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Immersion education in the early years: a special issue

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Early years' immersion education programmes can be either monolingual or bilingual, and their objectives can range from language maintenance and/or enrichment to early second language learning, depending on the context of implementation. Here we examine some of the key issues and policy concerns relating to immersion education in the early years. Among these are difficulties associated with the term itself in certain political contexts, due to historical negative experience. Another issue discussed concerns the differing outcomes noted by studies comparing monolingual and bilingual programmes for minority language children. The importance of training in immersion methodology for early years' educators is discussed, and the need to adapt preschool pedagogical practices to the immersion context, in order to provide optimal input for young language learners. Consideration must also be given to differentiated provision in early years' immersion programmes, with adaptation to the needs of L1 speakers as well as L2 learners, and to children with language impairment. The article explores some of the challenges currently facing this sector, particularly focusing on pre-service and in-service training and professional development for practitioners, and the availability of appropriate materials in less widely used languages. Evidence of the benefits for children and their families of attending a high quality immersion preschool points to the need to review the recognition and resources accorded to this sector by parents, primary years educators and educational planners.

Keywords: immersion; early years' education; preschool; minority language; bilingual education; heritage

Introduction

This Special Issue focuses on early years' education settings which offer total or partial immersion education to children aged between about two and six years, and thus it explores an area of bilingual education that has grown significantly, both in popularity among parents and in research interest in recent years. Immersion education shows wide variation with regard to the policies, programmes and implementation practices found throughout the world, reflecting the different needs of multilingual countries, as well as provision for migrant groups (Tedick, Christian, and Fortune 2011; Baker 2011; García 2009). Similar levels of variety are evident in immersion in the early years: in different countries these settings can range from day-care settings to preschool to kindergarten provision, showing significant differences in terms of their philosophical approach to early years' education and to the type and intensity of immersion implemented. What

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they share is that they offer preschool children a model of care and early education that brings with it a particular focus on language maintenance and/or enrichment.

Immersion in the early years encompasses settings which operate through minority and/or majority language(s), and include both monolingual and dual-language immersion (see discussion in Hickey 2013a). *Monolingual early immersion models* offer early years' experience through a single language, which may be the second language (L2) of the majority attending, with the aim of achieving additive bilingualism; alternatively, a minority language may be used to support the mother tongue of at least some of the children attending, to support/enrich that language before exposure to the majority/community language. *Dual-language immersion preschooling* exposes young children to two languages in their early years' setting. One language may be the first language (L1) of some or all of the children attending, and the other may be the dominant language of the wider community, with the aim of supporting the mother tongue of the non-dominant group and developing bilingual competence (Baker 2011).

Early years' immersion as high-quality preschooling

Parents may opt for immersion preschooling based on their belief that there are social, cultural or economic benefits in exposing their child early to learning a language. Some parents may view early years' immersion as a vital preparatory step towards the model of immersion primary education they have already chosen for their child. Other parents may view early years' immersion as a relatively low risk trial of immersion (see Hickey 1999), to see how their child fares in this setting at a time that they see as relatively unacademic. What parents may share is a common belief that young children 'pick up' or absorb languages effortlessly, even though the research evidence points to advantages from starting young for acquiring a native-like accent in the L2, rather than for speed of acquisition per se (see Singleton and Ryan 2004). Young children are naturally motivated to take part in playful activities and are less self-conscious about errors than older learners. However, beliefs about the naturalness of young children's language learning may lead to inflated expectations among parents regarding their children's progress in the early years, and also to a tendency to undervalue the professionalism of the sector, seeing it as less demanding than formal education.

