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Migrant parents' school involvement: extent, barriers and opportunities

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ABSTRACT

Background: Parental involvement in children's education is widely recognised as positively associated with students' academic achievement. However, migrant parents often face specific barriers to engaging with their children's education, including language and cultural obstacles. This paper examines the participation of migrant parents in schools in Ireland, drawing on data from a multi-country research project, IMMERSE Horizon 2020.

Purpose: The research aimed to explore the extent and nature of migrant parents' involvement in their children's education in Ireland and to identify key barriers to their participation compared to non-migrant parents. Specific objectives were: 1) to investigate the availability of channels for parental involvement in schools; 2) to explore parental involvement in school activities; and 3) to examine the influence of parental migrant status.

Methods: Quantitative data was collected through surveys administered to parents and school principals in Ireland. The data examined parental involvement in both school-based and home-based activities, including attendance at parent-teacher meetings, involvement in homework support, volunteering, and participation in school decision-making. The study also investigated whether schools adapted their communication and involvement strategies to meet the language and cultural needs of migrant parents.

Findings: The findings reveal a high level of parental involvement overall, with most parents attending parent-teacher meetings. However, fewer migrant parents reported taking part in parent-teacher meetings and information sessions compared to those parents born in Ireland. Language barriers emerged as a potential factor limiting parental involvement. Migrant parents had significantly lower odds of attending information sessions, and significantly higher odds of experiencing barriers due to language difficulties. Parental educational attainment was also a significant factor influencing the level of involvement.

Conclusion: The research highlights persistent inequalities in parental involvement among migrant families in Ireland. It underscores the importance of schools adopting more inclusive and culturally responsive strategies to facilitate the active participation of all parents, particularly those from migrant backgrounds.

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Introduction

According to O'Toole, Kiely, and McGillicuddy (2019), the importance of parental involvement in education is so well established that it is considered one of the most universally accepted principles of effective educational practice. Benefits include fewer behavioural issues among pupils, better attendance, higher achievement, improved social skills, and stronger feelings of self-worth. Additionally, parental involvement helps build suitable school environments for children to thrive in and cultivates good relations between teachers and parents (Oranga, Matere, and Nyakundi 2023). Wilder (2013), synthesising results of nine meta-analyses, found that the relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement was positive, regardless of the definition of parental involvement or the measure of achievement. However, Tan, Lyu, and Peng (2019), in a meta-analysis of 98 studies published between 2000 and 2017, found that some benefits of parental involvement were stratified according to familial socio-economic status, particularly in relation to students' academic achievement. Furthermore, levels of involvement and participation varied considerably depending on parents' social and economic resources (Schmid and Garrels 2021).

The concept of 'parental involvement' can be interpreted in different ways; as Antony-Newman's (2018) synthesis of studies on parental involvement found, it was defined and understood differently across 40 international literature sources. The most common classification is provided by Epstein et al. (2019), combining psychological, educational and sociological perspectives on the cooperation between families, schools, and local communities. Epstein distinguishes six types of parental involvement – *parenting; communicating; volunteering; learning at home; decision-making; and collaborating with the community*. Hill and Tyson (2009) state that, at one end of the spectrum, parents' involvement in education can be all-encompassing, either through homeschooling – spanning in person and digital modalities – or through a wide range of school-focused activities such as participating in school governance or classroom volunteering (Hill, 309).

Migrant parents face unique challenges in being involved in their children's education, including language barriers and unfamiliarity with the host country's school system (Antony-Newman 2018; Yakhnich 2015). Limited host country language proficiency can hinder communication with teachers and participation in school activities, leading to reduced involvement (Arias and Morillo-Campbell 2008; Martin et al. 2023; Shin 2009). Additionally, the absence of social networks and knowledge about school policies can complicate migrant parents' ability to advocate for their children (Doucet 2011). Yet, migrant parents' involvement is critical to their children's educational participation and success. A study on recently resettled refugees in the United States of America (USA) highlighted the long-term benefits of parent-teacher involvement. These benefits included empowering parents and teachers to value education, leading to higher graduation rates, increased college enrolment, and better career prospects (Chipalo 2024, 455). Crul and Schneider (2010) also found that, when parents were integrated into the school community, migrant children's outcomes were often enhanced. Barger et al. (2019) stress the importance of future research focusing on the experiences of families from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, especially immigrant families.

This paper examines the self-reported views of migrant parents in Ireland, where the perspectives of non-Irish parents are largely underrepresented in the literature

(O'Toole, Kiely, and McGillicuddy 2019). It also incorporates data from school principals. The authors utilised a dataset from a larger research project called IMMERSE (Integration Mapping of Refugee and Migrant Children in Schools and Other Experiential Environments). This was a multi-country research initiative funded by the European Union (EU) under the Horizon 2020 framework, which included quantitative self-report data from migrant and non-migrant parents and other educational stakeholders across the following countries: Belgium, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy and Spain. This paper presents the first quantitative analysis of data from this project on parents and principals in Ireland. It aims to enhance understanding of migrant parents' experiences of involvement in their children's schools, contributing to the existing research on parental involvement and home-school relations. Throughout the article, we use the term 'parents' to encompass not only biological parents but also guardians and other primary caregivers of children. We focus specifically on school-based parental *involvement* – defined as parents' participation in school-related activities via meeting attendance, volunteering, or involvement in school decision-making. This can be distinguished from the broader concept of parental *engagement*, which also includes home-based involvement as outlined in Epstein's framework (Epstein et al. 2019).

