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The Role of Classroom Assistants:

a case study in the context of an immersion school.

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BEd (Hons), BA (Hons), MEd.

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the

Degree of Doctor of Education (EdD)

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September 2020

Abstract

Irish Medium Education is a form of immersion education which uses extensive exposure to Irish language to meet the language needs of children, helping them develop proficiency in the target language. The Irish Medium sector continues to evolve as a viable option for nursery, primary and secondary education in Northern Ireland. The majority of children come from homes in which English is the dominant language and so school staff, mainly teachers and classroom assistants (CAs), play a pivotal role in developing children's second language proficiency. This research aimed to explore perceptions of the role of CAs in supporting children's learning in the Irish Medium immersion classroom. CAs have become an integral part of classroom life and play a major role in supporting teaching and learning. Regarding the immersion setting, CAs also play a major role in children's target language acquisition. There is very little in the literature regarding the deployment of CAs in Northern Ireland, and more specifically, nothing related to the Irish Medium sector. This study, therefore, is significant as it is the first to explore the role of the CA in the Irish Medium immersion classroom. No previous study has investigated the role of the CA in the immersion classroom. Aligning with an interpretivist paradigm, the study used a case study approach to explore the deployment of CAs in one immersion primary school from multiple perspectives. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus groups, which aimed to gather the perceptions of senior leaders, middle leaders, class teachers, CAs and children on the role of CAs in the immersion classroom. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, collating and categorising them into manageable chunks. Five main themes emerged from the data collected. These were relationships, communication, training, language development and CA deployment. Evidence shows that CAs carry out many duties within the case-study school. However, there was some confusion around the role of the CA in the school and it seems that this role remains undefined. The main role of CAs was seen as supporting the class teacher in whatever way support is required. However, a more specific role was also identified regarding the development of children's language proficiency through language modelling in the form of both formal and informal interaction. There was evidence that a lack of clear policy and guidelines to focus the deployment of CAs in the school meant that tensions could arise, which, while seemingly not affecting children's language development, did lead to frustration. Issues emerging from this study will be of interest to the wider education community where CAs are a common feature in primary and secondary classrooms, but particularly to the immersion context, in which this study was situated. Although this study was small-scale, the outcomes suggest that CAs can have a purposeful role to play in the development of children's academic development as well as language proficiency in the immersion classroom.

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Acknowledgements

‘Just keep plodding’ has been my mantra for the last five years whilst completing this EdD. Writing this page means that I have ‘plodded’ to the end of a rewarding personal and professional journey.

I would first and foremost like to thank my supervisor Dr Hazel Crichton for her advice, guidance, patience, expertise and honesty throughout the completion of this study. The unending support was very much appreciated.

Heartfelt thanks goes to all those who participated in providing information for this study and for giving up their valuable time to aid this piece of research.

I would finally like to express my sincere gratitude to my parents, who have always encouraged me to believe in myself and whose unwavering and unending encouragement on so many levels has got me to where I am today.

Author's Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this Dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Thomas Rogan

List of Acronyms

BEd – Bachelor of Education

BICS – Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills

CA – Classroom Assistant

CALP – Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency

CLIL – Content and Language Integrated Learning

DENI – Department of Education Northern Ireland

ETI – Education and Teaching Inspectorate of Northern Ireland

IME – Irish Medium Education

ITE – Initial Teacher Education

L1 – First language

L2 – Second language

LAD – Language Acquisition Device

NI – Northern Ireland/ Northern Irish

PGCE – Post Graduate Certificate in Education

SEN – Special Educational Needs

SENCo – Special Educational Needs Coordinator

SLT – Senior Leadership Team

ZPD – Zone of Proximal Development

Chapter 1: Dissertation Aims and Outline

This chapter will set this dissertation in context, providing a brief rationale for the study, identifying the research problem and will outline the research questions which drove this enquiry. It will also describe the background to the study and the literature which informed the questions, methodology of the study, findings and conclusions. This chapter will also outline the structure for the dissertation and provide a summary of each chapter.

1.1. Rationale for Design

The main focus of this study was initially to develop an understanding of how CAs can support the development of children's language proficiency in the Irish Medium immersion context through examining perceptions of stakeholders within a primary school in NI**.** I work in the immersion sector and I was therefore aware that current practices regarding the role of CAs could be enhanced. Therefore, my personal experience of working in the sector prompted this research to investigate key stakeholders' perceptions of the role of the CA.

The topic of study was influenced by my role as a practitioner in an immersion classroom. A professional doctorate is connected with professional knowledge and the act of doing (Lester, 2004). My research interest reflects this, stemming first from my involvement within the Irish Medium Education system and secondly from my commitment to the continued development of the sector. As a practitioner who has spent my teaching career thus far working in the sector, I believe firmly in the social and cognitive benefits of immersion education. I feel privileged to be part of a dynamic and developing sector of the education system in Northern Ireland and feel invested in its development and sustenance. Research informed practice has the potential to enable the sector to continue to provide educational experiences of sound quality.

1.2. Motivation and Context for Study

Immersion Education began in Northern Ireland in 1971 with the opening of the first Irish Medium primary school in Belfast with 9 pupils, 7 of whom were from the newly formed urban Gaeltacht (Irish speaking community) and 2 of whom were from Irish speaking families in the wider West Belfast area (Maguire, 1991). The Irish Medium sector in Northern Ireland continues to evolve and expand**.** Over the last five decades the number of children being educated through the medium of the Irish language has increased. There are

now 6184 children in Northern Ireland being educated through the medium of Irish in Nursery, Primary and Post-Primary settings (Education and Teaching Inspectorate of Northern Ireland (ETI), 2018). Figures held by Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI) (2020) indicate that in the school year 19/20, 983 children were being educated in Irish Medium Nurseries, 4510 were being educated in Irish Medium primary settings and 1323 were being educated in Irish Medium post-primary settings. Although figures were not available at the time of the study, it is generally understood that most parents who opt for Irish Medium Education are not native Irish speakers. Children who receive their education in an Irish Medium school are fully immersed in the target language, especially in the early years. Much emphasis is placed on language input and language modelling, especially within the early years' classrooms. It is the immersion classroom that provides the context for this research study.

1.3. Identifying the gap

In my role, as class teacher, as Special Educational Needs Co-Ordinator (SENCo) and as a member of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT), I have witnessed good practice, high levels of collegiality and good working relationships between teachers, CAs and pupils in order to raise standards and to deliver good quality educational experiences. It is in these elements of good practice that the knowledge and potential of the CA can be and has often been unlocked. Equally, I have also witnessed how the worth and value of the CA can be questioned and diminished. Before conducting the study, engagement with various members of staff highlighted that CAs can be deployed in a variety of ways and not necessarily consistently, or in a way that truly reflects their abilities, or the practices expected in the immersion environment. Being aware that there were areas where CAs might have been better used to support learning, this research was influenced by the need to discover how CAs are deployed, and whether they could be more purposefully deployed to develop language fluency in the immersion setting, with a focus on the early years of schooling. This study focused on the role of the CA in the early years due to the important role that they play in the early years classroom in supporting all aspects of learning and teaching. The school in which I work provided the context for this research and offered the opportunity to explore in depth current deployment of CAs. Many CAs possess a hidden intellectual and practical ability and knowledge gained through working in a school that can be overlooked (Burgess & Shelton-Mayes, 2007). As a practitioner and member of the Senior Management Team, I also have a

professional interest in the effective deployment of CAs and how their knowledge and expertise can be used fruitfully to promote language acquisition in the immersion classroom.

To collect the data for this study, a wide range of participants, who all have an important role in the school, were interviewed. This included: school leaders, those who had a senior or middle management role, class teachers, CAs and a small selection of Key Stage 2 [1]children. Interviewing a wide range of participants allowed me to gather a wide diversity of views and insights with regards to the most effective deployment of CAs.

In the case study school children are fully immersed in Irish, the target language until Primary 4[2], when the formal instruction of English, the home language, begins. It is important to note that even though the children then receive formal instruction in English, the delivery of all other curricular areas occurs through the medium of Irish until the end of Primary 7, the last year of primary school. English is taught as a subject, rather than being used as a language of curricular delivery.

1.4. Aims of the Dissertation

The dissertation aimed to address the following research questions:

- What do teachers see as the key role of CAs in the early years classroom?
- What do CAs see as their key role in the early years classroom?
- How are CAs deployed in the early years immersion classroom to help children develop language capacity?

In order to answer these questions, it was necessary to conduct an examination of the research and theoretical literature relating to the role of CAs in the classroom, immersion education and Irish Medium Education This study was an empirical study, which gathered qualitative data to help answer the research questions. Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews and focus groups, which focused on the deployment of CAs to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions of those working within the context of the study school regarding the role of CAs to support learning and teaching in general to develop children's academic ability. It also explored the deployment of the CA for the purpose of developing

[1] Key Stage 2 is the second stage of primary education. Children are between the ages of 8 and 11.
[2] Primary 4 is the fourth year of primary school when the children are aged 7-8.

children's language proficiency. Collected data was collated and analysed using thematic analysis to identify common themes and trends.

This piece of practitioner led research focuses on practice within the case study school. Mason (2002) suggests that practitioner led research stems from a desire to avoid complacency and investigate new ways of seeing and articulating practice. This was the case in relation to this study where I wanted to investigate the most purposeful use of CAs to provide the best possible immersive learning experiences for children. It was my aim 'to bring to light assumptions, beliefs and actions' (Holly et al., 2008, p. 28) and to examine these for the future benefit of the school: reflecting on practice and building upon good practice with a view to consolidating and enhancing the effective deployment of CAs in the early years setting. Practitioner research can be 'a powerful tool for transforming the educational environment' (Holly et al., 2008, p. 18) and can encourage engagement as it often directly affects classroom practice (Everton et al., 2000). I aimed to collect evidence that I could present to staff so that they could improve their practice for the benefit of the children and their colleagues.

The specific objective of this study was to offer a platform for reflective discussion, involving senior members of staff, class teachers, CAs and children, to examine what was considered the effectiveness of current deployment of CAs in the school. A secondary aim of the study was to investigate how participants perceived the role of the CA in the development of children's second language (L2) proficiency. Depending on the outcomes of this study, the engagement of school staff in critical reflection on the role of the CA in the classroom could influence positive changes in future practice to enhance the role of the CA. Two main data collection methods were used, semi structured interviews and focus groups. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with those who had senior and middle management roles. Three separate focus groups took place: one of class teachers, one of CAs and the other of children aged 8 – 11. Discussions were facilitated so that participants would find them meaningful and purposeful, with a view to identifying issues and ensuring consistency in the future deployment of CAs to enhance learners' Irish acquisition in the early years.

Having conducted the research, I intended that the findings could be the basis for whole staff reflection, which could then inform future personal and professional development opportunities for CAs and teachers in the case study school.

No previous study has investigated the role of the CA in the immersion classroom. In the wider context, the study will be of relevance to researchers and practitioners in, and interested in, bilingual and language medium education. The contribution that this study makes is important, because not only will it identify key areas of significance to be taken into account when planning for the deployment of CAs, it will also form the basis for larger, more extensive studies. Although this study focussed primarily on the role of the CA in the immersion classroom the main findings that emerged will also be of interest to anyone working with CAs, or working in Initial Teacher Education to help shape student teachers' views regarding the role of CAs. This study offers important insights into the role of the CA that would be of interest to those who wish to ensure that CAs are deployed effectively in the classroom.

The option of Irish Medium education in Northern Ireland offers an exciting and innovative aspect to the educational choices that parents can make in an evolving educational landscape (Mac Corraidh, 2005). Increasing numbers of children being educated through the medium of Irish (ETI, 2018) would suggest the Irish Medium sector is a growing and thriving sector of the education system in Northern Ireland. However, there appears to be a dearth of research in relation to the Irish Medium Education system in Northern Ireland. Through my search of the literature pertaining to Irish Medium Education in Northern Ireland, I noticed no studies in the body of literature which focused specifically on the deployment of CAs to promote children's language acquisition. The role of the CA has been referenced in generic-type research pertaining to the sector. An example of this is the study of SEN that was carried out by Ní Chinnéide (2009).