A common factor in parents' decision-making is likely to be an awareness that quality preschool education has been shown to promote children's social and intellectual development. An extensive research literature evaluating different models of early years' education (e.g. Early et al. 2007; Jalongo et al. 2004) points to some commonalities in identifying high-quality early years' provision, such as appropriate philosophies and goals; a developmentally appropriate pedagogy and curriculum for children's physical, social, emotional and intellectual development, with regular evaluation/review of that curriculum; well-trained teachers working under knowledgeable supervision; small groups with a low pupil-teacher ratio; a central role for play and talk; and respect for, and meaningful participation by, parents as active educational partners. Haskins and Rouse (2005) point to a range of studies of programmes such as Head Start that show that the preschool years offer a vital opportunity to bridge, or at least narrow, the achievement gap that opens up between advantaged and disadvantaged children, in terms of building firm foundational skills that improve school readiness. The underlying philosophy of preschooling provided in different countries to children at slightly different ages can vary from a play-based or child-centred one, where teachers or leaders facilitate play to foster socialisation and cognitive development through experiential learning; to settings with a

didactic approach, where teachers lead children in a more structured way through planned activities that focus on early skills such as distinguishing shapes and colours, and learning number concepts and letters and sounds. A feature common to all approaches is the aim to develop strong foundations that facilitate children's transition to kindergarten and primary school, through interaction with teachers who strive to stimulate children's intellectual curiosity and support their developing social skills.

Preschool curricula have traditionally been more child-centred and less 'content-heavy' than primary school curricula. A number of reviews of immersion (e.g. Genesee and Lindholm-Leary 2013; Lyster and Genesee 2013; Baker 2011; Genesee 2006) have noted the non-native-like L2 grammar outcomes of immersion, and commented on the benefits of incorporating 'language-rich, discourse-rich' form-focused instruction in immersion pedagogy at the primary level. It is just such language-rich instruction that exemplifies high-quality early years' education at its best, where language instruction is embedded in meaningful tasks. However, there is currently some evidence of growing formalisation of preschool curricula in some countries (Hickey 2013b), where mother-tongue preschool learning objectives are being imposed unadapted onto immersion preschools, in a way that could promote greater emphasis on content in early years' immersion also. This will be discussed in relation to some of the articles in this issue.

Immersion in the early years: different models

The monolingual model of early years' immersion can be divided into two types of programmes. One type offers mother-tongue linguistic support to minority language children to develop their mother-tongue skills, in order to prevent attrition of that language under threat from a dominant majority language (see Genesee et al. 2006) and to provide a firm foundation in their L1 as a basis for additive bilingualism. MacKenzie's (2009) research among Indian tribal groups has demonstrated that when preschool education supports the L1 of minority/threatened language children, they achieve better academic results and have a lower risk of dropout.

The second type of monolingual early immersion programme exposes children whose L1 is secure to L2 as the medium of interaction in preschool, with the aim of adding it to their (unthreatened) L1. In such programmes, the target language may either be a dominant or high-status language, or a local heritage language, but in either case it is not considered a threat to the children's mother tongue. Instead, parents see these immersion settings as offering an opportunity to develop early bilingual competence in their children.

In bilingual models of early years' immersion, children are exposed to two languages, one of which may be the native language of some or all of the children, and the other the dominant language of the wider community. Spanish–English dual immersion programmes in the US are an example where children receive part of their instruction through each language. These programmes aim to prevent attrition of the non-dominant language and acquisition of the dominant one, so that children develop bilingual competence. Such bilingual early education may be part of a bilingual education programme that continues through elementary school and beyond, or it may be transitional, in preparation for moving them to mainstream schools. Typically, dual and two-way immersion programmes plan when each language is used, and they apportion time to activities in each language. Of critical theoretical as well as practical importance is the research finding that challenges the popular assumption that more time spent learning

through English benefits L2 English learners (for example Thomas and Collier 2002 and Barnett et al. 2007).

The issue of intergroup relations is relevant to the dual-language model and to other approaches in preschool settings in areas of conflict, such as the *Hand in Hand* programme in Israel (Amara et al. 2009), where Jewish and Arab children are integrated in each class, with both an Arabic-speaking and a Hebrew-speaking teacher who engage in team teaching. As well as aiming to produce proficiency in both languages among the pupils, this programme also attempts to increase tolerance for cultural diversity before children become strongly affected by negative views in their society. The contribution of early years' immersion to sociocultural cohesion, and to increasing intergroup interaction in later educational provision, is not a central feature of the articles in this Special Issue, but merits further consideration on its own.