Background

Migrant parents' involvement

Antony-Newman (2018), in a systematic synthesis of 40 qualitative and quantitative studies on parental involvement among immigrant parents in North America, Europe, Asia, and Australia, demonstrated that immigrant parents face unique challenges to involvement in their child's education, due to language barriers and lack of familiarity with the educational system of the host country. Mantovani and Gasperoni (2018) drawing on data from the 2015 edition of PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), and its parent questionnaire, showed that immigrant-origin parents of 15-year-old students were more likely to face a set of barriers to involvement with teachers and schools, in both France and Italy, than parents of non-immigrant origin. Barger et al. (2019) found that immigrant families 'often have a deep interest in their children's education, but may experience multiple barriers to being involved, ranging from culture and language barriers in interacting with school personnel to racism and feeling less welcome in the schools' (873). These challenges are discussed in a little more detail below.

Language barriers can be a key obstacle to parental involvement in their children's education (Antony-Newman 2018). Arias and Morillo-Campbell (2008) note that a lack of capacity to understand and communicate in English may limit a parent's involvement in education and participation in their children's school. Where immigrant parents do not possess considerable English competency or have confidence in their English proficiency, they may be less active or involved in their children's education, visiting their children's school less frequently or interacting less with teachers because of fears related to their English proficiency (Martin et al. 2023; Shin 2009). Furthermore, an absence of language support in schools can prevent many immigrant parents from participating and helping their children to navigate the system better (Sohn and Wang 2006).

A lack of familiarity with the host country school system can also be a key barrier to parental involvement. Having acquired their own education abroad, in a different educational context, immigrant parents often know little about school rules and policies related to grades, guidance, or counselling, for example, in the new country (Yakhnich 2015). Parents are crucial advocates for their children when it comes to important choices, such as which school to attend, or in negotiating school decisions about ability setting or streaming. However, they are often attempting to play this role without the benefit of social networks, which have been disrupted by the migration process, or sufficient knowledge of the host country's educational system.

Factors enabling involvement

Research has demonstrated that the experience of involvement is not the same for all migrant parents, and that certain factors support greater involvement for some. For example, parents with professional status tend to have larger networks, which comprise not only fellow immigrant parents from the same country, but also members of the majority population, who have come through the host school system themselves (Klein 2008). This creates a higher level of 'social capital' for these parents, which supports their involvement. In a qualitative Australian study of migrant Muslim Iraqi mothers, for example, having fluency in the dominant language of the host country, and having economic resources, were identified as key enablers. These factors tended to enhance social contacts with non-immigrant, middle-class parents whose parental involvement tended to align with school expectations (Jamal al-Deen and Windle 2015). Jung and Zhang (2016) used data on immigrant parents and school-age children in the USA from the New Immigrant Survey to examine immigrant families from diverse backgrounds. The data revealed that parents' English proficiency and involvement in school education were directly related to children's academic achievement, cognitive development, and English language ability, and indirectly related to children's educational aspirations. At the school and teacher level, support for parental involvement often relies on teacher-initiated activities, which require time and resources. One Norwegian study (Melnikova 2022) highlights that schools may have limited capacity to develop non-crisis communication with families, particularly when parents do not actively assert their rights, as is often the case for many migrant families.

Current responses and interventions

Current responses and interventions in schools often reflect traditional conceptualisations of parental involvement, as described by Jung and Zhang (2016). These include that parents should engage with their children in learning activities, provide academic instruction, organise outside-of-school educational experiences, and participate in school processes. Antony-Newman (2018) notes that educators and migrant parents tend to have somewhat different perspectives on what parental involvement should encompass, with educators valuing parents' involvement in school-based activities (for example, volunteering, attending parent-teacher conferences, or serving on parent councils), and migrant parents often confining their role to the home environment (for example, setting expectations,

monitoring their child's progress, helping with homework, or discussing school with their children). While educators may indeed support parents' home-based contributions, these forms of involvement are often less visible to schools and therefore may not be as readily acknowledged as forms of meaningful involvement (Antony-Newman 2018). Additionally, as migrant parents may have different cultural and educational backgrounds, with distinctive expectations, these do not always correspond with those of educators. For example, for some migrant groups, getting involved in school is viewed as interfering with the work of teachers (Antony-Newman 2018).

This demonstrates the importance of schools recognising diverse forms of parental involvement and adapting their processes accordingly to better integrate migrant parents into the life of the school. Poza, Brooks, and Valdés (2014), for example, recommend that schools should encourage parents to ask questions about school processes, attend supportive events, and should consider adjusting children's educational trajectories to improve their outcomes (for example, by requesting changes to a child's programme, classroom, or academic track, or by seeking alternatives by enrolling their children in different schools or districts to better meet their needs) Ladky and Stagg Peterson (2008) found examples in Canada of successful language support practices, which included: the translation of messages sent home; an emphasis on students' first languages; and homework modification for linguistically diverse learners. All these practices helped parents learn more about their children's schools. Hornby and Lafaele (2011), drawing on Koki and Lee's (1998) findings, contend that, in contrast, parental involvement activities and programmes which are not culturally inclusive can lack effectiveness or impact. For example, parental involvement programmes in New Zealand often failed to engage Pacific Islander parents effectively because they overlooked cultural factors such as the importance of community and church leaders in bridging school-family relationships, or the need to build on parents' cultural strengths.