The theoretical underpinning for this study will be discussed in more detail below.

1.5. Theoretical Approach

The investigative process of research is fuelled by a specific purpose, which stems from a gap in current research (Clough and Nutbrown, 2003), which provided the motivation for this study. Compiling the literature review helped me identify a gap in research related to the deployment of CAs to develop children's language proficiency. This research is important because of the contribution it makes to Irish Medium research, not only in focusing on how CAs can be best deployed to develop language proficiency, but also in general terms regarding the deployment of CAs in the primary classroom.

After an extensive search of the literature, it appears that the role of CAs in the Northern Irish context remains unexplored. More specifically, their role in the Irish Medium context has not been researched. The Northern Irish system warrants separate research because curricular content differs from that in other parts of the UK. Although the core subjects are the same, the Northern Irish Curriculum differs from the English curriculum, with different standards and levels. The recruitment process for hiring CAs is different to that in England, Wales and Scotland. The referral systems for Educational Psychology input, which help identify those children who are deemed as needing additional support, differ. Northern Ireland operates under a separate governance: there has been devolved legislature in Stormont since partition in 1921. It has its own Minister for Education, who is responsible for major decisions pertaining to educational development. The education system in Northern Ireland is predominantly directed by the Education Authority, which became operational in April 2015 (www.eani.org.uk/about-us), after an amalgamation of the 5 previous Education and Library Boards. Currently a process of centralising and streamlining of services across the province is taking place to ensure a national approach to services and the recruitment of school staff, including CAs.

In the context of the dissertation, theories of second language learning will provide the theoretical framework in which this study will be set, with a particular focus on the sociolinguistic aspects of language learning. Sociolinguistic and sociocultural theories of language learning emphasise the social element of the language learning process (Vygotsky 1978, Mercer 2004). Sociolinguistic and Sociocultural theories promote the learner as a social being who learns a language, coupled with academic content in a socially rich context This approach aligns with the thinking of Baker (2007) who notes that one of the main purposes of language is as a tool for communication. Mitchell & Myles (2004, p.23) note that the 'identity of the learner, and his or her language knowledge are collaboratively constructed and reconstructed in the course of interaction'. Watson-Gegeo & Nielsen (2003, p. 156) reaffirm this view, noting that language learning is both cognitive and social. Language modelling and scaffolding are crucial in facilitating this learning. High levels of meaningful interaction between adults and children in the immersion setting are vital for academic and linguistic development (Andrews, 2006: Mhic Aoidh, 2020). Baker (2007) argues that by focusing on context and placing emphasis on tasks and experiences, aspects of language can be taught informally, almost unbeknown to the children. Language driven tasks promote engagement with the environment and context. As language and knowledge develop in

tandem, children are continually learning curricular content, social skills and a second language. In the immersion classroom, although language development is a priority (Mhic Aoidh, 2020) the pedagogical focus is not only the teaching of a language, but also the teaching of educational concepts (Lyster, 2007).

Since young children learn language and content through exposure and interaction, much emphasis is placed on play, practical contextual learning experiences and interaction between children and staff, as well as interaction between children themselves in the early years immersion setting (Mhic Aoidh, 2020). Mitchell & Myles (2004) note that learning can be socially driven through interaction, discussion and problem solving. Although communication between expert and novice is useful, Andrews (2006, p.19) suggests that 'dual interaction' between children must happen throughout the process of second language acquisition. This is not to deprecate the role of the teacher but emphasises the importance of children initiating communication with other children in the target language and engaging in discussion. An integral part of the teachers' and CAs' role is therefore to promote this dual interaction, allowing children to view language as being a social tool for communication.

1.6. Overview of the dissertation

The overall structure of the study takes the form of seven chapters. Chapter 1 has provided the rationale for the research and the overall outline and aims of the dissertation.

Chapter 2 will provide an overview the context of Irish Medium Education in Northern Ireland, focusing on the emergence of the Irish Medium sector, the growth and development of the sector and associated challenges.

Chapter 3 reviews the literature relevant to the study. The review of the literature will explore what the literature says about the role of the CA, with a specific emphasis on their pedagogical input in the classroom and will also discuss theories of second language learning.

The fourth chapter is concerned with the methodology used for this study and presents the paradigms, project design and research tools. It will provide justification for the methods used to collect and analyse the data. Ethical issues, as well as my position as the 'insider' researcher will also be discussed. This chapter will outline the practical approach taken to address the research questions.

The next two chapters, 5 and 6 will present the findings of the research after the analysis of the data. The findings will focus on the three main strands of this study, as laid out in the research questions: the key role of CAs as seen by teachers and CAs; the collaboration between teachers and CAs in the early years immersion classroom; and the role of the CA to help children develop language capacity.

Finally, Chapter 7 outlines the limitations of the study and presents conclusions and recommendations.

Chapter 2: The context of Irish Medium Education in Northern Ireland

The aim of this small-scale study was to investigate the ways CAs can effectively support the development of children's academic and language proficiency in the Irish Medium immersion early years classroom. In order to provide a meaningful context for this study, it is important to first give an overview of Irish Medium Education in Northern Ireland. This overview will focus on the emergence of the Irish Medium sector, the growth and development of the sector and the associated challenges. It will also provide a brief description of the case study school.

2.1. Emergence and development of the sector

This section will discuss the emergence and development of Irish Medium Education in Northern Ireland. Irish Medium Education is still a relatively new phenomenon in the educational landscape of Northern Ireland. Linguistic, educational and religious differences in Northern Ireland offer a sense of pride and conflict (Langlois, 2006). The Irish language has therefore very often become synonymous with Nationalistic viewpoints, political ideologies and religious affiliation (O Riagáin, 2009).

With regards to the link between politics and language, times of conflict in Northern Ireland have led to an increased national conscience, which has naturally impacted on how the Irish language is used and viewed, with many seeing a tangible connection between the Irish language and political identity (Mc Manus, 2016). Since ‘historical and linguistic connections are being re-examined in a calmer, less fraught political environment’ (Harris, 2007, p.3) this link between politics and the language is evolving. Whilst acknowledging the political presence, this dissertation will however examine the Irish Medium Education system from a purely educational perspective. In this thesis, I have no intention of framing this work in any political ideology, or of adopting a political stance.

Irish Medium education emerged in the South of Ireland after the establishment of The Free State in 1922 (Mc Adory & Janmaat, 2015) before its emergence in the North. The Irish Medium sector in Northern Ireland began on a modest scale in 1971 with nine children, as O Baoill (2007, p. 412) describes: ‘humble beginnings’.

It is important to note that the growth of IME has been tumultuous and arduous, being fraught with suspicion, hostility and challenge (Mac Póilin, 1992), much of which has centred on issues of formal funding and recognition. Although the first school in Northern Ireland opened in 1971, it was not until 1984 that the first bunscoil (primary school) received formal

funding and recognition after a tenacious struggle between founding members, committee members and the education authorities (O Baoill, 2007). Before receiving formal funding, the school relied on generosity and fundraising efforts to generate capital. It was the cohesion of both the small language community of the Shaws Road Gaeltacht (Irish speaking community) and the wider West Belfast community that allowed the language and the school community to survive (Mac Póilin, 2018).

The emergence of the first Irish speaking school in the Shaw's Road Urban Gaeltacht area of Belfast was a 'ground-breaking initiative' (Mac Corraidh, 2005, p. 178). This pioneering approach to education in the North was driven by the passion, vision and the determination of a small group of Irish speaking families who, recognising the advantages of bilingualism, wished their children to be taught and to learn solely through the medium of the Irish language. Those initial members of the Shaw's Road Gaeltacht community, who had mainly learnt Irish as adults had a desire to raise bilingual families. For these families, the ability to provide their children with Irish Medium Education would be an 'extension to their lives as Irish-speaking households' (Maguire, 1991, p. 96). The founding members of this neo-urban Gaeltacht were also driven by the desire to create a community in which Irish 'would be the natural language of interaction' (Mc Adory & Janmaat, 2015, p. 536). Speaking on a very personal level about the Shaw's Road Gaeltacht, Mac Póilin (2018, p. 244) claims that being part of such a community allowed him the opportunity to experience life success and to live his life in a language 'that could have died out completely sometimes over the last century'.

At the heart of this new community would be the Irish Medium Primary School, which would later become known as Bunscoil Phobal Feirste. Success celebrated by Bunscoil Phobal Feirste, academically and linguistically, influenced other communities in Belfast and other areas of Northern Ireland to set up IME schools (Nig Uidhir, 2005). Referring to the growth and sustainability of the Irish Medium sector, the Chief Inspector of ETI (2018, p. 36), noted that 'an increasing number of learners are educated through the medium of Irish, with 6184 pupils benefiting from an immersion-specific learning environment'.

The inception of Irish Medium Education in the early 1970s was pivotal in changing the educational landscape in Northern Ireland, most especially with regards to parental choice. In the beginning, parents noted Irish identity and quality of education as being two of the main advantages of being educated through the medium of Irish (Maguire, 1991). The increasing demand for Irish Medium education reflects a shift from a community venture based around

language and culture to an educational venture. Maguire (1991) suggests that there was a demand for Irish Medium Education due to a reputation for high educational standards coupled with a small teacher/ pupil ratio. Increased parental demand has promoted the development of the sector. Since it 'became obvious that GPF (the first Irish Medium primary school) alone could not cope with the large numbers seeking Irish Medium Education' (O Baoill, 2007, p. 417) a second Irish Medium primary school was established in West Belfast in 1987. As noted above, at the time of writing, figures held by ETI (2018) show that 6184 children receive their education through the medium of Irish. Those children may be in nursery, primary school or secondary school.

Since its emergence, the sector continues to experience change and development to the present day. As the system continues to improve and mature, those children currently being educated through the medium of Irish have opportunities 'to develop their cognitive and bi-literacy skills and achieve good or better standards' (ETI, 2018, p. 36) than those being educated monolingually. ETI (2018) also notes that as learners progress through the sector, they develop fluency and accuracy in both Irish and English. As a teacher I have noticed that a process of standardisation and formalisation has been pivotal to the success of the sector, and the ability to sustain immersion education in Northern Ireland. A major strength of the sector has consistently been the dedication of the staff (Mac Corraidh, 2005). Immersion teachers are generally enthusiastic about bilingualism (Baker, 2007, p. 306) and their high levels of commitment are evident in their practice and pedagogy (Swain & Johnson, 1997).

As the sector has grown and developed, it could be inferred that there has been, and perhaps still is felt a need to prove the viability of the sector as an educational option which can lead to academic success and excellence, on a par with those experiences in the English Medium sector. Research conducted by Muller (2018) on behalf of Pobal, an Irish language organisation, which focused on the further and higher education, training and employment experience of past pupils of Irish Medium Education in Belfast showed that 72.3% of respondents who answered the question specific to further and higher education were educated to degree level. Although Pobal's research was a small-scale study, such academic successes coming from within the sector may be seen in relation to the positive attributes of additive bilingualism. Bilingualism can contribute to more developed evaluation skills, a higher IQ, greater flexibility of thought and a more developed ability to problem solve (Murray, 2010).

Although possibly not the main aim of the initial founders of the urban Gaeltacht community, the growth of the sector also heralded a change in the Irish language landscape of Northern Ireland. In relation to this changing language landscape, Mac Póilin (1992) notes the role of Irish Medium education in consolidating and improving the position of the Irish language in Northern Irish society, most especially in terms of increasing the amount of bilingual families, and the general expansion of the pool of Irish speakers in the North, across all sections of the community.

Even within the very early stages of its development, the Irish Medium sector underwent rapid evolution. In the beginning, only Irish speaking children were afforded the opportunity to take advantage of this new educational opportunity. In the early stages, between 1971 and 1978, children being educated through the medium of Irish were coming from homes in which Irish was the majority language: the language of the home, the language of the community and indeed the language of educational instruction (Nig Uidhir, 2005). In order to increase the viability of the sector, to become sustainable and to attract the sort of numbers that would satisfy the Department of Education, the opportunities of Irish Medium education were extended to take in children from English speaking families (O Baoill, 2007, p. 412). Widening the sector to include children from English speaking homes has allowed the linguistic community to grow (Mac Póilin, 2018).