A particular feature of immersion education in the early years is that it has played an important role in language revitalisation efforts. A practical reason for this is that it is easier for parents and language activists to establish a preschool that is offering an appropriate curriculum through their minority/non-dominant language, than to get approval for establishing a primary school teaching through the language. In addition to supporting children's acquisition of the target language, these preschools also raise the status of the minority language in the local community and play a part in mobilising other language maintenance efforts, such as conversation groups for parents, and the establishment of schools teaching through the language. Examples of contexts where preschool immersion education has figured prominently in the growth of bilingual educational provision in minority languages include Basque *Haur hezkuntza* (Cenoz 2008), Maori's *Kohanga Reo* ('language nests') in Aotearoa/New Zealand (King 2001) and Welsh *cylchoedd meithrin* in Wales (Jones and Martin-Jones 2004). Another very important contribution such programmes make is to facilitate the formation of peer-group networks through the minority language, which helps to prevent marginalisation at the level of the individual child (Gregerson et al. 2009; Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke 2000) and counteract language shift at a generational level. This model is applied worldwide, in the teaching of Catalan, Frisian, Scots Gaelic and Irish, to name but a few other examples.

Examining immersion in the early years: this volume

This issue presents research contributions which explore the implementation of different models of early years' immersion programmes in a number of different national contexts, the development of policy and provision for these programmes and their pedagogical process and outcomes. It includes research on outcomes and effective practice in early years' immersion from some contexts that are relatively less widely known outside of their own national sphere, and aims thereby to promote wider dissemination of such research. Given the complexity of provision internationally, the selection of papers included makes no claim to represent the worldwide variety in immersion in the early years, but offers instead a detailed consideration of the topic from different viewpoints, using a range of quantitative and qualitative methods, looking specifically at the North American and European contexts of Belgium, Canada, Finland, USA and Wales. The issues and concerns of these individual contributions are discussed here in relation to a number of specific issues or themes of wider relevance to research on immersion in the early years.

Comparing outcomes from different models of immersion

The first article by Kathryn Lindholm-Leary examines the L1 (Spanish) and L2 (English) language development of Spanish-speaking low-income children in the US who were attending either bilingual (Spanish–English) or monolingual (English) preschool and kindergarten. The children showed low mother-tongue proficiency on entry to these programmes, and the study compares the differences in outcome for their language skills if they attended an early dual-language or a monolingual English preschool programme. The study conducted detailed comparisons, assessing performance on a variety of language measures along with language and literacy background information. Lindholm-Leary shows that the children in both programmes made progress during the course of the preschool and kindergarten years, but by the time they entered Grade 1, the children in the bilingual programme performed significantly better in Spanish than the children in the English-only programme, while there were no differences between the groups with respect to their English language skills, despite differences in their exposure to English. This study provides empirical support for the view that Spanish-speaking children from low socioeconomic status (SES) families in the US benefit from L1 maintenance and enrichment, and are not disadvantaged in their L2 English progress compared to peers in monolingual English programmes. It therefore contributes significantly to our knowledge of language outcomes in children who have poor support for developing the minority language at home, and evaluates the effect on them of different models of early years' immersion.

The term 'immersion' and historical experience of immersion

While this Special Issue uses the term 'immersion', some articles point to current or historical concern with either the term or the approach. Cormier, Bourque and Jolicoeur discuss an educational intervention in Canada, a country internationally known for its leadership in immersion education. However, they point out that the term 'immersion' carries some historical baggage for the Francophone minorities in Canada. French immersion education was initially provided to the French-speaking minorities in some of the Anglophone provinces by the English language schoolboards in the 60s and 70s, in lieu of fully fledged French-medium schooling under Francophone control. Following changes in legislation and provision for the Francophone minorities in 1982, French-medium schools were established, reserved for those judged to be right-holders on the basis on having Francophone parentage. The term 'French immersion' is used in Canada to refer only to French as L2 immersion programmes in the Anglophone system, in order to distinguish them from French-medium schools in the francophone school system. The term preferred for discussing the latter type of Canadian schools refers to their language revitalization role as '(re)francization' programmes.