Principals and school leaders play a crucial role in promoting parental involvement through culturally responsive and inclusive policies (Melnikova 2022; Rissanen 2019). It is important that they implement comprehensive programmes that aim to raise awareness about intercultural values throughout the entire school system (Johnson 2003). Efforts to make schools more welcoming for all parents and to move beyond narrow roles to facilitate respectful inclusion of diverse students and families are vital for equitable parental involvement (Melnikova 2022; Rissanen 2019). Sancho et al. (2024) argue that, given the sizeable proportion of school-age children with migration backgrounds in Ireland (12%), school personnel should be culturally responsive and open to diverse perspectives, as well as aware of their own cultural identity. There is a danger that, where there is insufficient implementation of inclusive policies or guidelines by school senior management, this goal can fail or, at worst, there can be ethnic stereotyping (Stevens and Görgöz 2010).

The migrant context in Ireland

Ireland is now a well-established migrant-receiving country, with one of the highest proportions of foreign-born residents in the EU (McGinnity et al. 2020). According to the results of the last Census in 2022, 12% of Ireland's population was made up of non-Irish

citizens. On average, 13% of students in OECD countries have an immigrant background (OECD 2023) and Ireland slightly exceeds this average. The number of second-generation immigrant children has also increased over the past two decades, a trend traceable to the wave of migration starting in 2001 (OECD 2019). The profile of the migrant population in Ireland is mixed, with varying levels of social and cultural capital, comprising nationals from EU countries (70%) and non-EU countries (30%) (Central Statistics Office 2017), although a distinctive feature is that they are, in general, highly educated: this is particularly true for those of west European or Asian origin (McGinnity et al. 2020). Another distinctive feature of migrants in Ireland is that a significant proportion of those from non-EU countries have acquired Irish citizenship through naturalisation, which usually signals an intention to stay in the country on a permanent basis (Darmody, McGinnity, and Russell 2022).

The important role of schools in integrating migrant students underpins Irish policy through the Intercultural Education Strategy 2010–2015 (2010). Among EU countries, there is some difference in approach to the integration of migrant children, ranging from immersion to segregation, with some countries favouring an initial phase of catch-up classes and intensive host language training before transfer to mainstream classes, while others promote linguistically diverse classrooms to encourage foreign-language proficiency (Koehler and Schneider 2019; Rodríguez-Izquierdo and Darmody 2019). Irish policy has been to mainstream children with migrant backgrounds in the education system, except for a few specialised services for newly arrived migrants and refugees including unaccompanied minors or children arriving through the Irish Refugee Protection Programme, which have largely proven ineffective, due to a lack of training for teachers with respect to their implementation (Ní Dhuinn and Keane 2021). The Migrant Integration Strategy, published in 2017, sets out the Irish Government's approach to the issue of migrant integration. It includes 12 education-related actions (Department of Justice and Equality 2017) such as language support, enrolment policies, teacher training, addressing racism, promoting intercultural attitudes, curriculum reform and encouraging parent participation. The mid-term progress review of the Strategy notes progress in some areas, but identifies that migrant children continue to be vulnerable to educational disadvantage (Department of Education and Skills 2021b). There is some evidence that black and ethnic minority students are overrepresented in larger disadvantaged urban schools. There are also concerns about how children in Ireland's collective accommodation system for refugees and asylum seekers integrate into, and are supported by, the mainstream schooling system (Darmody, McGinnity, and Russell 2022).

In relation to policies on parental involvement in Irish schools, the Education Act (1998) makes provision for collective parental involvement including the involvement of parents on the Board of Management of a school. Section 26 of the Act provides for the establishment of parent associations in recognised schools to promote the interests of students. Sections 20 and 21 require schools to inform and consult parents on the school plan. Principals must set objectives in consultation with parents and students, monitor achievement, and encourage involvement (Department of Education 2021a). However, the Act does not address individual parental involvement activities such as parent-teacher meetings or the barriers faced by migrant parents. While the Department of Education has issued Circular 14/04, (Department of Education and Science 2004) which requires schools to hold at least one formal

parent-teacher meeting per academic year, the responsibility to organise these meetings rests solely with schools, and there is no obligation for parents to attend. Importantly, there is also no statutory requirement for schools to provide specific accommodations for migrant parents, such as translation services or culturally responsive communication strategies, which may limit the ability of parents with limited English proficiency to fully engage. Brown et al. (2021) argue that education policies in Ireland need reconsideration to enhance student and parent involvement in school evaluation. For example, the proposed legislation, The Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill 2019, has not yet been enacted (Department of Education 2021a).

Conceptual framework

The research reported in this paper adopts a systems-based approach, grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, with a focus on the relationships between the home and school *microsystems* (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Within this theory the *mesosystem* refers to the connections between these microsystems – i.e. it considers the interaction between home and school. The mesosystem also links to an *exosystem*, which includes additional social and economic factors such as parental employment conditions, access to community services, and housing stability. Ecological systems theory provides a framework for understanding how interconnected environments and relationships shape children's lives (Egan and Pope 2019). Migrant scholars such as Correa-Velez, Gifford, and Barnett (2010) and Jung and Zhang (2016) emphasise the relevance of this theory when studying migrant children and families. Expanding on Bronfenbrenner's theory, O'Toole, Kiely, and McGillicuddy (2019) describe a bioecological model, which integrates 'process', 'person', 'context', and 'time' to capture the dynamic, ongoing interactions shaping parental involvement across different cultures. This bioecological model highlights how development stems from regular interactions between individuals and their environment, shaped by personal traits, context, and change over time (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006). This is especially relevant for research on migrant families, as it captures how parental involvement is influenced by evolving personal, social, cultural, and structural factors. The bioecological framework also highlights the importance of specific school factors that shape immigrant families' school-based parental involvement, such as school size and school climate (Curtis, Anicama, and Zhou 2021).