The changing demographic and linguistic profiles of children being educated through the medium of Irish changed the approach to teaching. Two teaching methods have been used to meet the language needs of those children coming from English speaking families: immersion education and bilingual education (Mac Póilin, 1992, p.7). The school in which the research was conducted is an immersion school and so the school was the main source of Irish language input for the majority of the children.

Many parents who opt for Irish Medium Education for their children, do not themselves speak Irish. Although some parents attend Irish classes and can use basic phrases, children now mainly come from English speaking homes. Although there are no formal records showing the amount of children coming from Irish and non-Irish speaking homes, information from the school in the study indicates that 62% of the children use English as the main home language, 10% use Irish as the main home language, 1% use French as the main home language and 27% used both English and Irish as the main home language. In light of these figures, the majority of children being educated through the medium of Irish are

receiving their educational instruction through a minority/second language. This appears to reflect the general situation regarding Irish in Northern Ireland**.**

As the language profiles of families and children changed, this presented a challenge for school staff (Nig Uidhir, 2005) and thus 'two further trends emerged at the community level' (O Baoill, 2007, p. 411). These involved the provision of pre-school education and Irish language classes for parents. In an English language dominated landscape such as Northern Ireland, such changes aimed to reflect the need not only to provide children with positive language experiences and models, but also to lay down the foundations of functional language proficiency, which could be supported in the home, even at a limited level, and which would in turn allow children to develop the basic language proficiency and accuracy to access the academic curriculum. Irish Medium nursery experiences lay down the linguistic foundations upon which primary and secondary immersion experiences build (Mhic Aoidh, 2020). As mentioned above, the role of the CA in supporting children's language development, which was the focus for this study, is of great importance at this stage of schooling as children begin to develop an understanding of the L2.

2.2. Immersion Pedagogy and Initial Teacher Education in Northern Ireland

As the sector expanded at primary and secondary level, the need for third level provision to prepare teachers to work in the Irish Medium sector was recognised (Mac Corraidh, 2004). It could be argued that immersion pedagogy, and the challenges facing teachers to deliver a second language and academic content call for a robust training programme at the stage of Initial Teacher Education. In the early stages of Irish Medium Education in Northern Ireland, teachers working within the sector had either followed the Bachelor of Education (BEd) undergraduate degree or Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) postgraduate route through Initial Teacher Education, in English, but as noted by Mac Corraidh (2004) had no particular training to teach in an immersion programme.

Teachers currently working within the Irish Medium sector are only required to possess the equivalent qualifications of those required to work in monolingual schools. DENI (2010) states that Initial Teacher Education programmes are designed, structured and assessed in a way that meets the Teacher Competences as laid down by The General Teaching Council of Northern Ireland, but there is nothing relating to Irish medium teaching competence. The General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (2011) note that coupled with appropriate levels of qualification to teach, teachers in Irish Medium schools and other bilingual contexts,

as well has having linguistic ability, should possess sufficient pedagogical knowledge to teach the curriculum. In the case of Irish Medium schools, competence and fluency in Irish can be demonstrated both by qualification and willingness to communicate both verbally and in written form in Irish.

After demands for change in policy with regard to teacher training for the Irish Medium sector (Andrews, 1995), one of the main teacher training institutions in Northern Ireland, Saint Mary's University College Belfast, now offers an Irish Medium route through their BEd Course, as well as offering an Irish Medium PGCE. The first cohort to follow this Irish Medium route graduated in June 2000 (Mac Corraidh, 2004). Both routes tackle issues of relevance to Irish Medium Education and immersion pedagogy, helping beginning teachers develop the knowledge, understanding and skills necessary to teach in an immersion classroom. As part of their qualification, those who complete either route receive a Certificate of Bilingual Education. Research conducted by Ní Chinnéide (2009) highlighted one area of development within the sector as being the need for Continued Professional Development of teachers, targeted to help teachers fulfil the demands of teaching in the immersion environment to meet the needs of the bilingual learner. There are now opportunities for teachers to follow an Irish Medium specific pathway of study at Masters level in order to develop the sector, through increased opportunities for critical reflection and creative thinking amongst practitioners. Prior to this, professional development for teachers in the Irish Medium sector mainly happened in a less formal manner by way of in-service training and staff attendance at the annual conference organised by Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta who is the representative organisation for Irish Medium Education in Northern Ireland. The findings of this dissertation will be pivotal in providing support for teachers and CAs with regard to what can be considered 'good practice' in collaborative teaching for learning in the immersion setting.

2.3. The context of the case study school

The school which provides the context for this research study is one of longest established Irish Medium primary schools in Northern Ireland.

The school is situated in a ward of high social deprivation and most of the children come from the local catchment area. Internal school data shows that in the school year 2017/2018, 53.5% of children were entitled to Free School Meals. In the same academic year, 17.4% of the school's population were recorded on the school's Additional Support Register. Since the

school is based in an area of high social deprivation, many of the children present with varying early learning/ language experiences and varying networks of support in the home. This can have an impact on how they engage with schooling and the education process.

The case study school is a one form entry school which means that there is one class per year group, with approximately 30 children per class. When this study was conducted, the school staff was made up of an almost even mix of teachers and CAs: 9 teachers and 7 CAs. 3 CAs were employed specifically to support children with additional needs whilst the other 4 CAs assisted with general learning and teaching in the Nursery and Foundation Stage classrooms working with children aged 3-5 years old. There is a Literacy Coordinator who is concerned with bilingual literacy and a Foundation Stage Coordinator who also plays a pivotal role in developing Irish Literacy in the early years.

2.4. Context of Irish Medium Education in Northern Ireland: Summary

This chapter has offered an overview of Irish Medium Education in Northern Ireland. The overview has focused on the emergence of the sector, the growth and development of the sector and some associated challenges.

Irish Medium Education began in Northern Ireland in 1971 and has continued to expand and develop over the last five decades. Since its emergence, Irish Medium Education has offered a unique approach to education in Northern Ireland giving parents the option to choose bilingual education for their children, with the aim that they will become bilingual and biliterate.

In the early stages. Irish Medium Education was only available to those children for whom Irish was L1. However, in order to secure funding from the Department of Education and to sustain the development of the sector, Irish Medium Education was offered to children from English speaking families. Widening the sector to afford children from English speaking homes the opportunity to be educated through the medium of Irish heralded a change in the linguistic profile of children and consequently the approach to teaching changed. A change in demographic has meant that the majority of children who are currently being educated through the medium of Irish are being educated through the L2 and so are being immersed in the L2 in the school environment. This is known as immersion education.

Immersion education, which is the type of bilingual education that relates to this study, will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter where the literature relating to bilingual education will be reviewed and where theories of second language learning will be examined.

Chapter 3: The Role and Deployment of the CA

The main purpose of this research project was to investigate the role that CAs played in supporting learning and teaching in the Irish Medium immersion classroom. A secondary aim was to investigate the role that CAs played in developing children's development of L2 proficiency. There is a gap in the literature regarding the role of CAs in the immersion context. There has been research conducted in monolingual school settings regarding the role of CAs, but very few in the context of Northern Ireland, and there appear to be none regarding developing children's language in the early years immersion classroom. The role of the CA has not been investigated in the immersion context. This thesis is therefore significant as it aims to address this gap and can provide a starting point for investigating the role of CAs with regard to developing young children's language in general in the NI context, but in particular it offers a valuable contribution to understanding their role in the immersion classroom in the early years. Additionally, this thesis is also important because it addresses an area that is under-researched in general regarding perceptions of the role of CAs in learning and teaching in the early years classroom.

This review of the literature will discuss the role and deployment of CAs in schools, with an emphasis on their pedagogical input to support learning and teaching, finishing with a brief overview of immersion education and language learning from a sociocultural perspective. The literature to be reviewed has been chosen because, as well as focusing on teachers' and CAs' perceptions of the role they play in teaching and learning as a whole, this study also focuses on the pedagogical role of CAs in helping children develop L2 proficiency in immersion education, which is a form of bilingual education. It is important to have a clear understanding of the role of the CA in the immersion setting, therefore the literature about bilingualism and immersion is necessary to set the context to engender an understanding of the CA in this setting.

3.1. What is a CA?

Many adults, with varying degrees of expertise, work with children in schools providing educational and pastoral support (Tucker, 2009). This adult support in the classroom does not include parental helpers, or other volunteers. Several terms have been used to refer to those adults who support children in schools, but who do not adopt the role of a qualified teacher (Rhodes, 2006). CAs are referred to by a number of titles including learning assistants and teaching assistants. For the purpose of this dissertation, the term CA has been used to refer to

those adults who work alongside class teachers to aid learning and teaching in the classroom setting.

It has been a challenge to find a succinct definition of the role of the CA. Tucker (2009) argues that the role of the CA is difficult to define but is adamant that it must be understood in relation to a partnership between class teacher and CAs and suggests that CAs must possess the ability to understand both children and the curriculum. According to Groom (2006) whilst some CAs are employed to support children with additional educational needs, the majority of CAs appear to fulfil a generic support role in the classroom. Building on the idea of a partnership, The Education Endowment Foundation (2017) which supports school leaders and teachers in raising attainment amongst the poorest pupils in English schools, refers to CAs as adults who support the teacher in a classroom across a range of duties ranging from administrative tasks to a more academic, pedagogical input.

Noting the positive impact of CAs, Sharples et al. (2015, p.9) refer to CAs as being a 'committed resource', which implies that CAs are a willing and enthusiastic component of the school framework, who have much to offer in terms of providing guidance and support for children. CAs who have been employed in a particular school for a number of years will have hidden intellectual and practical knowledge gained through participating in school life (Burgess et al., 2007).

In the context of Northern Ireland, three types of CA role are operational in schools: a general assistant, a special needs assistant and a CA. A general assistant provides support for children with physical and/or medical difficulties. Special Educational Needs assistants provide 1-1 support for children who are deemed to have additional educational needs as a result of the statementing [3] process, and who have been issued with a Statement of Educational Need. Generally, a CA usually works in the Nursery and Foundation Stage of early primary for the benefit of all children in a class to aid the general teaching and learning in the Nursery and Foundation Stage classroom.

3.2. The impact of the CA's role

[3] The statementing process refers to a process of statutory assessment carried out by the Education Authority to investigate a child's educational needs. A statement lays out the needs of the child and the support that he/she should have in the educational environment.

The role of a CA in schools is broad and varied, and centres around offering support. The support offered by CAs is fourfold: support for the class teacher, support for the school, curriculum support and support for individual learners (Balshaw, 2010). Support may take the form of educational, personal, social or emotional support. Butt (2016), drawing on international studies, identified three models of CA support in classrooms. The first model is referred to as the 1-1 model, which engenders a high level of student dependence on the CA. The second model, is referred to as the class support model which is based on the concept of teacher directed support for CA intervention in the classroom, with increased cooperation between teacher and CA. The third support model is the itinerant support model where a CA may offer support across several classes with different teachers and multiple students. In this model teachers act as host (Giangreco & Doyle, 2007) to children with learning difficulties, whilst the CA, when present, assumes the role of the primary educator.

The support role fulfilled by CAs has undergone change and has evolved beyond the concept of the CA as 'classroom helper' (Groom, 2006, p. 199) with more of an emphasis being placed on the role of the CA in supporting learning and teaching in the classroom. This change in role definition recognises the pedagogical input they provide. As outlined below, CAs' pedagogical input has, however, been questioned and contested.

