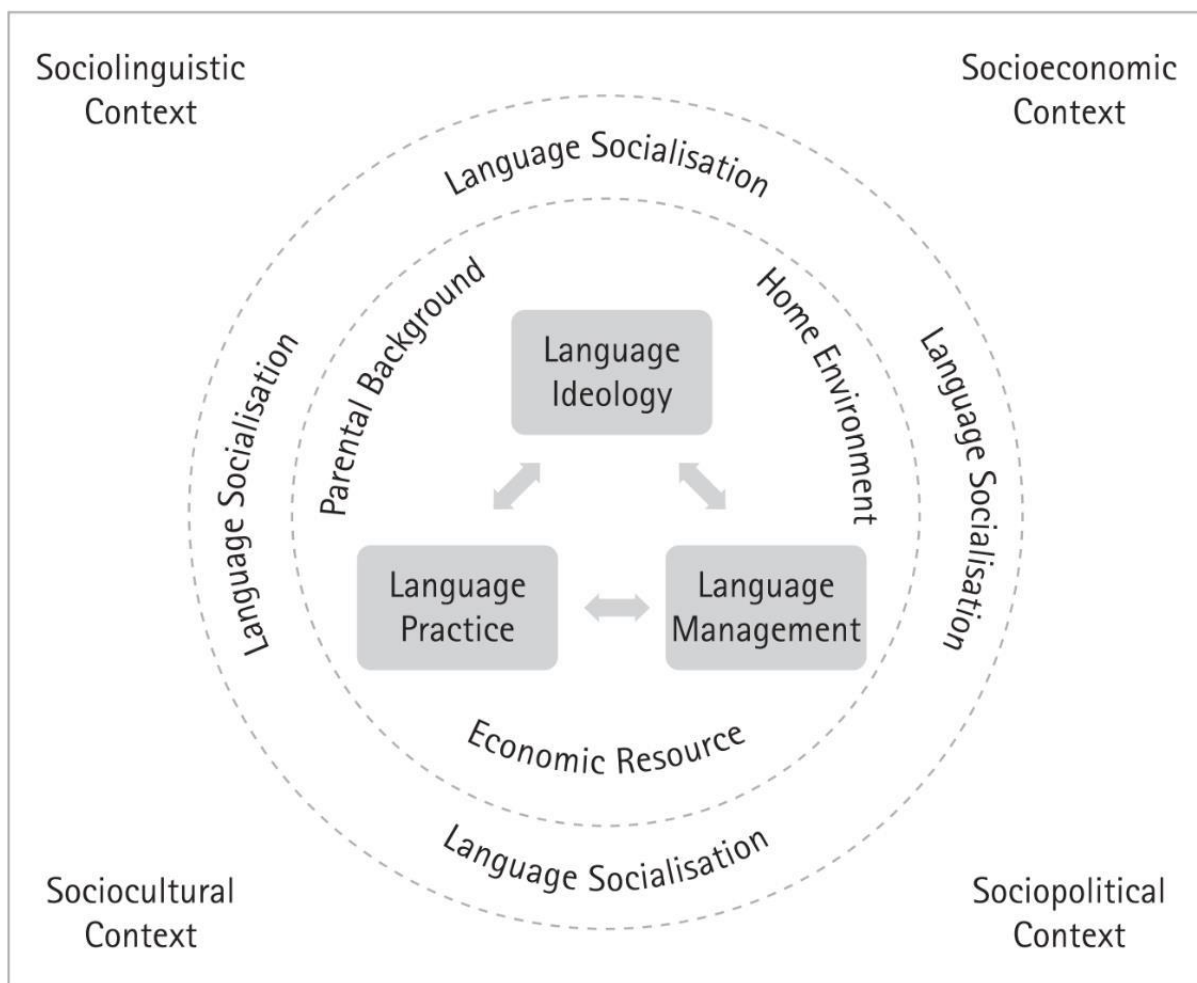


Figure 1. The Interdisciplinary framework of FLP (Curdt-Christiansen, 2018, p. 422)

We examined the *Tús Maith* and home visits scheme within this framework for FLP where a community-based intervention was seeking to influence parental linguistic ideologies, practices and management strategies in the home. 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 (Evas, Morris, & Whitmarsh, 2017). It is noteworthy that very often parents' positive attitude towards the minority language is 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. Many parents worried that speaking Irish at home could disadvantage their children in regard to their acquisition of

English and left the acquisition of Irish to the schools. 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 hIfearnáin, 2013). Research shows that achieving a high level of competency in a minority language requires maximal input in the home (De Houwer, 2009). Whether parents make a conscious decision to speak a minority language or not varies across families (Baker & Wright, 2017; De Houwer, 2009).