This theoretical framing aligns with this study's purpose to identify barriers, especially language and cultural obstacles, and to assess how schools' communication and involvement strategies respond to the needs of migrant families. The framing informs our analysis of how individual characteristics, school practices, and broader contextual influences combine to support or limit migrant parents' involvement in their children's education.

Purpose

The purpose of the research reported in this paper is to investigate the integration of migrant background children into the Irish educational system, with a specific focus on parental involvement in school activities. The research is part of the larger IMMERSE

project, outlined above, which aims to enhance the integration of refugee and migrant background children through comprehensive data collection and analysis of their experiences in schools. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), data was gathered from parents, children, teachers, and school principals to reflect the multiple systems that influence children's development and integration. This paper, however, focuses exclusively on data collected from parents and principals in Ireland, as these perspectives were deemed most pertinent to examining parental involvement in schools, and because the IMMERSE dataset contained limited data from teachers and children on the topic of parental involvement. For findings related to children's experiences, see Martin et al. (2024), Horgan et al. (2022), and Martin et al. (2023). The specific aim of this research was to examine how school engagement channels and parental migrant status affected parental involvement, and to identify barriers to participation.

The research contributes to the broader IMMERSE project by providing detailed insights into the role of parental involvement in the integration process of refugee and migrant children within the Irish context, with the goal of ultimately supporting the development of strategies to improve the integration of refugee and migrant children in the Irish educational system.

Method

This paper employs an exploratory quantitative research design to investigate the stated study aims. This type of research is an appropriate means of studying topics that have not previously been explored in depth and was judged appropriate to examine the underlying patterns, trends, and relationships emerging from the IMMERSE principal and parent survey data. To facilitate this exploration, descriptive statistics, tests of difference, and binary logistic regression were employed to provide insights from the survey data.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained, in 2020, from the Social Research Ethics Committee at University College Cork (UCC), Ireland (Log 2020–130). Schools served as gatekeepers, communicating with parents to obtain consent for their participation in the study. Informed written consent was obtained from all participants after providing them with detailed information about the study, including their rights and the voluntary nature of participation. Parents and principals could choose to complete the survey online via a dedicated link or through a paper-based survey. To protect the confidentiality of personal data, and participants' anonymity, all data was stored securely in accordance with UCC's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) guidelines, and a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) was submitted. All identifying information was anonymised in reporting and references to specific individuals or locations were modified.

Data collection

Data collection took place between June 2021 and June 2023. A common sampling framework was adopted across the six countries included in the IMMERSE project (Maier et al. 2023), targeting both primary and secondary schools. Schools were selected using

a stratified random sampling strategy based on geographic region, school size, socioeconomic status, religious status and school type, with specific criteria adapted for each country depending on their education systems. The sample primarily focused on urban areas, reflecting the concentration of foreign-born populations in metropolitan regions across Europe and within the IMMERSE partner countries (Eurostat 2016).

In Ireland the sample was drawn from primary- (pupils aged 8 to 12) and second- (pupils aged 13 to 18) level schools in Cork, Dublin and Limerick. According to 2016 Census data (the most recent census data available in July 2020, when the sampling took place), Ireland's migrant population was highly concentrated in urban areas, in particular the city centres of Dublin, Cork, and Limerick and the suburbs of West and North Dublin (CSO 2017). These areas accounted for about half the country's migrants and contained electoral districts that had as many as 59% of their residents foreign-born. Most rural areas, by contrast, had fewer than 5% of their residents foreign-born. The schools included in the sample were state-aided or -funded schools. English-language medium schools and private institutions such as European or international schools were excluded as they constituted a minimal portion of Irish Schools (CSO 2017). A stratified random sampling approach based on the IMMERSE common sampling framework was employed to select the schools in Ireland, with stratification variables including school size; DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) status; and religious affiliation. Fifty primary- and 45 second-level schools were included in the initial sample, of which 15 primary- and 13 second-level schools took part in the research. Most of the 27 school principals whose schools participated in the study returned a completed questionnaire (24).

Once schools were selected, each participating school was asked to identify year groups within their school that could take part in the survey. A whole class-approach to sampling was utilised to identify parents of the children in those year groups from both migrant and non-migrant backgrounds. Country of birth was used as a proxy to determine first generation migrant adult status (Hull 2023). In total, 677 parents returned a completed questionnaire. Schools acted as gatekeepers to parents and facilitated the distribution of surveys. To comply with the GDPR, the researchers did not receive details of the number of parents or their contact information until parents had provided consent to participate in the research.

The variables analysed in this paper are derived from items on parental involvement, which featured in the parent and principal questionnaires developed for the wider IMMERSE project. These questionnaires were developed by the IMMERSE team and were based on PISA (OECD 2019) survey items on parental involvement. They underwent testing and piloting prior to data collection (Bajo Marcos et al. 2023). Items from the parent questionnaire analysed for this research included a series of demographic questions related to country of birth, educational attainment, and work status; and two further questions as follows: First, a question concerning parents' self-reported participation in school-based parental involvement activities. Parents were asked the question: *Have you ever participated in any of the following school-related activities?* Response options were: 1) Parent-teacher meeting; 2) Local school government; 3) Information sessions for parents; 4) Volunteer in daily school activities; 5) Social activities for families; and 6) Attend school events in which children participate. Parents were invited to tick all options that were relevant to them. Second, a question concerning perceived barriers to parental involvement. Parents

were asked the question: *Other than Covid-related school closures and restrictions, has your participation in activities at your child's school been hindered by any of the following issues?* Response options were: 1) The meeting times were inconvenient; 2) I was not able to get time off work; 3) I had no one to take care of my child/children; 4) The way to school is unsafe; 5) I had problems with transport; 6) I felt unwelcome at my child's school; 7) I feel generally awkward in a school; 8) I do not speak [English] very well; 9) I think participation is not relevant for my child's development; 10) I do not know how I could participate in school activities; 11) My child(ren) do(es) not want me to participate; and 12) The school does not provide opportunities to participate. For each item, participants were asked to provide a single, binary response (yes, or no).