As the educational landscape continues to evolve, CAs have become an integral part of classroom life. One quarter of the workforce in schools in England is made up of CAs (Sharples et al., 2015). Sharples et al. (2015) note that the number of CAs employed in schools has risen from 79 000 in 2000 to approximately 243 700 in 2015. Internationally, CAs account for a significant component of the workforce in Canada, USA, Ireland and Finland (Giangreco & Doyle, 2007). CAs make up 63% of early years staff in the study school. The increase in CA presence could be an indication of the complex needs with which children present in the classroom and a response to the inclusion of children with additional needs in the mainstream classroom (Wilson et al., 2003). A similar situation is evident in the US where CAs are seen to be the only way of supporting children with additional needs in the mainstream setting (Giangreco, Suter & Doyle, 2010). A similar situation is also evident in Australia (Butt, 2016). In England, an increased CA presence in schools may have also been as a result of the inceptions of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies (DfES, 1998: DfES, 1999).

The growing number of CAs supporting learning may also relate to increasing class sizes and the complexity of the primary curriculum (Kay, 2005) where CAs are needed to help schools provide a safe, positive and fruitful learning environment for all learners. It has also been noted that CAs in mainstream schools may adopt the role of primary educator, especially for those children in need (Sharples et al., 2015). Such high levels of responsibility are neither favourable for CAs or students (Bourke & Carrington, 2007). Increasingly, CAs are becoming more involved in learning and teaching, often being used as substitute teachers, which sees the parameters of the role crossing boundaries, with more of an emphasis on teaching than supporting (Warhurst et al., 2014). Furthermore, the deployment of CAs to cover staff absence, to provide 'wrap around' care for children or to facilitate teacher engagement in planning, preparation and assessment has been described as a "cost-effective staffing resource" (Skipp & Hopwood, 2019, p. 7). A study conducted by Roffey-Barentsen & Watt (2014) which examines how CAs offer value for money in schools highlights that, whilst CAs covering teacher absence offers continuity, deployment of CAs in this way may also be driven by monetary concern. CAs covering teacher absence are cheaper than hiring a supply teacher. This study suggests that CAs may resent being deployed in such a way, with Barentsen & Watt (2014) reporting that CAs were dissatisfied at the prospect of supervising whole classes, often feeling out of their depth when faced with such a situation.

In Northern Ireland, the release of The Special Educational Needs and Disability Order (SENDO) in 2005 placed great emphasis on promoting greater inclusion in the mainstream setting. Increasing demands on teachers and the diverse nature of those children with additional needs entering the school system mean that certain aspects of inclusion require extra adult presence and assistance in the mainstream setting. In such instances, CAs have been used to support the needs of the teacher and the class, increasing the opportunity for worthwhile and meaningful interaction in the classroom (Russell et al., 2013). Where CAs are used wisely, support can be provided that allows all children to succeed and reach their potential (Webster et al., 2013).

The support role of the CA in schools is multifaceted and varied in nature. CAs engage in a variety of tasks to support teachers and learners in the classroom aiming to enhance children's learning experiences. The impact of CA intervention in schools depends on a number of factors which will be discussed in more detail below.

3.3. The impact of CA deployment in schools

The role and the effectiveness of CAs have been explored extensively in the context of the Scottish and English education systems (Sharples et al. 2015: Wilson et al. 2003: Burgess et al. 2007: Rubie-Davies et al. 2010 & Webster et al. 2013). Current research pertaining to the deployment of CAs could be said to be controversial and highlights varying, contradicting attitudes to the role, the effectiveness and to the impact of CAs on children's learning (Wilson et al. 2003; Burgess & Moyes, 2007). As far as I can ascertain, despite an extensive search of the literature, this role remains relatively unexplored in the context of the Northern Irish education system. Explorations of the role of the CA in Northern Ireland thus far have centred on perceptions of the CA in secondary schools, the value of the CA in the classroom and the role of the CA in promoting an inclusive learning environment for learners with additional needs. This is very different to the issues being addressed in this study. This study is significant as the first study to explore the teachers' and CAs' perceptions of the role, as well as exploring their role in language acquisition**.**

Opinions around the effective employment and deployment of CAs to guarantee maximum positive impact on students' learning are variable, with research findings from the Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project, which will be discussed in more detail below, not fully aligning with the positive views of schools and teachers (Russell et. al., 2013). The Education Endowment Foundation (2017) suggests that evidence relating to the deployment and impact of CAs in England is limited and varied.

A major corpus of research that assessed the impact of CAs in England was the DISS project (Blatchford et al., 2012) conducted between 2003 and 2008 which focused on the impact of CA presence on academic learning and progression. Findings from this project were predominantly negative and highlighted the fact that those most vulnerable students made little academic progress, even with high levels of CA support. In attempting to explain the low level of impact, Radford et al. (2013) suggest that high levels of support from the CA can often lead to low levels of support from the class teacher. Supporting this line of thinking, it could be inferred therefore, that the issue of the effectiveness of CAs is not necessarily related to the work of the CA per se, but the utilisation of the CA. Throughout the DISS project, no fault was attributed directly to the CA, but fault was found with their deployment, and issues surrounding training and qualifications, all factors which influence levels of impact. A study conducted by Wilson et al. (2003) also noted issues around a lack of time and lack of collaboration influencing the effectiveness of CAs in the classroom. Wilson et al.

(2003) argued that 25% of CAs in their study claimed that they spent no time liaising with the class teacher. I was curious to discover if any of the issues identified above might be pertinent to my study.

Furthermore, The DISS Project (2008) highlighted pitfalls in practice and called for reflection by schools and school leaders to identify areas for improvement. Following on from the DISS project, subsequent research around the deployment of CAs in schools has focused on raising levels of CA impact, with a focus on upskilling the workforce. Radford et al. (2013, p.5.) note that 'in order to deliver effective support, teaching assistants' pedagogical practice should be informed by relevant theories of teaching and learning'. CAs could therefore enhance the role of the teacher in the process of learning and teaching, rather than attempting to replace teacher input without any training in the education process. Similarly, in the American context, where the role of CAs in the classroom has diversified, and where there is disconnection between the demands of the role, and CAs' levels of training to meet these demands (Gerber et al., 2001), CAs are often unprepared for the capacity in which they act in the classroom.

Many factors influence, both positively and negatively, the deployment of CAs in the classroom and have an impact on their ability to fulfil the duties associated with their role effectively. Factors influencing the quality of deployment include training, qualifications, relationships, collaboration, and management. These will be discussed individually in more detail below.

3.4. Qualifications and Training

Questions exist around the levels of training and qualifications needed to be a CA. CAs engage in many tasks in schools that reflect the breadth and ever-increasing demands of the role. These tasks may be functional in nature, or may be more pedagogical in nature, where CAs have direct input in supporting learning and teaching in the classroom. Given the responsibility that CAs carry, internationally, there are questions regarding the adequacy of their qualifications to meet the demands of such a role.

A comparative study (Breyer et al., 2020) looking at the role of CAs in supporting the inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream schools in five European countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Portugal, Slovakia and the UK) highlights variations in qualification requirements to fulfil the role of CAs. In the majority of these five European countries, there

are no specific qualifications required to work as a CA. In contrast to the other four countries, Slovakia presents as the only country in which CAs need to be educated to a certain level, either having completed the upper secondary education, or having an undergraduate degree in pedagogy. Similarly, in Finland, there is an expectation that CAs will have engaged in formal education in preparation for the post, having completed at least 40 study weeks, with opportunities during this time to engage in practice in the field (Takala, 2007).

Such levels of qualification are not always required in other contexts/countries. In England, Sharples et al. (2015, p.15) note that 'there are no specific entry qualifications for teaching assistants, and many do not receive any induction training'. Similarly in the Scottish context, when employing CAs, greater importance is placed on the CA's personality than his/her qualification set. Findings from a study, which elicited the responses of 2000 head teachers, teachers and CAs in a national survey, as well as drawing on interviews with directors of education in nearly half of all Scottish authorities, show that 84% of head teachers who took part in the study believed personality to be the most desirable attribute when hiring CAs (Warhurst et al., 2014). It could be deduced, therefore, that CAs are not fully qualified to undertake the pedagogical tasks associated with their role. Russell et al.'s (2005) study of teaching assistants in English Key Stage 2 classes highlights how imprecise career entry paths for CAs are.

Internationally, CAs who have very few qualifications, or indeed who are unqualified, can often provide extensive support to children (Butt, 2016). In the USA, when CAs work in an instructional capacity, Gerber et al. (2001) suggest that often, since they have no formal preparation and minimal educational attainment, they are not always prepared for the demands of a role which requires an understanding of how children learn. Furthermore, CAs are often central in supporting the behavioural and emotional needs of children in the classroom. This sort of work requires an understanding of the characteristics of nurture and how to implement it effectively. Russell et al., (2013) question whether CAs are sufficiently qualified for the demands of such a role.

As educators, when we are concerned with the holistic development of children, it is important to remember that not all aspects of progress can or should be viewed in relation to academic progress and attainment. Rubie-Davies et al. (2010) claim that CA input can be personalised and differentiated to meet the needs of students. CA input can also serve to nurture and provide emotional support (Russel et al., 2013). Support offered to learners by

CAs can be pastoral as well as educational (Tucker, 2009) and thus can increase levels of engagement in the formal learning process. It could be understood from this then that through informal interaction and the establishment of positive relationships between CAs and pupils, CAs can positively impact on the educational experiences of those whom they support. Sharples et al. (2015) suggest that when CAs deliver targeted intervention on 1-1, or small group basis, a positive impact on attainment can be seen. With regards to such targeted intervention, The Education Endowment Foundation (2017) suggest that optimum positive impact occurs when class teachers and CAs work collaboratively amidst structures of support, training and mutual respect.

Referring to the lack of training for CAs, Burgess et al. (2007) suggest that the role of the CA has a number of tensions, some of which stem from the conflict between the CA as learner, and as worker. Often, CAs may be developing knowledge and skills on the job, that is, learning through practice. In relation to the CAs as learner and worker, many class teachers do not work collaboratively with them and hope or assume that the CA will learn on the job with no direct instruction (Calder & Grieve, 2004). This issue around their own learning and professional development adds an added dimension to their interactions in the classroom. Since time is spent training on the job, developing pedagogical awareness, interpersonal skills and those practical skills needed to work effectively and intuitively with children, this could detract from the power of the CA's interactions with the children. Additionally, working with a CA can be seen by teachers as an additional management responsibility. The management of CAs sees class teachers adopting a position for which they have not been prepared (Woolfson & Truswell, 2005). Since much guidance and instruction is needed for CAs who are learning on the job, a high level of input from teachers is needed. When teachers need to provide direction, guidance and support, this impacts on the time they have to engage in other duties such as planning and assessing.

Issues therefore surrounding formal education, communication and finding the time to work productively and collaboratively with teachers can all be said to impact on the effectiveness of the CA.

A lack of training for CAs to fulfil their role and to meet the potential of their role in the classroom, points to the importance of providing opportunities for CAs to engage in inset training to enhance their personal and professional development. Although the provision of training for CAs is limited (Gerber et al., 2001: Radford et al., 2014), a shortfall in CAs'

knowledge and understanding should be met with action (Webster et al., 2016). Opportunities for engagement in professional learning could enhance the effectiveness of the role of CAs in the classroom, allowing them to act skilfully in their roles (Balshaw, 2010). Additionally, access to adequate training could allow CAs to act with confidence and competence (Ofsted, 2003), and as noted by DfES (2004) would offer recognition of the professional input of CAs and the need to support this role in schools. It is important that the provision of training for CAs links theory with practice to allow CAs to build on the skills and knowledge used in the classroom (Groom, 2006). As suggested by Balshaw (2010) the attitude of school leaders can influence the potential of the role of CAs and can influence CAs' engagement with training. Balshaw (2010) also suggests that CAs can be deployed creatively in such a way that they support one another in their learning and professional development.

3.5. Relationships

Relationships in schools can be complex and exist on many levels: staff relations, relationships between staff and children and their parents, relationships between children themselves and relationships that exist between parents and children. The development of professional working relationships can positively influence the working environment (DfEE, 2000) and can promote collegiality and collaboration when class teachers and CAs work together with a shared vision.