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, Boyce, Cook & Jump, 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.). The visits facilitate personalised and tailored support, without the inconvenience of organising travel or childcare (Sweet & Appelbaum, 2004). There is strong empirical evidence of the success of home visits in developing children's school readiness, socio-emotional development and academic achievement throughout schooling, when families received home visits over a period of 18 months (Parentchild+ n.d.). Suskind, Leffe and Graf (2016), reported 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', translated as 'growth' scheme in Wales (Edwards & Pritchard Newcombe, 2006; Irvine, Roberts, Spencer, Jones & Tranter, 2008). 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 FLP 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 & Pritchard 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.

Having considered themes relevant to FLP as well as the merits of home visits in an international context. The methodology of the current study is now presented. This is followed by an analysis of the benefits and challenges of the *Tús Maith* home visiting scheme as reported by parents (n=22).

Methodology

Holliday holds that the outcomes of research will be influenced by researcher beliefs (2015, p. 49). 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. Observations of home visits were deemed to be too intrusive as personal matters are often discussed during visits (Roggman et al., 2015). Three focus groups were organised (total number of parents = 22), two in *Corca Dhuibhne* and one in *Uíbh Ráthach*. 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. 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 two groups said they preferred using mainly English to express their views.

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, Manion & Morrison (2018, p. 532) 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. When reporting verbatim from parents, a letter is used as an identifier. No indication is given as to the particular focus group or researcher in question to protect participants' confidentiality in a small rural 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 and then into overarching themes as the analysis progressed. 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 Literature Review 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. Both benefits and challenges to the scheme emerged from the analysis of focus groups with parents which are reported in this section.

Benefits of the Home Visiting scheme

Findings show that the home visiting scheme succeeded in providing individualised targeted support to families, tailored to their individual linguistic needs and the broader linguistic context of the family (Curdt-Christiansen, 2018; Spolsky, 2009). The weak sociolinguistic background to community use of Irish in *Uíbh Ráthach* means that parents are relying on the Irish they learned at school and that the home visitor is in fact introducing them to the use of Irish at home. This involves using a more informal register, child-directed speech and basic phrases suitable for the home context. Many children attend an Irish-medium preschool in their local area from age three and acquire basic words and phrases in Irish as a second language. This is augmented by attendance at an Irish-medium primary school from age five and the home visits generally begin when they have started primary school. They are then able to benefit from home visits that develop their capacity to speak Irish in the home context.

The Irish language has higher visibility and use in *Corca Dhuibhne*, used extensively in some homes and community contexts and more sporadically in others, but nevertheless, providing exposure to the language outside the home. Many families would know about and participate in the community events provided by *Tús Maith* or attend the playgroups and Irish-medium preschools in the locality. Children's familiarity with Irish means that they can benefit from home visits before starting primary school. In keeping with (Roggman et al, 2001), it emerged that parents in both communities appreciated the convenience of visits in their own home which provided them with a unique opportunity to avail of individualised linguistic support.

FLP is impacted on by the linguistic resources available to parents (Curdt-Christiansen, 2018). The following testimonies illustrate how home visitors supported parents with different levels of competency and different linguistic practices within the home - a parent

for whom Irish was the home language (Parent H), a parent with proficiency in Irish but who did not speak Irish at home (Parent C), and a parent with little proficiency in Irish (Parent K).

Thug sé muinín domsa chomh maith [Translation: It gave me confidence that I
creidiúint go raibh an rud ceart déanta was doing the right thing (speaking Irish),
agamsa, tá jab ceart á dhéanamh agat that I am doing a good job, Parent H].
(Tuismitheoir H).

Nuair a thagann an bhean chuig an tigh [Translation: When the woman comes to
agus bíonn siad ag imirt leo leis na the house and they're playing the games,
cluichí déanaimse iarracht níos fearr, I make a better effort, you know, Parent
you know (Tuismitheoir C). C].

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 (Parent K).

It can be inferred that the home visits reinforced Parent H's linguistic ideology and practice (Curdt-Christiansen, 2018; Spolsky, 2019) of speaking Irish at home, while Parent C who was a proficient speaker of Irish was prompted to make a greater effort to use Irish at home, as a result of the home visits. Parent K was provided with linguistic input to use Irish at home, that otherwise would have been constrained by a lack of competency in Irish.

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. In *Corca Dhuibhne*, many of the 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. The participation in a wider speech community (Nesteruk, 2010; Velázquez, Garrido & Millán, 2015), sought to establish a reciprocal relationship of strengthening Irish both in the home and in the community (Smith-Christmas & Ruiséal, 2019). Home visits also foster 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), family and community exert influence on each other and factors that influence one area can also influence the other.