Items from the principal questionnaire analysed for this research also included a series of demographic questions related to the principal's country of birth, their school's level (primary or secondary), location and patronage, and the socio-economic background of the area in which the school was based. They were then asked a question about the types of parental involvement available in their school. This was worded: *Does your school provide the following to students' parents?* Response options were: 1) Information on child's progress; 2) Requests and ideas to help students at home with homework; 3) Requests to volunteer and participate in school-related activities; 4) Channels to participate in decision-making. For each item, principals were asked to provide one of three responses: *No*; *Yes, generally for all parents*; or *Yes, adapted for parents' needs (e.g. language, culture, etc.)*. This question was developed by the IMMERSE team based on the PISA (OECD 2019) school questionnaire survey item and the Epstein et al. (2019) parent involvement framework. It includes school-based and home-based aspects of parental involvement, providing a measure of parental involvement in the school and whether the school facilitates parental participation by adapting its channels of participation according to parents' needs, language or culture.

Prior to administration, the parent survey was translated into Arabic, Chinese, Dutch, English, Farsi, French, German, Greek, Italian, Romanian and Spanish. This ensured cultural relevance and comprehension across diverse linguistic backgrounds.

Data analysis

The research team used SPSS V29 software to conduct quantitative analysis, facilitating the examination of data patterns and statistical relationships among the variables. Descriptive statistics only were calculated for school principal data, as the sample size was small and not suitable for further statistical analysis. In terms of the parent data, descriptive statistics were calculated initially for sociodemographic factors, school participation factors, and school participation hindrance factors. Then chi-squared tests (a technique used to detect significant differences between expected and observed frequencies) were conducted to examine any differences between parents born in Ireland and parents not born in Ireland in relation to parental education status; parental employment status; school participation factors; and school participation hindrance factors. Finally, binary logistic regression analysis was conducted to measure the strength and direction of the relationship between school participation and school participation hindrance factors, and parent migrant status. As these processes involved conducting

multiple inferential tests on the data, Bonferroni corrections were applied (this is a technique that protects against ‘false positive’ results) with a more conservative significance value of $p < 0.0025$ (the commonly used threshold for significance is $p < 0.05$).

Findings

In the sections that follow, findings from the school principals’ data are presented first, followed by findings from the parents’ data.

School principals

Of the 24 principals who completed the survey, almost all (23) were born in Ireland, with just one born in the United Kingdom. They represented 13 primary and 11 secondary schools. Eighteen principals reported that their school was in a city, four were responsible for schools in a town or suburb, and two did not provide a response. Just under one half of the principals (11) reported that their school had Catholic patronage, while the remaining schools were either multi- or non-denominational. Just over one half (13) said that their schools were designated as having DEIS status, meaning that their schools were identified by the Irish government as serving communities with higher-than-average levels of socio-economic disadvantage.

In terms of the question on types of parental involvement available within their schools, 20 of the 24 principals responded. Most (18) of these reported that their schools provided all four channels to parents (information on their child’s progress; requests and ideas to help students at home with homework; requests for parents to volunteer and participate in school-related activities; and opportunities to participate in decision-making), with the two remaining schools providing three of the four. While all 20 principals indicated that their schools provided information on children’s progress to parents, only six had adapted this information to accommodate parents’ language and cultural needs. Similarly, all schools allowed parents to request and share ideas on supporting their children with homework, but only two had tailored these resources for diverse parental needs. Opportunities for parental volunteering and participation in school-related activities were available in 19 schools, with just three adapting these opportunities to make them inclusive. Similarly, 19 schools provided channels for parental participation in decision-making processes, though only two of these made efforts to accommodate different parental needs. We can see, therefore, that while most schools provided a variety of opportunities for parental involvement, adaptations for the unique needs of migrant parents were lacking.

Parents

Of the 677 parents who completed the survey, around two thirds (441; 65%) reported being born in Ireland, around one third (235; 35%) outside of Ireland, and one did not report their country of birth. This respondent was excluded from further analysis meaning that the number of responses reported in the following sections is 676. The most frequently reported countries of birth outside Ireland were Poland ($n = 41$), India ($n = 22$), Nigeria (n

= 19), the United Kingdom ($n = 16$), Lithuania ($n = 12$), Romania ($n = 12$), South Africa ($n = 11$), Latvia ($n = 7$), the USA ($n = 7$), and the Philippines ($n = 6$). A total of 83 parents reported being born in other countries, with fewer than five people born in each of these.

Table 1 shows that most parents (77%) had completed third-level education (college, technical or vocational school, an apprenticeship, university undergraduate or postgraduate education). A similar proportion (76%) were employed in work outside the home. Notably, those born outside of Ireland were significantly more likely to have a third-level education ($p < 0.001$). This educational profile aligns with the general trend observed among migrants in Ireland, where migrants are more likely to hold or attain a third-level qualification compared to the Irish-born population (McGinnity et al. 2020). There was no significant difference between those born outside Ireland and those born in Ireland in relation to working outside the home ($p = 0.889$) and for both groups the majority worked outside the home (75% of those born in Ireland, and 77% of those born outside of Ireland).