When carrying out their classroom duties, class teachers and CAs work closely together and thus establish close working relationships, with an emphasis on working together for a similar purpose (Woolfson & Truswell, 2005). The ability to work together is influenced by many factors and can influence how CAs are deployed in the classroom effectively.

Whilst positive relationships often exist between class teachers and CAs, as noted by Kay (2005) relationships between both can at times be difficult. Teachers and CAs often work in different pairings and these pairings can change often. When pairings change, the establishment of a relationship between teacher and CA can take time to develop. In instances where positive professional relationships develop, teachers and CA can work together with a mutual respect and awareness of how the other works. Regarding the development of relationships, Groom (2006, p. 201) describes the relationship between class teachers and CA as a 'partnership'. This partnership influences the deployment of CAs. When the partnership is well established and supportive and clear expectations exist for the deployment of CAs,

their role in the classroom can be purposeful and productive. The expectations for the role of the CA can vary from teacher to teacher which influences how the class teacher and CA collaborate for maximum effect to support learning and teaching in the classroom. As part of this study, I wanted to gain teachers' and CAs' perceptions of their collaborative relationships. This will be discussed in more detail below in relation to collaboration and planning.

Also, relationships that exist between adults can impact on how children view relationships. Adults, in their dealings with one another, may model positive interactions and good relationships for children. Where CAs work closely with children in the classroom, it is important that the relationships that develop between children and CAs are founded in trust, care and respect (Groom, 2006, p. 201). Relationships that are founded in trust can influence the impact of the CA's role in the classroom.

3.6. Opportunities for Collaboration and Planning

For purposes of maximising the input of CAs in the classroom, it is important to provide opportunities for collaboration. In Finnish schools, there is in fact an expectation that class teachers and CAs will work collaboratively to support children through the learning process, with this collaboration being characterised by good communication (Takala, 2007). A study focussing on CAs' interpretation of their role in the classroom uncovered common consensus among participants that part time CAs felt unable to voice their opinion due to a lack of opportunity or feeling that they didn't have the 'right' (Roffey-Barentsen & Watt, 2014, p. 26), which influences the impact of collaboration and planning to direct the role of CAs in the classroom. I was curious to see if any of these issues would arise in my study.

A lack of planning opportunities can lead to a lack of information being shared between teachers and CAs, which means that tasks can be allocated to CAs in an 'ad hoc' (Roffey-Barentsen & Watt, 2014, p.27) manner. When planning is impromptu or 'opportunistic' (Roffey-Barentsen & Watt, 2014, p.28), CAs carry out the duties associated with their role with a lack of prior knowledge and instruction (Parker et al., 2009), which can affect the effectiveness of CA input in the classroom. In such circumstances, where CAs do not always understand the thinking behind such unpredictable decisions, or where it may be difficult to adapt to a teacher's pattern of decision making there may be a need for adaptability, which may not always be possible.

Setting aside a designated time for class teachers and CAs to meet and collaborate can enhance the role of the CA in the classroom (Parker et al., 2009). In order to maximise the role of the CA in schools, time for collaborative dialogue and planning is important, yet difficult to find. Opportunities for class teachers and CAs to collaborate and plan are however essential to generating shared expectations (Briggs, 2012) for CA input in the classroom. Such opportunities can serve to validate the ideas put forward by CAs and offer direction to their input in schools. When expectations and planning are shared beforehand, CAs can carry out their duties with direction, confidence and independence. Not only does this increase the CAs' awareness of the nature of the support needed (Groom, 2006), it can also allow CAs to take ownership (Kay, 2005) over what they do in the classroom. In this way they can work with purpose, adopt responsibility in classroom, carry out their role more efficiently with focus, which will add to the overall effectiveness of their role.

Furthermore, opportunities for collaborative work (Groom & Rose, 2005) facilitate the sharing of good practice to enhance the role of the CA in the classroom. When class teachers and CAs plan effectively, they work together with a joint approach, which in turn can enhance the quality of curriculum delivery for all (Balshaw, 2010). Due to time constraints and the business of the school environment, it may not always be logistically possible for CAs and teachers come together to plan.

Ideally, CAs therefore would be directly involved in planning, or teachers would complete planning independently and discuss methods of delivery with CAs at a later date (Kay, 2005). Collaborative planning between teachers and CAs can positively impact on teachers in that children's learning is led suitably (Rhodes, 2006).

Although the involvement of CAs in planning can be a positive experience for both class teachers and CAs, being able to facilitate opportunities for collaborative planning is not without challenge. Having discussed research relating to the role of the CA and accompanying issues, the review of the literature will now provide some information about the context in which the study was conducted, the immersion setting, to assist the reader in developing an understanding of the specific issues related to the context.

3.7. Bilingualism

As a form of bilingual education, immersion schooling aims for additive bilingualism (Lyster, 1987) by producing bilingual pupils who are fluent and comfortable in using more than one language. Additive bilingualism sees the second language as having an equal level of importance to the child's first language (Cummins, 1998). Proficiency in the first language is not sacrificed in order to promote proficiency in a second language. Additive bilingualism pertains to this study and will be discussed in more detail in the discussion of immersion education.

3.8. Immersion Education

Immersion models of education teach students through a minority language, where the L2 curriculum parallels the L1 curriculum (Swain & Johnson, 1997). Examples of this can be seen in Canada, New Zealand, Scotland and Spain as well as other countries. The concept of immersion education grew from a Canadian education experiment in the 1960s (Baker, 2007). This educational experiment was inspired and powered by parental desire for their children to be taught through the medium of French: to be bilingual, bicultural and to achieve academically. Like Canada, a small group of parents in Northern Ireland wished for their children to be taught through the medium of a minority language, in this instance, Irish. It was this parental activism that initiated immersion schooling in Northern Ireland.

Immersion education used with majority English speakers shows that learners can become biliterate and bilingual in two languages (Roberts, 1995: Johnstone, 1999: Johnstone & McKinstry, 2008). This study investigated the role of the CA in the immersion classroom from the perspective of school leaders, class teachers and CAs themselves. Since the CA is an additional source of Irish Language for the children in the immersion classroom, this study also has a view to making recommendations regarding strategies to enhance CAs' support for L2 learning in the classroom.

Although teachers, parents, government organisations, charitable organisations are interested in the benefits of being educated in the immersion context, there is still limited research with regards to Irish Language immersion programmes in Northern Ireland. Much of this bank of research has a historical or political focus, whereas this study examines practical educational strategies which could be of benefit to practitioners and learners. As well as addressing the dearth in the literature, this study also aims to provide a starting point for scholars who wish to investigate Irish Medium education especially regarding the development of language acquisition and more specifically the role of the CA in children's language acquisition.

3.9. Approaches to learning in Immersion Education Programmes

Immersion education is a system of education where children are educated through a language which is not the language of the home (Andrews, 2006). Immersion programmes of education may follow various models of immersion: partial immersion, dual language immersion and total immersion (Hurajová, 2015). Total immersion occurs when children are immersed 100% in the target language (Baker, 2007), most especially in the early years. It is this type of full immersion that is appropriate to the context of this study.

In the context of the Irish Medium approach in Northern Ireland, on entering the school environment the majority of children, who come from English speaking homes, are fully immersed in the second language. Irish becomes the language of communication and academia while the children are in school. In the immersion setting, language instruction and acquisition are 'embedded in meaningful tasks' (Hickey & de Mejía, 2014, p.135).

For some bilingual learners, immersion can be a school only phenomenon (Baker, 2007) and second language exposure may be limited to the classroom (Swain & Johnson, 1997). In this study, it is possible that for many children, their only exposure to Irish may be in school. It is therefore important that the language that learners are exposed to in school is as rich and interactive as possible.

It could be argued that in school, children learn the language of socialisation and academia in tandem (Lyster, 2007). Nursery and early years staff, such as teachers and CAs, therefore, play a major role in helping children develop understanding and proficiency in L2. In terms of the development of language proficiency, Cummins (2000) differentiates between the contextual language needed by children to interact socially and the language competence that is needed in the educational context. Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) refers to the ability to communicate in a social context and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) refers to the breadth and depth of language needed to be educated effectively through a second language, that is, the specialised language appropriate to specific subject areas and the language needed to describe subject specific concepts. CALP also refers to the learners' ability to articulate understanding using the L2. Thus, he differentiates between language needed to communicate on a practical, social level and the abstract, higher order language of the classroom. The higher order of language needed to access educational content takes time to develop through exposure, modelling, scaffolding, and opportunities for use. By seizing formal and informal opportunities to converse with children, CAs continually

and consistently support the development of children's use and understanding of social language as well as their academic progress.

As children engage with the formal process of schooling, language demands at an academic level increase. A very specific type of language, CALP, is required to engage with the schooling process and to experience academic achievement (Cummins, 2000). Bourdieu (2000) suggests that those children who lack linguistic capital, that is, those who may have had poor early language experiences, may struggle with language in the educational domain, regardless of the language of academic instruction. In the immersion environment, the role of Nursery experiences cannot be underestimated, therefore, due to their purpose in equipping children with the language of basic communication, BICS, which is needed to communicate on an inter-personal level through the medium of the second language (Halbach, 2012) and which can be developed through interaction with teachers and CAs. Developing this type of language lays down the linguistic foundations to be built upon with the more formal language of academic instruction.

Since a secondary focus of this study is on developing language proficiency in the immersion setting relevant theories of second language learning will now be discussed. Given the limited scope of this dissertation, it would not be feasible to discuss each theory of language learning in great depth. Therefore, a brief overview will be given of those theories which pertain to the context of the study.

3.10. Theories of Second Language Learning

The main theories of learning which informed this dissertation included socio-linguistic and socio-cultural theories. A distinction has been made between learning a language and acquiring a language (Krashen, 1984). Elements of this study will focus on how language is acquired naturally in an immersion setting, with the help and support of CAs, rather than learned where the learner makes a conscious effort to learn form, rules and structure.

3.10.1. Language viewed from a sociocultural perspective

Children's understanding develops, as they actively construct knowledge, understanding and skills through their interactions with those around them (Vygotsky, 1978). It could therefore be argued that aspects of learning find their roots in a child's life experiences (Gray & MacBlain, 2005). The nature of a child's environment, age, culture and interaction can all

influence his or her development either positively or negatively (Hoff, 2006). One major component of a child's development of cognition is the role of language, which pertains to the secondary focus of this study.

Proficiency in a language runs much deeper than the ability to construct sentences and implement grammar rules in response to well informed habit formation. Watson-Gegeo & Nielsen (2003, p. 156) note that language learning is both cognitive and social. Socio-linguistic and socio-cultural theories emphasise the social element of the learning process in the acquisition of a second language. Baker (2007) suggests that language is a tool for communication with others in a social setting.

Sociolinguistic and sociocultural theories (Vygotsky 1978, Mercer 2004) view the learner as a social being who learns language, coupled with academic content in a language rich environment where the target language is constantly visible and audible. CAs, through their modelled interaction with class teachers and through their general interactions with children, help create a language rich environment and thus support the development of children's linguistic ability.

From Vygotsky's perspective, all speech is social in its language and in its function (Vygotsky, 1978: Smidt, 2009). It is through speech and interaction that children share their thoughts, ideas and acquired knowledge, as they develop a sense and understanding of the world around them. Through listening to one another and responding to the views of others, children not only develop their own language ability, but they can also 'develop and enhance their own understanding' (Gray & MacBlain, 2015, p. 96). To support learners' cognition and social development, language input, modelling and scaffolding are important (Bruner, 1978). In the early years through their interactions with children in small group situations or on a 1-1 basis, CAs in the immersion classroom are heavily involved in the development of children's understanding and use of L2 through modelling correct language use and scaffolding to encourage the children to begin to orally produce in the L2. Because of its relevance to this study, where children are learning in a second language, modelling and scaffolding will be discussed in more detail below in relation to sociocultural learning.