Marianne Cormier, Jimmy Bourque and Manon Jolicoeur's paper examines the implementation and outcomes of four different types of such early (re)francization programmes among French Arcadians. These are located in schools which aim to revitalise and preserve the endangered language heritage of the Francophone minorities, where some children arrive with limited or no French. Cormier et al. examine types of interventions aimed at this group of children, gathering qualitative data from teacher focus groups and interviews, and showing interesting differences in the perceptions of classroom teachers and language support teachers regarding the models of language support offered to English-dominant children in nine schools. They also examine the outcomes of these different models in terms of assessments of the children's progress in

French, showing preliminary results that one model appears to produce more effective learning. While these findings will need to be explored in further research, this study provides a wealth of issues for consideration with regard to provision for English-dominant children acquiring French in schools for the Francophone minorities in Canada. While relatively little research has hitherto examined the language learning of these pupils at this young age in Canada, this situation also has similarities with other contexts, such as those parts of Ireland and Wales where the minority heritage language is the language of the local community, but where intergenerational shifts in family language transmission can produce situations where some families are no longer transmitting the minority language used in that community's schools. Thus, this issue has important socio-political ramifications for minority language maintenance not only in Canada, but also more generally for countries which provide schooling through the medium of endangered minority languages.

The following paper also looks at how history impacts on current experience of immersion, and examines the reasons why official policies regarding immersion education in Belgium have been cautious. Aafke Buyl and Alex Housen outline the historical and political status of bilingual education initiatives in Belgium, and discuss the negative attitudes towards immersion models that stem from previous experience of dual-medium classes for Dutch-speaking children in the Brussels area. These were known as 'transmutation classes', and for a period of about 35 years up to 1915 it is argued (see Van de Craen 2002) that they assisted a language shift from Dutch to French, leading to antagonism among the Dutch-speaking community in particular towards early bilingual education. This negative view was not restricted to Dutch speakers in Belgium, since French speakers had earlier been opposed to French-Dutch education, initially on the grounds that Dutch was then seen as having lower social status, and in more recent times because of concern about the rise of Flemish nationalism and fears of fragmentation. Arising from this complex socio-political history, bilingual education in the national languages remains constrained by official policies in Belgium.

Buyl and Housen's article examines early years' immersion in a non-national language that has acquired international dominance, English. Parents worldwide recognise the educational and economic benefits of proficiency in English, and many see the preschool years as the ideal time for their children to begin learning it. Parent-and/or state-led growth in monolingual majority-language preschooling is growing (de Mejía 2002) and is evident in the expansion of English immersion in countries such as Croatia, Italy, Hungary and Israel (see Nikolov 2010) and China (Feng and Sunuodula 2009). The EU policy of advocating that citizens speak 'mother tongue plus two' has contributed to the high rates of English learning in mainland Europe, and Ruiz de Zarobe (2013) notes that English is now learned by 90% of European students during compulsory formal education. Buyl and Housen discuss current practices and review research on the outcomes of immersion provision in the Belgian context, and examine the challenges of developing successful English immersion preschool education there. They present data on language progress among children attending a preschool English immersion programme for Francophone speakers in Wallonia, and offer valuable comparisons of those outcomes with the results from English immersion preschools collected in Germany and Sweden as part of the wider ELIAS study (see Kersten et al. 2010). While there were differences in the age at which immersion began and the length of exposure to L2 between the Belgian and the other English-medium preschools studied, the results revealed no cost to the L1 language abilities (French) of the Wallonian children, and their progress in English as an L2 was not significantly lower than the mean

of the comparison groups. The authors discuss these results in relation to issues such as amount of exposure to English outside of the immersion context and age at the start of immersion.