Parental involvement in school activities

Table 2 shows that, of the parents who responded to the question on school activities (646), most reported participating in one or more school-related activities. The parent-teacher meeting was the school-related activity with the highest level of reported participation (94%). School events that their children participate in (75%) and information sessions for parents (67%) were also highly attended school activities. Fewer parents reported participating in social activities for families (39%), local school government (17%), or volunteering at daily school activities (9%), however. There was a significant difference between the reported participation of parents not born in Ireland and parents

Table 1. Parent educational attainment and work status.

	Total	Born in Ireland	Not born in Ireland	
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	Sig.
Highest education level	670	440	230	$p < 0.001^{\wedge}$
No third-level education	157 (23%)	121 (28%)	36 (16%)	
Primary school	10 (1%)	10 (2%)	0 (0%)	
Lower secondary school (up to about age 15/16)	43 (6%)	36 (8%)	7 (3%)	
Upper secondary school (up to about age 18)	104 (16%)	75 (17%)	29 (13%)	
Third-level education	513 (77%)	319 (73%)	194 (84%)	
College, technical/vocational, apprenticeship	213 (32%)	159 (36%)	54 (23%)	
University/postgraduate degree	300 (45%)	160 (36%)	140 (61%)	
Work status	674	440	234	$p = 0.889^{\wedge\wedge}$
Employed (outside home)	511 (76%)	332 (75%)	179 (77%)	
Employed full-time	329 (49%)	200 (45%)	129 (55%)	
Employed part-time	138 (20%)	105 (24%)	33 (14%)	
Self-employed	44 (7%)	27 (6%)	17 (7%)	
Not employed (outside home)	154 (23%)	101 (23%)	53 (23%)	
Take care of home/children	106 (16%)	73 (17%)	33 (14%)	
Full-time student	10 (1%)	8 (2%)	2 (1%)	
Unemployed	18 (3%)	6 (1%)	12 (5%)	
On long-term sickness or disability	16 (2%)	11 (3%)	5 (2%)	
Retired	4 (1%)	3 (1%)	1 (0%)	
Other	9 (1%)	7 (2%)	2 (1%)	

$\wedge$ chi square test carried out comparing 'No third-level education' to 'Third-level education'.

$\wedge\wedge$ chi square test carried out comparing 'Employed (outside home)' to 'Not employed (outside home)'.

Due to rounding errors, percentages may not sum to 100.

Data source: IMMRSE Parents Dataset.

Table 2. Reported involvement in school activities.

	Full sample		Born in Ireland		Not born in Ireland		Sig. p =
	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Parent-teacher meeting **	605	94	409	96	196	90	0.002**
Attend school events children participate in	484	75	329	77	155	71	0.082
Information sessions for parents ***	431	67	310	73	121	55	0.000***
Social activities for families	250	39	171	40	79	36	0.326
Local school government (parent council or school management committee)	107	17	82	19	25	11	0.012
Volunteer daily school activities	61	9	45	11	16	7	0.183

** $p < 0.0025$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

646 of 676 parents responded to this question.

Due to rounding errors, percentages may not sum to 100.

Data source: IMMRSE Parents Dataset.

born in Ireland in relation to two school activities: parent-teacher meetings ($p = 0.002$) and information sessions for parents ($p < 0.001$). In both cases, the parents who were not born in Ireland were significantly less likely than those born in Ireland to take part in these activities. We found no significant differences based on parent country of birth for the other four school activities.

Barriers to parental involvement

In total, 651 of the 676 parents responded to at least one item in the question about barriers to their involvement in school activities. As Table 3 shows, the number responding to each question item varied, ranging from 614 who responded to the item 'I do not speak English very well' to 638, who responded to the item 'The meeting times were inconvenient'.

From the list of twelve possible barriers to parental involvement in school activities, the three selected most commonly by parents were: 'I was not able to get time off work' (38%), 'The meeting times were inconvenient' (35%), and 'I had no one to take care of my

Table 3. Reported barriers to involvement in school activities.

	Full sample		Born in Ireland		Not Born in Ireland		Sig. p =
	N	%	N	%	N	%	
I was not able to get time off work ($N = 628$)	236	38	152	37	84	39	0.719
The meeting times were inconvenient ($N = 638$)	223	35	139	33	84	38	0.192
I had no one to take care of my child/children ($N = 621$)	162	26	91	22	71	33	0.004
I had problems with transport ($N = 618$)	43	7	23	6	20	9	0.076
I do not know how I could participate in school activities ($N = 615$)	42	7	22	5	20	9	0.067
I feel generally awkward in a school ($N = 615$)	33	5	19	5	14	7	0.334
The school does not provide opportunities to participate ($N = 615$)	26	4	13	3	13	6	0.090
I do not speak English very well *** ($N = 614$)	24	4	7	2	17	8	0.000***
My child(ren) do(es) not want me to participate ($N = 615$)	21	3	19	5	2	1	0.014
I think participation is not relevant for my child's development ($N = 616$)	20	3	15	4	5	2	0.360
The way to school is unsafe ($N = 616$)	10	2	3	1	7	3	0.018
I felt unwelcome at my child's school ($N = 615$)	8	1	2	1	6	3	0.015

** $p < 0.0025$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

651 of 676 parents responded to at least one item in this question.

Due to rounding errors, percentages may not sum to 100.

Data source: IMEMRSE Parents Dataset.

child/children' (26%). Each of the other nine barriers was selected by 7%, or fewer, of parents. We found only one significant difference between parents not born in Ireland and parents born in Ireland in terms of the barriers identified: 'I do not speak [English] very well' ($p < 0.001$). This is not surprising, given that this issue is considerably more likely to be relevant to immigrant, than non-immigrant, parents, a point that is likely reflected in the fact that this barrier attracted the lowest item response rate and had the highest level of missing data. No other significant differences based on parent country of birth were found for the other barriers to parental involvement in school activities, although the item 'I had no one to take care of my child/children' ($p = 0.004$) was notably approaching significance.