Vygotsky (1978) suggests that it is in The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) that learning can most productively take place. The ZPD refers to the 'gap' between those skills that are currently too difficult for children to master alone, but which can be mastered with

guidance and encouragement from someone who is more knowledgeable. Language is the tool with which the more knowledgeable other guides the learner. In the ZPD, the discussion that takes place as the learner is assisted to complete the task, leads to mastery of the task. The social process and interaction between child and adult, or more knowledgeable other is an important component in the facilitation of learning, (Arshad & Hsuch Chan, 2009) but this 'expert' input does not necessarily have to be another adult. Learning can be co-operative, in collaboration between a more competent learner and a less competent learner.

In relation to the ZPD, the gap between what a child can do and what he/she could do with help (Smidt, 2009, p. 89) refers to the 'notion of potential'. The potential is what a child can do with help and support. Those working with children are therefore focused in moving a learner from the level of performance to the level of potential. This is done in the ZPD. When working with children, adults are 'tasked with developing a self-regulated and increasingly competent learner' (Gray & MacBlain, 2015, p. 100). Cognitive apprenticeship, which emphasises the importance of the interaction between an 'expert' and novice, can be aided through interaction and through the use of increasingly cognitively challenging learning tasks (Gibbons, 2002). The concepts of scaffolding and the Zone of Proximal Development are relevant to the study because the CA represents a more knowledgeable other who can not only help develop the children's language, but also supports the development of their cognitive processes.

The early years immersion classroom is characterised by high levels of adult/child interaction. Interaction leading to learning should be of relevance to the learner and should be at a level which is slightly higher than the child's level of production (Krashen, 1984). In order to make language comprehensible, adults in the immersion classroom use 'caretaker speech' (Baker, 2007, p. 308). This is language and speech that is simple, repetitive and slower than the normal rate, which facilitates appropriate understanding and language development (Chaudron, 1988). To further encourage understanding and language consolidation, the speech of class teachers and CAs is complemented using visual, practical contextual objects, and/or body language (Andrews, 2018).

In response to the work of Vygotsky, Bruner (1978) developed the concept of scaffolding. The term scaffolding is often used to describe the level of support provided to help a child reach his/her level of potential in their ZPD. This is temporary, interactional support that will help a child develop; the adult words and actions and the discussion between both parties

allow children to construct their own knowledge. 'Though scaffolding offers a structure to learning, it does not imply a rigid structure' (Gray & MacBlain, 2015, p. 141). Throughout the process of scaffolding, therefore, small manageable chunks of information and purposeful activities are provided by the more knowledgeable other to help the learner achieve their goal. This is a gradual process of learning in which the learner is encouraged to master that which is within grasp before moving to a higher level of learning. Supports are gradually withdrawn as learners develop mastery. Teachers, CAs and students are partners in the collaborative learning process (Gibbons, 2002). In the context of the case-study school, targeted adult input reduces as children progress through the Key Stages [4].

Learning which is scaffolded through modelling helps develop understanding and proficiency. In the immersion setting, language learning is scaffolded in a highly social and collaborative interactive classroom setting (Gibbons, 2002). By providing a stimulating environment and engaging lessons, adults have a prominent role in the development of language proficiency and modelling appropriate language use. It is important to note that the scaffolding of language learning does not equate with correction. Met & Lorenz (1997) note that a fixation with correction can be detrimental for the learner and can impede communication and content learning.

In the early years, importance is placed on play, investigation, practical contextual learning experiences and interaction between children and staff, as well as interaction between children themselves. Krashen (1984) emphasised the importance of meaningful interaction and natural communication when learning a language: emphasis which at first focuses on understanding rather than on form and grammatical accuracy. Without explicit teaching, a great breadth of vocabulary and a wealth of grammatical concepts can be shared through interactions between expert and novice, in this context, the teachers and CAs and the children. Although communication between expert and novice is essential, Andrews (2006, p.19) suggests that 'dual interaction' between children must also happen throughout the process of second language acquisition. This underlines the importance of children initiating communication with other children in the target language and engaging in discussion with

[4] Key Stage refers to a child's stage of education. In Northern Ireland the Key Stages in primary school are as follows:
Nursery and Foundation Stage: children aged 3-6
Key Stage 1: children aged 6-8
Key Stage 2: children aged 8-11.

them, as well as the teacher. Promoting this dual interaction allows children to choose language for a specific purpose, control their language choice and develop their use of language as a social tool for communication (Swain, 1995). Understanding the need to provide learner to learner interactions emerged from studies of the French immersion system which showed that although learners developed good levels of linguistic fluency, they did not develop native like fluency due to a lack of extended interaction between the French learners themselves (Swain, 1995). Since accessing the speech of others helps children learn the rules of speech (Chomsky, 1976) collaboration and interaction are seen as key to developing language proficiency. As outlined in the school's Irish Literacy policy, pupil/pupil talk is important in the early years and is actively encouraged by the study school. I was therefore interested in whether this was something that CAs promoted in their work with children.

For those children who will receive their formal education through the medium of Irish, early years experiences delivered through the medium of Irish lay down the foundations upon which primary and post primary education will build (Mhic Aoidh, 2020). The exposure to the language in the early pre-school setting aims to make up for the lack of exposure in the home. With a focus on developing understanding, the provision of early years instruction through the medium of Irish should be characterised by natural language use and staff interactions beyond the pre-fabricated (Edelenbos et al., 2006). Such interactions should allow children to develop a working knowledge of communicative language so that they can develop more sophisticated language necessary for academic achievement in the primary school.

In light of the language needs of children coming from English speaking homes, Mac Póilin (1992) suggests that the role of the early years setting is two-fold: to provide a range of learning experiences that will promote holistic development and also to fulfil a linguistic function. There is the need, therefore, from the very earliest stages of education to provide good quality teaching and learning experiences through the target language. Time is needed for children to acquire the levels of language proficiency needed to access academic content (Andrews, 2008). Adult language use should therefore be accessible to help children build their language proficiency and move beyond the period when children are consolidating their understanding of the language before producing it. It is not uncommon therefore that children in the Irish Medium sector, at the level of production especially, in attempts to make sense and be understood, use a simplified grammatical code, non-standardised language and interchange the target language with the mother tongue (Andrews, 2018). Mac Póilin (1992,

p. 32) writes that ‘language learners use inter-language, or transitional language, as part of the learning process’.

In the immersion setting, an important additional source of Irish language for the children is the CA. The role of the CA will be discussed in more detail below. This discussion will focus on perceptions of the role in general, challenges of the role and the role of the CA in the Irish Medium classroom. After a thorough search of the literature, there appears to be no published research that relates to the role of the CA in the immersion setting. The discussion on the role of the CA relies, therefore, on research undertaken in general settings and not immersion settings.

3.11. CAs in the context of the Irish Medium Sector

Despite an extensive search of the literature, it appears that no research has been carried out with a specific focus on the role of CAs in the Irish Medium sector in Northern Ireland. Although not relating specifically to the role of the CA in building children’s language proficiency, a research study into Special Educational Needs (SEN) in the Irish Medium sector carried out by Ní Chinneide in 2009 found that CAs were often untrained in supporting the needs of the SEN children with whom they were working. Similar to the research conducted in England and Scotland, Ní Chinnéide (2009) discovered that a sizeable minority of CAs, 43% of those who took part in the study, lacked what they saw as adequate training. In the Irish Medium sector, where Irish language proficiency is essential, CAs may be employed because of Irish language proficiency, rather than for their pedagogical knowledge in the hope that this knowledge could develop as part of ‘on the job training’.

The Northern Ireland Curriculum for Irish Medium Primary Schools (CCEA, 2009) notes that the immersion classroom is cognitively demanding, and thus it is important to use a wide range of strategies and resources to allow children to access learning and to develop academically. The CA can be a valuable resource to support teaching and learning in this environment. Part of the curricular guidance emphasises the need for teachers to be organised to provide a range of educational experiences that will meet the needs of all learners, stating that all learners should be suitably challenged in order that they can engage with learning and in turn succeed (CCEA, 2009). Part of the teacher’s organisation of the learning will likely include managing and deploying the CA effectively to provide opportunities for him/her to work actively with children across many learning situations to enhance language acquisition and learning.

As noted above, in the early years of immersion education great emphasis is placed on children's language development, language modelling and high levels of interaction. In the immersion setting, language instruction is 'embedded in meaningful tasks' (Hickey & de Mejia, 2014, p.135). In this type of context of embedded learning, social development in the target language is seen as equally important as intellectual development. Children need to establish their position and identity in relation to each other (Andrews, 2006). Regarding aspects of interaction and language development, the role of the CA cannot be underestimated. Bowles et al. (2018) note that CAs can provide support that is emotional, curricular and relational. This means that there is great potential to deploy the CA as a learning resource to develop children's language proficiency and accuracy in the immersion classroom through the social interactions which they partake with the children. CAs influence language acquisition through their interactions with children by encouraging them to talk about their own experiences and share their knowledge (Kay, 2005). Their comprehensible input runs alongside that of the class teacher. At times interactions between CAs and children may be on a more natural level than those of the teacher who may be more concerned with delivering educational content. In relation to interactional support and input within a social constructivist context, CAs play an important role in the early years classroom, providing scaffolding in language learning (Bruner, 1978) that the children may not have in the Key Stage 1 or Key Stage 2 classroom. They are involved in developing children's language in a systematic manner through Nursery, Primary 1 and Primary 2 when opportunities for both formal and informal interaction are plentiful. CAs may be heavily involved in group work and 1-1 interaction at this level, whereas the role of the CA in Key Stage 1 and 2 pertains more to supporting children with individual needs.

3.12. The role and deployment of CAs: Summary

This chapter has addressed the role of the CA in supporting learning and teaching, the impact of this in the classroom, theories of second language learning and second language learning in the Irish language immersion classroom. This chapter has drawn on theory and reviewed the literature on the role of CAs, language learning and immersion which has informed this study. Through the review of literature, a number of key points have emerged.

This chapter outlined the role of the CA. This discussion focused on the pedagogical role of the CA to support purposeful learning and teaching in the classroom. Discussion on how CAs may be deployed examined how CAs could play a role in developing children's cognitive

ability, as well as developing children's' second language proficiency, noting that when taking their guidance from the class teachers, CAs can model language use and support children in developing second language proficiency. Furthermore, discussion on the role of CAs addressed the need for CAs to be trained to meet the demands of the role and highlighted how good communication, collaboration and the development of positive professional relationships can enhance CA deployment to positively influence classroom learning and teaching.

This chapter also discussed the main theories of learning which informed this study, namely socio-linguistic and socio-cultural theories. Since immersion education aims to replicate L1 learning, suitable emphasis is placed on the process of acquiring a language, rather than learning a language.

Following this review of the literature pertaining to the role of CAs and second language learning, I present the methodology used in this study to investigate perceptions of the role of the CA in the development of children's academic and language proficiency in the early years immersion classroom.

Chapter 4: Project Design and Methodology

4.1. Design and Tools

The main aim of this small-scale study was to explore teachers' and CAs' perceptions of the role of the CA in the early years immersion classroom. The views of the children also formed part of this study and details of their perceptions can be seen in Appendix G.

This chapter will discuss the methodology and provide justification for the methods used to collect and analyse the data. To explore the deployment of CAs from multiple perspectives a case study approach was used within one Irish immersion school. Participants came from different levels of the school's hierarchy and included members of senior and middle management, class teachers, CAs and a small selection of children. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Collected data were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. Due consideration was given to ethical issues. These, as well as my position as the 'insider' researcher will be discussed in this chapter. Issues around validity and reliability will also be discussed, with emphasis on how attempts have been made to ensure that this study could be considered valid and reliable. The role of pilot studies in supporting novice researchers to develop their research skills and to trial data collection methods will also be considered in this chapter.

The following research questions were used to guide the study on the way CAs can support learning and teaching in the Irish Medium immersion context:

- What do teachers see as the key role of CAs in the early years classroom?
- What do CAs see as their key role in the early years classroom?
- How are CAs deployed in the early years immersion classroom to help children develop language capacity?