Immersion in the early years: input and output

Siv Björklund, Karita Mård-Miettinen and Marjo Savijärvi also examine a context of early years' monolingual immersion in another high-status language, in this case Swedish. While Swedish has a special status in Finland, the majority of children learn it in the educational system, which has attempted in recent years to improve Swedish outcomes. Finland offers comprehensive early years' provision, outlined by the authors, who examine the Swedish immersion environment at preschool and kindergarten level as contexts for early L2 learning and teaching. They offer an informative synthesis of Finnish research studies on early years' Swedish immersion, reviewing a number of quantitative and qualitative research studies which have not previously been available to English speakers. Björklund, Mård-Miettinen and Savijärvi then present a fine-grained analysis of child and teacher interaction in preschool Swedish immersion settings. This study uses an interactional approach to analyse the use of both L1 and L2 among immersion children in dialogue sequences with an educator or peers, in order to examine aspects of children's language learning. Here, the focus is on learning in interaction (see Pekarek Doehler 2010), highlighting strategies used by young children as they learn Swedish in everyday interaction. The authors consider a number of interactions where the children take up language items from input and discuss them among themselves in order to extract meaning cooperatively, or reflect on form.

Björklund et al.'s analysis highlights the importance of training and preparation in order to support high-quality teacher input in the target language throughout the totality of contact time with children, regardless of whether the activity is explicitly didactic or routine caretaking. The authors discuss the need to adapt early years' pedagogy to provide the ideal input to children, so that teachers are prepared to verbalise actions or feelings that are relevant to what the young child is focused on in the immersion environment. In this way, the teacher provides meaningful L2 input to the child in a maximally comprehensible way. The bilingual dialogues presented by Björklund, Mård-Miettinen and Savijärvi also show that very young children in monolingual immersion settings can use their L1 as a common resource in their L2 learning.

A different consideration regarding input is the topic of the article by Tina Hickey, Gwyn Lewis and Colin Baker, which considers adult input in early years' classes where L2 learners of the target language are grouped together with L1 speakers. They note that such mixing arises in many endangered language early years' immersion contexts, because of the difficulty of making separate provision for L1 children when their minority group dwindles, and that management of such diverse proficiency is relevant to a number of language contexts. While other research in this area has noted the benefits for L2 learners of interacting with native speaker peers (e.g. Keck et al. 2006, Martin-Beltrán 2010), there is a particular need to explore mixed L1 and L2 speaker groups where the target language is threatened. Hickey et al. examine data gathered from educators in Welsh-medium preschools (*cylchoedd meithrin* or preschool nursery groups). Using both quantitative and qualitative data, they explore the attitudes and language strategies reported with regard to L1 Welsh children and L2 learners. The authors argue that some of these educators' use of, and attitudes towards, English translations point to a need to review training in immersion methodology for those with mixed groups, and to raise

awareness of the need to offer differentiated teaching to Welsh L1 speakers and Welsh L2 learners. There is ongoing discussion of the role of the mother tongue in L2 learning classrooms (e.g. Cummins 2007), but in this context it is argued (and see discussion in Turnbull 2001) that these findings point to a need to examine the quality of teacher input offered to mixed groups of L1 and L2 children, and consider the wider impact of educator concerns that adherence to Welsh only in input could be too difficult for such young L2 learners. Hickey, Lewis and Baker discuss the need for quality ongoing training and support for immersion educators in immersion pedagogy, including a more differentiated approach to diverse needs. They also highlight the resonances between their findings and those of studies in other minority language settings such as Ireland, French Ontario and the Basque country.