As chi-squared tests of significance indicated differences between parents born in Ireland and parents not born in Ireland for the school involvement activities 'parent-teacher meetings' and 'information sessions for parents', and for the barrier to school participation 'I do not speak English very well', these three factors were brought forward for further analysis. Binary logistic regression analyses were performed to measure the strength and direction of the relationships between each of these factors and parent migrant status, with educational attainment and work status included as control variables (variables that are included to account for potential confounding factors in the analysis). All the binary logistic regression analyses were carried out with predictor variables of parent migrant status (where born in Ireland = 0; not born in Ireland = 1), educational attainment (where no third-level education = 0; third-level education = 1), and work status (where not employed outside the home = 0; employed outside the home = 1).

The first binary logistic regression analysis was performed with the dependent variable of 'attendance at parent-teacher meetings' (where no to attendance = 0; yes to attendance = 1). The full regression model did not significantly predict attendance at parent-teacher meetings ($\chi^2 (3) = 9.79$, $p < 0.02$). The model accounted for between 1.5% (Cox and Snell R^2) and 4.0% (Nagelkerke R^2) of variance in attendance, with 93.6% of predictions accurate overall. The Hosmer and Lemeshow test suggested a good fit to the data ($\chi^2 (5) = 2.21$, $p = 0.82$). These results tell us that parent migrant status, educational attainment, and work status together did not significantly predict whether parents attended parent-teacher meetings.

The second binary logistic regression analysis was performed with the dependent variable of 'attendance at information sessions for parents' (where no to attendance = 0; yes to attendance = 1). In contrast to the analysis of parent-teacher meetings, the full regression model significantly predicted attendance at information sessions for parents ($\chi^2 (3) = 33.92$, $p < 0.001$). The model accounted for between 5.2% (Cox and Snell R^2) and 7.2% (Nagelkerke R^2) of variance in attendance, with 67.6% of predictions accurate overall. The Hosmer and Lemeshow test suggested a good fit to the data ($\chi^2 (4) = 1.25$, $p = 0.87$). Parent migrant status was thus a significant predictor of attendance at information sessions ($B = -0.89$, Wald = 24.25, $p < 0.001$, Exp(B) = 0.41), suggesting that parents not born in Ireland had significantly lower odds of attending information sessions for parents compared with those parents born in Ireland. Parental educational attainment was also a significant predictor of attendance at information sessions ($B = 0.73$, Wald = 11.50, $p < 0.001$, Exp(B) = 2.07), suggesting that those with a third-level education had significantly higher odds of attending information sessions for parents. Work status, however,

was not a significant predictor of attendance at information sessions ($B = 0.10$, $Wald = 0.20$, $p = 0.66$, $Exp(B) = 1.10$).

The third binary logistic regression analysis was performed with the dependent variable of endorsing 'I do not speak English very well' as a barrier to involvement in school activities (where disagreement with the statement 'No' = 0, and agreement with the statement 'Yes' = 1). The full regression model significantly predicted attendance at information sessions for parents ($\chi^2(3) = 39.86$, $p < 0.001$). The model accounted for between 6.4% (Cox and Snell R^2) and 23.1% (Nagelkerke R^2) of variance in attendance, with 96.2% of predictions accurate overall. The Hosmer and Lemeshow test suggested a good fit to the data ($\chi^2(4) = 2.82$, $p = 0.59$). Parent migrant status was therefore a significant predictor of endorsing the statement 'I do not speak English very well' as a barrier to involvement in school activities ($B = 2.14$, $Wald = 17.58$, $p < 0.001$, $Exp(B) = 8.53$), suggesting that parents not born in Ireland had significantly higher odds of believing this, compared with those parents born in Ireland. As noted previously, this is a relatively unsurprising finding. Parent educational attainment was also a significant predictor of endorsing 'I do not speak English very well' as a barrier to involvement in school activities ($B = -2.05$, $Wald = 16.46$, $p < 0.001$, $Exp(B) = 0.13$), suggesting that those with a third-level education have significantly lower odds of endorsing this barrier to involvement. Work status was not a significant predictor of endorsing 'I do not speak English very well' as a barrier to involvement in school activities ($B = -0.49$, $Wald = 1.00$, $p = 0.32$, $Exp(B) = 0.61$).

Overall, most parents reported participating in school activities, particularly those related to their own children (e.g. attending parent-teacher meetings). Parent migrant status was a significant predictor of attendance at information sessions, and of endorsing 'I do not speak English very well' as a barrier to involvement in school activities. Parents not born in Ireland had significantly lower odds of attending information sessions, and significantly higher odds of endorsing 'I do not speak English very well' as a barrier to involvement in school activities. Parental educational attainment was also a significant predictor for both factors, while parental work status was not a significant predictor.

Discussion

Parental involvement is widely recognised as a key factor in enhancing children's educational outcomes (Antony-Newman 2018; Wilder 2013). Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, parental involvement in school activities, particularly interactions with teachers, forms a vital part of this microsystem. Findings from the research reported in this paper show that language barriers, cultural mismatches, and a lack of adaptation by schools can undermine these interactions. When parents are unable to effectively communicate with teachers or participate in school events, the cohesion of the microsystem is disrupted. While schools demonstrate a strong commitment to fostering parental involvement, the specific needs of migrant families, including language and cultural adaptations, are often overlooked. Several findings emerge from the data which are discussed below.