Communication and social interaction are promoted in the immersion classroom to develop L2 proficiency (Genesee, 1985: Stein, 1999: Andrews, 2006: Mhic Aoidh, 2020). CAs have the potential to influence language development through interaction with children, both in a formal and informal manner. In the immersion context, this study is important as it is the first of its kind which focuses on the role of the CA in the immersion classroom to support the development of children's academic and L2 proficiency. Furthermore, this study examines the importance of professionally negotiating relationships to maximise the potential of the role of the CA in the classroom, and highlights how the development and maintenance of

relationships between CAs and teachers and CAs and children can influence children's L2 development.

4.2. Research Paradigms

The aim of this small-scale empirical study was to discover the various views of teachers, CAs and children regarding the deployment of the CA in the early years Irish immersion classroom. It is intended that the information gathered from this study will be disseminated in the first instance in the case study school in order to refine identified good practice and to identify areas for development in order to maximise the role of the CAs in the school. However, this study also offers practical educational strategies regarding the role of the CA, which would be of benefit to both those working in the immersion setting and the non-immersion setting. Finally, this study could act as a starting point not only to develop further studies to investigate the role of the CA in relation to children's language acquisition but also learning in general in the early years.

In the research context, paradigms are those beliefs which guide our actions (Creswell, 1994). This study attempts to determine participants' perceptions of reality, and from an ontological standpoint it aligns with an interpretivist paradigm. Interpretivist enquiry is concerned with collecting, adding to and accumulating knowledge (Lincoln, 2010) in the context of human endeavour, with a very specific focus on addressing the complexity of the perceptions and the experiences of participants (Black, 2006). Within an interpretivist paradigm, this study aimed to understand and to interpret how CAs were perceived by different groups of participants to impact upon children's L2 development in the early years Irish Medium classroom. Furthermore, this piece of practitioner research was concerned with new ways of seeing and articulating practice, with a view to refining already existing good practice, as well as identifying areas that would benefit from further development.

Interpretivist research does not replicate or theory test (Shah & Corley, 2006). This study was driven by the need to discover, rather than the need to prove a particular hypothesis. Throughout the study, meaning and understanding were generated through the encounters between me, the practitioner researcher and the participants. These meanings were relative to time, culture and the context of the study. This study, therefore, constructs and interprets the findings of a range of data collected from a variety of sources, all related to the context, making sense of the information that people have shared (Cao Thanh & Le Thanh, 2015).

The views of participants were pivotal in generating meaningful rich data, that were relevant to, and reflective of their interpretations of the issue (Shah & Corley, 2006).

By focusing on one school as a case study, this study offered the opportunity to explore the complexity and meaning of a specific situation (Black, 2006) in relation to the use of CAs. Since, from an interpretivist perspective, reality is subjective and socially constructed (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011) direct interaction with participants was crucial to this study. The interaction through interviews and focus groups aimed to lead to the discovery of their perceptions of how best to deploy CAs in the immersion classroom. The interaction with participants created a rich data set which reflected their own perceptions and experiences of the issue (Cao Thanh & Le Thanh, 2015) and which were carefully scrutinised (Chi Lin, 1998) with a view to interpreting them to make sense of the situation.

From an interpretivist perspective, access to the experiences of participants is gained through talk, which adds an iterative dimension to the research process. Kitzinger (2004) makes two suggestions in relation to the iterative dimension of interpretivist research. Firstly, as the research process unfolds and is revisited, conversations are interpreted and re-interpreted. Secondly, this interpretation is influenced by mood, personality and context. Additionally, since the patterns and themes which emerge from collected data are constructed by the researcher (Harper, 2003) and are driven by the way in which a researcher interprets the data (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009) data analysis can be described as a reflexive process (Bruce, 2007). This means that the researcher, when visiting and revisiting the data and connecting with emerging insights (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009), may experience a shift in focus and understanding as themes arise from the data that were not expected. Multiple understandings are generated as constructed realities are understood and interpreted (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011) by the researcher and consequently the readers, who bring with them their own preconceptions and understanding of the issue in question.

The findings from the analysis and interpretation will be explained in Chapters 5 – 6. This study used qualitative means of data collection, which will be discussed in more detail below.

4.3. Qualitative Methods of Data Collection

Qualitative research is concerned with generating knowledge grounded in human experience (Sandelowski, 2004). Qualitative methods of data collection are described as being ‘descriptive and inferential’ (Gillham, 2010, p. 10). The main aim of this small-scale study

was to interpret and to reveal lived situations as described by the participants, with an emphasis on understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participants' perspective rather than the researcher's (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In contrast, quantitative approaches to data collection focus on the number and volume of data to be collected (Anyan, 2013). Quantitative approaches rely on statistics, generalisations and the generation of concrete answers to prove a hypothesis. Quantitative researchers concern themselves with investigating and describing by gathering data in the form of numbers and statistics, which are numerically quantifiable. (Mc Cusker & Gunaydin, 2015). In this exploratory study, it seemed clear that the research questions could not be answered in a quantifiable manner through quantitative methods. Qualitative data gathered through narratives are context bound and irreducible to numbers (Richards, 2005) and so a qualitative approach was more suited to this study. Importance was, therefore, placed on human interactions in the generation of data through the use of interviews and focus groups.

4.4. Use of a Case Study

Case studies are exploratory in nature and allow researchers to examine details of a particular setting (Yin, 2015). The primary school is a very complex working environment and so a case study approach offers an in-depth description and analysis of such a bounded system (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) suiting my purpose of investigating the use of CAs to develop language proficiency from many different perspectives (Heale & Twycross, 2013). Additionally, case studies rely on a variety of data collection methods to explore the research questions in as much detail as possible (Rowley, 2002) to provide as clear and rounded a picture of the issue being investigated as possible. By choosing to focus on one particular school and recording the lived experiences of different groups of participants within that school I was able to develop an in-depth understanding of the situation that exists regarding the variety of perceptions of deployment of CAs.

In generating data, the social context (Taylor & Thomas-Gregory, 2015) of a case study is very important. Social interaction allows the researcher to generate meaning from those operating in the context of the research (Kitzinger & Barbour, 2011). Adopting a case study approach allowed me to explore the complexity of ideas in the context of human relationships (Gillham, 2010) through conducting interviews and focus groups with a wide variety of stakeholders: members of the management team, teachers, CAs and learners, to obtain as rich and detailed information as possible on which to base my analysis. This study, which focuses

on the behaviour, views and feelings of those working in one specific school offers an insight into how one school operates and thus is not open to generalisation in the wider context. However, although the issues identified are specific to one particular situation, they may resonate with other similar contexts, where CAs are involved in developing children's proficiency not only in the emerging language in immersion settings but also in the wider context of early years and nursery education.

4.5. Participants

Sufficient diversity amongst participants encourages discussion (Bloor et al. 2011). As part of the case study approach, it was important to engage as wide a range of participants as possible to reflect a wide range of areas of expertise, their insights and their interest in school development and school improvement. Participants included 3 members of the school's senior and middle management teams, 3 class teachers from Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1, 6 CAs and 13 Key Stage 2 pupils. Participants were chosen across each level of the school's hierarchy in order to explore a wide diversity in opinion. The diverse groups of participants provided a range of insights into the various ways that CAs were deployed in the context of the study (King, 2004).

By engaging in discussion with a variety of stakeholders, I aimed to discover, from a number of perspectives, how CAs were deployed in the case study school. This meant that there was a small pool of potential participants from which to draw. I therefore chose participants using non probability sampling (Guest et al., 2013) or purposeful sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), which means that I approached a sample of school staff from whom I felt the most information about the issue could be gleaned. The main adult participants in the study were: the school Principal, Foundation Stage Coordinator, Literacy Coordinator, three teachers from Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 and six CAs. Since this study focussed on developing Irish language in the early years, some members of staff did not take part, namely those teaching in Upper Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2. I will now explain my reasons for choosing each set of participants.

4.5.1. Senior and Middle Management: Principal, Literacy Co-ordinator, Foundation Stage Co-ordinator

The school Principal makes the decisions around the hiring of CAs and so was able to provide information about the employment process and criteria regarding CAs. In the

immersion context, the early years are crucial to L2 development. In the case study school, the Principal was responsible for the success of the immersion programme and so needed a clear overview of staff strengths and weaknesses which would influence deployment for maximum benefit. Additionally, the Principal had responsibility for pairing CAs with teachers. Both the Literacy Co-Ordinator and the Foundation Stage Co-Ordinator had responsibility for over-seeing the development of children's L2 proficiency, and the deployment of CAs, at a whole school level. They also had experience of working closely with teachers and CAs and had a clear focus for this work which was grounded in immersion pedagogy. Those in the three leadership roles were deemed able to provide information about the specific aims related to CAs and their work within the school. Due to their positions of relative power within the school hierarchy (Hollander, 2004) and since it is recommended that in focus groups participant groups are homogenous (Breen, 2006), these participants were interviewed separately, rather than being involved in focus groups. Those with higher status can talk more and assume leadership during focus groups (Ridgeway, 1993) which may have negatively influenced other participants' levels of interaction, engagement, and willingness to state the truth as they saw it (Gibbs, 1997).

4.5.2. Class Teachers

Class teachers had responsibility for and were directly involved in the teaching and delivery of the Irish (language) Literacy curriculum. Teachers were encouraged to work collaboratively with their CAs by the management team to plan for Irish language development in addition to the introduction to the different subject areas. It would be expected that this collaboration would happen more often in the early years where most of the CAs were deployed. The need for collaboration between teachers and CAs to practise, reinforce and consolidate language was noted in the school's Irish Literacy Policy. All teachers in the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 were invited to take part in focus groups and all bar one, who was sick, agreed.

4.5.3. Classroom Assistants

CAs are observant and insightful members of the team who may have developed intellectual and practical knowledge (Burgess & Shelton Moyes, 2007) through working in the school over a number of years and who are often highly qualified, as in the case-study school. At times their valuable observations and opinions can be overlooked (Burgess & Shelton Mayes, 2007). The role of the CA was at the core of this piece of practitioner enquiry. It was therefore important that they were asked to participate in order to gain understanding of their perceptions of their role in supporting teachers in the classroom, as well as their role in

helping children acquire Irish language proficiency and fluency especially in the Foundation Stage. Since their roles were under discussion it was imperative to the study that their views were sought. Teachers and CAs operated at different hierarchical positions within the school. Hierarchical structure can inhibit participation in focus groups (Kitzinger and Barbour, 2011) and when focus groups are made up of members from varied hierarchical positions the more senior or supposedly more educated members can dominate the conversation (Acocella, 2011). It was for this reason that separate focus groups for teachers and CAs were conducted.

The table below provides an overview of characteristics of the adult participants mentioned above.

Participant	Age Range	Role	Years in Post
Interviewee 1	35-54	Senior Leader	15+
Interviewee 2	35-54	Middle Leader	11-15
Interviewee 3	35-54	Senior Leader	15+
Class Teacher A	18-34	Teacher	0-5
Class Teacher B	18-34	Teacher	6-10
Class Teacher C	35-54	Teacher	11-15
Classroom Assistant A	18-34	Classroom Assistant	6-10
Classroom Assistant B	18-34	Classroom Assistant	6-10
Classroom Assistant C	18-34	Classroom Assistant	0-5
Classroom Assistant D	35-54	Classroom Assistant	11-15
Classroom Assistant E	18-34	Classroom Assistant	0-5
Classroom Assistant F	18-34	Classroom Assistant	6-10

Table 1: Adult Participant Information

4.5.4. Children

Although research conducted from the perspective of the child learner is less common than talking to adults or teenagers, a study in English as Foreign Language classrooms in Germany showed that young children have the capacity to reflect on the language learning process,

offering solid beliefs and insights (Kolb, 2007). Children's views of their experiences in the classroom were sought to provide insight into the language learning process and the support they felt had been helpful, as they saw it. Having formulated their own opinions on their social experiences and contexts, children can offer great insight into their own lives (Irwin & Johnson, 2005). The final group of participants was made up of 13 children from Key Stage 2 aged between 8 and 11 who were offered the opportunity to reflect on their Irish language learning journey thus far. It was important to offer the children the opportunity to share their views on Irish, the learning of Irish and the way they had been helped to develop fluency in Irish, because they were so deeply involved in the language learning process.