In the following article, Gabriela Simon-Cerejido and Vera Gutiérrez-Clellen discuss another group who require differentiation, and who are likely to be present in many early years' immersion settings: children with a language disability. The children they focus on are an underresearched group, dual-language learners with language disabilities in early years' two-way immersion settings in the US. They note that most evaluations of such settings are of typically developing children, and that there is growing concern about how to identify and provide for children with language impairment among children from minority language backgrounds who show limited L1 development on entry to preschool. They examine the effect of delivering an intervention which is aimed at children with language impairment, the Vocabulary, Oral Language, and Academic Readiness (VOLAR) programme, where this is delivered within the dual-language preschool curriculum by early years' teachers (rather than special needs' teachers) who have received relatively brief training in the programme. Simon-Cerejido and Gutiérrez-Clellen compare data from a sample of children with and without language impairments receiving the programme and controls receiving the usual preschool curriculum, and show that the children with language impairment in the VOLAR programme made more gains than those in the control groups. These findings show that effective language intervention can be provided in a dual-language immersion setting, by classroom teachers who are offered training in the intervention programme. The study also has implications regarding the potential use of this intervention in other types of bilingual preschools where children with language impairments are included in mainstream classes.

Future needs of this sector

The papers included here highlight some of the challenges facing this sector. One of the central issues, noted by several authors, centres on teacher education and ongoing support for educators in preschool immersion. Fortune, Tedick, and Walker (2008) noted that teacher preparation is a challenge for the field of immersion in general, but this is true *a fortiori* for early years' immersion, where educators must deliver high-quality early years' immersion, often through the medium of L2 for some or all of the children, and spanning a wide range of pupil needs. Slapac and Dorner (2013) explored the influence of an array of factors such as the political context, policies and curricula (or lack thereof), and teachers' prior experiences on their classroom management in a French immersion Kindergarten in Canada. Clearly, the work of early years' immersion educators is highly specialised, demanding strong foundations in child development and early years' pedagogical approaches, work planning and organisation, and strong empathy with young children, as well as the obvious, but not always available, fluency in the target language. However, moves in recent years to require preschool teachers in preschool programmes in the US to

have at least a Bachelor's degree, preferably in early childhood education, have been questioned by Early et al. (2007), who looked at the impact of teacher qualifications on classroom quality and children's academic outcomes at four years of age. The findings indicated that a focus only on increasing preschool educators' academic qualifications is insufficient to guarantee improvements in preschool classroom quality or academic gains. They concluded that raising the effectiveness of early childhood education requires a broad range of professional development activities and supports that target improving teachers' interactions with children.

In-service as well as preservice training and mentoring has been shown to be both effective and desired by these educators (e.g. Hickey 1997, 2007). Simon-Cereijido and Gutiérrez-Clellen in this issue showed the gains made by children with language impairments in the classes of preschool educators given specialist in-service training and ongoing support to deliver the VOLAR intervention. This is in no way intended to underestimate the value of sound academic preservice preparation, but rather to highlight the value of combining this with high-quality and systematic ongoing training delivered by effective and experienced practitioners, allowing them to share their expertise. Such training also needs to be accompanied by the development of adequate career structures where these are currently lacking, to promote better retention of the most effective and experienced practitioners. A focus on preservice academic qualifications for new staff without provision for ongoing specialist training is insufficient. Just as important, however, is the setting up of career development structures and ensuring appropriate remuneration, as the lack of these carries the cost in many contexts of losing the most effective and experienced practitioners in mid-career.

A related issue concerns teachers' beliefs about L2 teaching and learning. Hickey, Lewis and Baker show the impact on immersion methodology of Welsh preschool educators' views regarding the burden of using the target language with young children. Similarly, Hüttner, Dalton-Puffer and Smit (2013) explore the effect of teachers' 'lay theories' about the nature of language use and language learning on their teaching in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) programmes, and conclude that change cannot be implemented successfully without addressing these pre-existing beliefs. This is particularly relevant where an apparent conflict arises between what educators see as developmentally appropriate or desirable for a child or group, and the language requirements of the programme. Raising awareness of such issues is a first step, and needs to be followed by (live or videoed) observation of the classrooms of effective practitioners, in order to challenge such lay beliefs where they conflict with, or at least do not support, the immersion methodology.