In many cases the balance of language input in the children's language exposure at home (Unsworth, 2016) was 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 received visits reported that they were very happy with the support and the encouragement it gave them to continue speaking Irish at home. Parent H, a native speaker of Irish, 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.

<p><i>Nuair a thagann duine isteach agus tuigeann 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 Ghaelainn ag níos mó ná agamsa agus a muintir, chun an ciorcal san a leathnú, is dócha gur tacaíocht mhór é domsa (Parent H).</i></p>	<p>[Translation: 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 (Parent, H).]</p>
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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. The home visitors were 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. This concurs Place and Hoff's (2011) view that exposure to multiple speakers, especially native speakers was an important factor in vocabulary development. Parents 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 (Parent I), and that they could continue to engage in the activities with children following the visits, as commented on by Parent C. In this way, the home visits succeeded in influencing parent and child interactions (Fogle & King, 2013), and FLP (Curd-Christiansen, 2018) to some extent.

It wasn't just a language class. She came to the house to like naturally bring it to the kids.
(Parent K)

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. (Tuismitheoir I)

Translation: 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 (Parent I).]

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. (Tuismitheoir C)

[Translation: 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. (Parent C)]

In her study of Chinese–English bilingual families in Singapore, Curdt-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 in Ireland (Department of Education and Skills, 2016) published a strategy 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 strategy includes the provision of total immersion education in Irish for children at primary level in *Gaeltacht* regions where schools opt in to 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. Some newcomer parents may not be aware of this type of provision

when they settle in *Gaeltacht* communities, but other 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 headstart 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. (Parent K)

The home visits can also lay the foundation for links between home, early years' settings and school. 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, thus building on the basic foundation laid by the home visitors.

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.

<i>Chruthaigh sé uair an chloig ina raibh orm</i>	[Translation: It created one hour that myself and
<i>agus ar dhuine fásta eile a bheith suite i</i>	another adult had to sit down with the children
<i>dteannta na leanaí seachas a bheith ag</i>	instead of scrubbing potatoes or scrubbing the
<i>scuabadh na bprátaí nó ag scuabadh an urláir</i>	floor, so we spent time together that was really
<i>so chaitheamar am le chéile a bhí ana-</i>	comfortable and that really made a difference.
<i>chompordach agus dhein sé sin an-difríocht,</i>	We're too busy with every kind of thing that's
<i>bíonn muid róghnóthach le gach saghas rud a</i>	happening these days, so it brought that in as
<i>bhíonn ar siúl so thóg sé sin isteach chomh</i>	well. (Parent G]
<i>maith. (Tuismitheoir G)</i>	

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’ (Parent K). 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. FLP is multifaceted and complex (Curdt-Christiansen, 2018; King, Fogle & Logan Terry, 2008) and the potential of home visits to impact on language ideologies, practice and use within families (Spolsky, 2019; Curdt-Christiansen, 2018) would need to be explored over a longer time period.

Many parents were very satisfied with the range of activities that took place during the visit. Those that were fortunate to have a second series of visits expressed the opinion that there needed to be greater variety in the activities. Some parents were unclear as to their role during the visits. Many participated in the activities while others continued with housework and maintaining a presence. 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 perceive 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 16% of families availing of the scheme were primarily Irish speaking. When pressed, some of those parents said they did not need visits as they already spoke Irish and were proficient speakers. This might indicate a perceived stigma attached to receiving language support visits or perhaps a perception of the home visitors as language

police rather than language support workers. Finding opportunities to influence the linguistic behaviour of all parents can be very challenging. 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 & Pritchard Newcombe, 2006).

While there is some 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) and Ní Chathail (2019) studies, we were dependent on the opinions of parents. 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 linguistic practice or behaviour 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. Extending the time period of home visits would allow for more ambitious outcomes.

Conclusion

In summary, the home visits can be seen to provide flexible, localised support for parents with a range of proficiency in Irish offering individualised targeted support for parents and children in their own home. They provided set times for use of Irish during the visits, support for increased use of Irish at home, and laid the foundation for further socialisation through the language. . We would concur with previous studies (Raikes Green, Atwater, Kisker, Constantine, & Chazan-Cohen, 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 (Spolsky, 2009; Curdt-Christiansen, 2018), for example, remains under-articulated and further exploration of the home visitors' and families' ideology would add depth to the practical steps outlined above.

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 minoritized languages such as Irish as home languages 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 would therefore be of benefit to the families involved and to the maintenance and development of the Irish language and other minoritized languages.

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