Language as a barrier to parental involvement

Enhancing outcomes for migrant children depends in part on effectively integrating their parents into the school community, as emphasised by Crul and Schneider (2010). Findings

from this study reveal high levels of parental involvement across participants, especially in child-focused school activities such as parent-teacher meetings. However, parents not born in Ireland were less likely to attend these meetings and school information sessions. These findings suggest that language barriers, particularly limited English proficiency, restrict the ability of migrant-background parents to engage fully within the school microsystem. Such barriers may hinder communication with teachers and reduce access to school-related information and decision-making opportunities. Importantly, the data also highlight that educational attainment is a more significant predictor of parental involvement among migrant families than employment status. Those parents who had a lower educational attainment were more likely to identify their English language competency as a barrier to parental involvement activities. This underscores the importance of targeted supports that address both systemic barriers and individual-level challenges. Like other research, this study has found that limited proficiency in the host country's language can hinder communication with teachers and participation in school activities, leading to reduced involvement (Arias and Morillo-Campbell 2008; Shin 2009).

The role of schools in supporting parental involvement

The findings demonstrate a strong commitment from schools in Ireland to promoting parental involvement in children's education, aligning with key elements of Epstein's Framework (2019) in relation to communication, volunteering, and decision-making. The data suggest that most parents felt welcomed by their child's school, which reflects positively on the inclusive atmosphere fostered within the schools involved in the study. While these results are very positive there is, nevertheless, a discernible trend of limited adaptation of these parental involvement channels to cater to the specific needs of migrant parents. The principals reported very limited adaptation of materials to support parents to help their children with their homework, despite all schools requesting this support from parents. The data indicate that parents, regardless of background, are more likely to participate in activities directly related to their own children than broader school engagements. While a higher percentage of migrant parents do not participate in school-based activities and engagements such as social events, local school governance, and volunteering for daily school tasks, this difference was not statistically significant. However, the data suggest a consistent trend that warrants further investigation, as migrant parents were generally less involved in these activities. A contributing factor appears to be the lack of cultural and linguistic accommodations to support their participation in volunteering and decision-making within the school community, which may limit their overall involvement.

Towards inclusive involvement: addressing barriers

This study highlights the significance of structural and cultural factors, particularly language proficiency and educational attainment, in shaping parental involvement in schools (Antony-Newman 2018; Hornby and Lafaele 2011). While overall levels of parental involvement were high, migrant parents, especially those with limited English, were less likely to attend information sessions and parent-teacher meetings. Parental educational attainment influenced the level of involvement for all parents, with those holding a third-

level education participating more frequently in school activities overall, except for parent-teacher meetings. Parents without a third-level education were more likely to report transport issues and difficulty speaking English as barriers to their involvement. These findings reflect broader patterns of inequality shaped by migration status, social class, and employment conditions (Lareau 2011).

Addressing these barriers requires culturally and linguistically responsive school practices. Translation services, culturally adapted materials, and flexible opportunities for involvement are critical. Recent research by Adebayo and Heinz (2023) found that parents from minority-ethnic backgrounds in Ireland expressed a strong desire to go to parent-teacher meetings and meet with their child's teachers. However, data from this study indicate that non-Irish-born parents may miss wider opportunities to engage with teachers and the school community, to learn more about the school and engage with other parents, potentially affecting their ability to fully support their children's education. Cultural adaptability is therefore needed, to support the maintenance of heritage culture and foster equitable educational involvement (Pérez et al. 2021). This aligns with calls for greater cultural responsiveness in Irish schools (Sancho et al. 2024) and underscores the need for inclusive and flexible school – parent partnerships.

Limitations

Despite the valuable insights gained through this research, several limitations must be acknowledged to ensure a comprehensive interpretation of the findings. First, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to response bias or social desirability bias, potentially leading respondents to provide answers they perceive as more favourable (Rosenman, Tennekoon, and Hill 2011). Additionally, due to the small sample size of school principal responses, only descriptive statistics could be applied when analysing this data, limiting the ability to perform more robust statistical analyses or draw broader generalisations. Although some information was collected in relation to parents' migrant status, there was limited categorisation by, for example, whether the parents were work migrants or refugees, or by the length of their residence in Ireland. This prevented analysis of how these factors may have affected their involvement. Since migration status and time in the country likely influence language skills and understanding of the school system, future research could collect more detailed data on these factors to better examine their effects on parental involvement.

Conclusion

This study highlights both the strengths and limitations of current approaches to parental involvement in Irish schools. While the schools that took part in our research demonstrated a strong commitment to involving parents, structural and cultural barriers limited the participation of some migrant-background parents, particularly those with lower English proficiency or educational attainment. These barriers can weaken the quality of interaction within Bronfenbrenner's microsystem, where consistent communication and shared responsibility between school and home are critical for children's development. The findings enhance our understanding of the various types of parental involvement operating across Irish schools and highlight

the differences in participation among parents. They point to the need for schools to adopt more inclusive strategies that promote the participation of all parents, particularly those from migrant backgrounds.

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Data availability statement

The data sets used for this article have been deposited in a recognised data repository and are available at the following links:

Principals Data Set: IMMERSE research consortium. (2024). IMMERSE R Dataset [Data set]. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10591491>.

Parents of Young Children Data Set: IMMERSE research consortium. (2024). IMMERSE PYC Dataset [Data set]. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10591460>.

Parents of Older Children Data Set: IMMERSE research consortium. (2024). IMMERSE POC Dataset [Data set]. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10591427>.

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