Increasing recognition of the need for appropriate curricula for early years' education also presents early immersion with a challenge, if policy makers require the immersion preschool to do everything expected of mother-tongue preschools, and in the same way, but with the target language pasted on top. Implementation of such curricula must allow for adaptation to the immersion setting, so that educators can integrate appropriate planning for the language learning that is central to every activity and interaction, as noted in Björklund et al. in this issue. Every routine and every learning activity of the early years' curriculum offers valuable language learning opportunities when suitably adapted. That adaptation includes appropriate input married with a high level of hands-on experience for children, with teachers using gesture, mime and props, as well as simplification and repetition in order to facilitate comprehension and take-up (Edelenbos, Johnstone, and Kubanek 2006).

The provision of developmentally appropriate activities and learning in early years' immersion is highly demanding in requiring differentiation for the range of needs in each group. As is clear in the articles presented here, teachers cannot apply a 'one size fits all' approach to this task, but must be flexible in work planning in order to adapt to different language proficiency levels, as well as differences in general ability in different classrooms. Children at higher levels of proficiency need enriched input and vocabulary development through more challenging stories and role-play tasks, and teachers need training and sensitivity in order to provide children with input that is appropriate to their different levels of competence, while simultaneously supporting the other aspects of their development. Effective support for the target language, particularly where that is a threatened language, requires classroom management and organisation to promote its use between peers as well as in teacher–pupil interactions, in order to support the establishment of networks of target language use. The future survival of some minority languages may depend on the establishment of such networks among the preschoolers of today.

While some of the articles here reflect language contexts where appropriate resources for language teaching and assessment are available for those teaching children in early years' immersion, others show the struggle to provide resources in minority languages, requiring ad hoc translation of teaching materials and tests. Fortune and Menke (2010) note that accessing resources and interventions for children with special needs is a particular challenge in the immersion sector in general. Early years' immersion providers in minority languages would benefit from exploring the excellent materials already available for some languages, in order to reduce the costs of developing similar resources and limit the current situation of practitioners in different contexts reinventing quite similar wheels. An exploration of the benefits of involving experienced early years' immersion practitioners in adapting to their particular minority languages some of the resources discussed here by Lindholm-Leary and Simon-Cerejido and Gutiérrez-Clellen could make a significant contribution to the educational experience of speakers of those languages.

Finally, parents interacting with preschool provision are at a crucial juncture in their children's educational experience, and it is vital that the preschool immersion programme include a consideration of ways in which they can be helped to develop home practices and activities that support their children's oral and preliteracy skills. Parents who do not speak the target language of the immersion programme may feel marginalised and unable to offer support for the child's learning (Kavanagh and Hickey 2013), but effective preschool immersion programmes can play a valuable role in helping them to develop the practices of involved parents, establishing language and literacy-rich homes that effectively support their children's learning after the transition to primary years' immersion. Parents are likely to continue to show interest in early years' immersion as a relatively low-cost and low-risk method of initiating their children's L2 learning, or supporting their children's minority L1. However, their possible folklinguistic beliefs about the ease with which young children learn languages need to be addressed in order to maximise their involvement as effective educational partners in their children's language learning and general education.

Conclusion

The most significant challenge for the future of this sector centres on training *and retaining* effective and experienced educators with qualifications in early years' education as well as access to effective ongoing training in immersion methodology, accompanied

by fluency in the target language and the empathy and personal qualities required for working successfully with very young children. While this challenge is to some extent shared with primary years' immersion, there are particularities of the early years' context that pose additional problems in those countries where preschool educators receive lower pay than primary level teachers and have limited career development options. Another recurrent problem in immersion at different levels is of course the difficulty of accessing appropriate materials for early years' education in often underresourced minority languages. Despite these problems, early years' immersion is an educational sector that offers significant educational benefit to the children attending and personal satisfaction to the professionals engaged with it. Only a fuller appreciation among other educators, parents and educational planners of the value of providing high-quality, bilingual early education, in its varied models and formats, and in an age-appropriate way, will lead to the level of recognition and investment that this sector needs to develop to its full potential.

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