Children from Key Stage 2 were invited to participate as they had been learning Irish in the school context for at least 5 years. I felt, therefore, that they might be able to comfortably share opinions about their language learning. Although the main focus of the study is on the development of Irish language in the early years, older children were interviewed because it was felt that they would be better able to articulate their feelings regarding learning Irish, and any associated challenges (Kolb, 2007).

To facilitate purposeful discussion regarding the current deployment of CAs and how to build upon this in the future, methods of data collection were chosen carefully. Data collection methods were chosen to glean a variety of views from a number of stakeholders which would generate rich and detailed information to be analysed.

Having outlined above the participants in this study, I will now discuss the main methods of data collection used, offering justification for my choices of interviews and focus groups in the context of this study.

4.6. Methods of Data Collection

As mentioned above, a qualitative approach to data collection was deemed appropriate to collect as rich as possible data pertaining to this study. Qualitative methods lend themselves well to uncovering meaning and implication (Vaidya, 2010). In the interpretivist paradigm great importance lies in the interpretations of those experiencing the phenomenon under study (Shah & Corley, 2006) and in the interpretations of the researcher attempting to make sense of them. I aimed to facilitate opportunities for participant reflection, using qualitative tools of data collection, that is, interviews and focus groups (Gill et al., 2008). In a study where the views, opinions, insights and understandings of participants were crucial, interaction, conversation and communication were paramount to the collection of data (Miller & Glassner, 2016).

Individual interviews were conducted first with the management team, and focus groups took place after the interviews had been conducted and transcribed. Interviews uncovered some areas that were useful to further explore in focus groups. Conducting interviews to hear from key informants who will not be part of subsequent focus groups, before conducting focus groups is often the sequence of data collection (Morgan, 1997: Gill et al., 2008). Focus groups therefore acted as a way of clarifying and extending data gathered through individual interviews (Gill et al., 2008**).** Following this sequence also allowed for the development of alternative meanings and interpretations to the meanings expressed by the participants in the interviews. The use of more than one method of data collection in this way is known as triangulation. Triangulation in qualitative studies may involve the collection of data through interviews, focus groups, field notes and observation (Carter, 2014) and also from different groups of participants. Multiple methods of data collection can aid the development of a deep understanding of the phenomena being studied (Polit & Beck, 2012) and can extend the knowledge that is to be obtained (Flick, 2007).

Observation, as a method of qualitative data collection, focuses on understanding what it means to be a participant in the social situation (Shah & Corley, 2006). This emphasis on how behaviour is influenced by the social context and vice versa was not considered appropriate in this study due to the intrusive nature of observations. Participants may have felt insecure and may have anticipated a judgement on their classroom practice and so may not have acted in a way that they normally would have, had they not been under observation (Labov, 1972: Cukor-Avila, 2000). Observational methods are often used to verify whether what people say they do is the same as what they actually do (Mulhall, 2003). Due to my position on the school's leadership team, observations, therefore, may have appeared to participants as management 'checking up' on what was happening in the school. Since participants' views were the primary source of the data, I made it clear that they understood that the aim was not to judge in any way.

Both chosen methods of data collection were deemed, by me, to be non-intrusive and to promote the sharing of perceptions. Individual interviews were deemed to be non-intrusive since there was no need for prolonged involvement in participants' professional lives, yet there was the ability to generate rich data (Blee, 2001). Focus groups were deemed to be non-intrusive for the same reasons and because participants were able to partake as part of a larger group, rather than on an individual basis, which for some participants may have felt intrusive.

I was sensitive to that fact that I was investigating an area of practice that might make people feel insecure and vulnerable if they were being questioned individually regarding aspects of their classroom practice. Each method of data gathering will be discussed in more detail below.

Although all participants can speak Irish, a decision was taken to conduct all interviews and focus groups in English rather than in Irish. Although Irish was the working language of the school, it was a second language for the majority of participants, therefore taking part in a discussion in Irish may have been seen by them to be contrived. Conducting all interviews and focus groups in English also avoided the need for translation when interviews and focus groups were transcribed. Transcription that involves translating between two languages can be challenging and time-consuming (Davidson, 2009). Issues of representation and power can emerge (Bucholtz, 2007) as translated transcripts can weaken the meaning of what participants have to say. The process of transcribing will be discussed in more detail in Section 4.6.6. Other issues of power emanating from my position of responsibility in the school will be discussed in more detail later when I discuss my position as the 'insider' researcher.

4.6.1. Interviews

Interviews are conducted on the basis of a simple conversation and are the most common method of data gathering in qualitative research (King, 2004). This conversation does, however, have a very specific purpose (Frey & Oishi, 1995) which is to develop a deeper understanding of a situation or phenomenon.

The relationship between interviewer and interviewee and their ability to interact with one another influences the direction of the conversation. The rapport between the two can affect the generation of knowledge about experiences. Relationships in qualitative research are not fully defined (Karneli-Miller et al., 2009) and thus power shifts can occur throughout the research process (Anyan, 2013), often shifting between the researcher and the researched. Although the research project is driven by the agenda of the researcher, Anyan (2013) notes that participants have the power to negotiate the level of information provided in the context of the study. Establishing a positive relationship is therefore of high importance so that participants can actively shape the course of the interview process (King, 2004) and thus influence the amount of information gathered during the process of data collection.

Interviews can be structured, semi-structured and unstructured. Structured interviews are similar to verbally administered questionnaires and unstructured interviews have little or no organisation. Semi-structured interviews involve the use of several key questions to guide discussion. (Gill et al., 2008). This was deemed the most appropriate format for my purpose and I will outline the reasons below.

4.6.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi structured interviews involve the use of a set of themes that drive the conversation. In the context of planned interviews, the researcher can design the format in advance (Goodman, 2010). The use of an interview schedule guides the exploration of the issues to be discussed and allows for a focused examination of participant understandings and experiences of the issue in question (Fylan, 2005). Engagement in an interview conducted in this manner gives participants the opportunity to express their own ideas rather than being guided by pre-categorised choices as would be typical of a questionnaire.

The implementation of an interview schedule means that semi-structured interviews offer 'controlled direction' (Xerri, 2018, p. 141) as there is a focus to the conversation, guided by pre-set questions. In this study, semi-structured interviews were chosen on the premise that they were less formal than structured interviews, yet still offered the opportunity, due to the use of an interview schedule, for guided exploration and elaboration to encourage the respondent to develop thoughts and ideas in attempts to generate valuable information (Blee & Taylor, 2002) and generally allow a meaningful dialogue to develop naturally. I was reasonably certain that participants would have plenty to say about the research topic because of their familiarity with it and was keen to explore their attitudes and feelings (Arskey & Knight, 1999) regarding the deployment of CAs in the school. As the 'insider' researcher I needed to be sensitive in my questioning and I did everything I could to ensure that I appeared as non-judgemental as possible. A deeper discussion of the 'insider' relationship will be undertaken in Section 4.10.

Interviews were generally guided by an agenda which was laid down by me, the interviewer, (Kvale, 1996) to ensure that all information presented, shared and gathered was relevant to the purpose of the study. This agenda was similar for all interview participants and allowed me to gain relevant information which could later be analysed and interpreted. Additionally, areas of interest arising in interviews were also used as prompts to guide discussion during focus groups.

Although the information provided by the interviewee is of prime importance, interviews are driven and negotiated purposefully in relation to the interests of the researcher (Gibson & Brown, 2009). In this study interview questions reflected the research aims and were pre-defined (Gibson & Brown, 2009) and constructed with careful consideration to ensure that a specific response was not implied by the question (Litosseliti, 2003) to ensure that the study was ethically viable. Question construction was important in order to extract information that was related to the topic being researched. Open questions are exploratory in nature, allowing respondents to develop answers, presenting ideas that the researcher may not have planned for (Campbell et al., 2004). It was for this reason that I chose to use open questions during the interviews.

My use of open questions, which were carefully constructed to facilitate discussion, without directing (Rapley, 2004), encouraged respondents to expand their ideas, drawing on their experiences, and to share these experiences with me. Adopting the role of insider-researcher, I was aware of the issues which needed to be addressed and explored (Won Kim, 2010). Due to my positionality, it was important that I led the discussion using non-leading questions (Berg, 1998) remaining as neutral in my approach as possible. My positionality will be further discussed in more detail below in Section 4.10.

When constructing the interview questions, I was also aware of the possibility that information could arise that I had not expected. The semi-structured nature of the interviews meant that there was the freedom to explore these issues further if deemed applicable (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). If further exploration of issues was not deemed appropriate, the interview schedule allowed me to re-direct the conversation in line with the research focus where necessary (Qu & Dumay, 2011).

Although the interviews followed an agenda, where appropriate, I appreciated that the dialogic nature of semi-structured interviews meant that there were opportunities for participants to develop points which were important to them, offering them a sense of autonomy in the process (Anyan, 2013).

Interviews are a process of inquiry which can lead to an increased understanding through dialogue and exchange (Falk & Blumenreich, 2005) and therefore can offer a greater level of depth and complexity than a simple conversation, because participants respond to the line of questioning laid down by the researcher (Anyan, 2013) in order for specific information to be extracted. Because of this, the natural equilibrium which exists in the context of a general

conversation dissipates. During interviews, every effort was made, through promoting a two-way conversation, to ensure that interviews could be regarded by everyone as a guided conversation. The dialogic exchange that occurs during interviews facilitates the exchange of views and opinions which generates data to be interpreted (Kvale, 1996). In this way, the interviewer and interviewee reflect on and talk about their expectations, experiences and understandings of an issue (Nunkoosing, 2005). Since the interviewer and interviewee co-construct meaning during an interview by sharing their experiences and realities (Rapley, 2004), the relationship that is established between the two is a key component of the interview process. Since participants were chosen for the information that they could share and the value this would add to the study, the relationships between interviewer and interviewee were founded in the basis of sharing of professional knowledge. As a fellow professional, I hoped that participants would see me as a trusted and interested interlocutor and would be open in their responses.

In this study, interview participants were members of the school's senior and middle management teams. Interview participants, who all held positions of responsibility in the school were chosen for their knowledge of the research issue (Kolb, 2008). There was an assumption, that due to their experience and position that they would have a deep understanding of L2 language acquisition and would be able to provide clear justification for decisions made within the school regarding the deployment of CAs for the purposes of developing language. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the Literacy Co-Ordinator, the Foundation Stage Co-ordinator and the School Principal. Each of these participants played a pivotal role in school development and improvement. It was important therefore that the interviews were facilitated in such a way that involved participants in the construction of data about their professional lives (Blee & Taylor, 2002) and which also acknowledged their role in the organisation of the school's resources.

4.6.3. Conducting the Interview

Although I needed to drive the discussion forward (Kvale, 1996) it was also important that I assumed neutrality throughout the interview process (Rapley, 2004: Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This was something I was also mindful of when organising focus groups and which will be discussed in more detail in Section 4.6.4. I endeavoured to remain neutral by constructing questions that were worded using clear and concise language. Questions were

also shared with participants beforehand, giving them the opportunity to reflect on the issue, before sharing their thoughts during the interviews.

It is not uncommon during an interview that the interviewee may not fully understand something that is being asked of him/her. A benefit of interviewing, that other methods of data collection may lack, is that clarification can be sought at any point throughout the process. During the interviews, the two-way nature (Rapley, 2004) of the interview process meant that respondents were able to stop and seek clarification when they did not exactly understand a question or what exactly I was asking them. As the interviewer, I too was able seek clarification, further examples or more details (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

4.6.4. Focus Groups

As a method of data collection, focus groups are a good way for the novice researcher, as I was, to gain a large amount of good quality information (Dick, 1998) in a short period of time (Gibbs, 1997). Being a novice researcher, I had to plan how to engage purposefully with participants, which involved the careful consideration of proposed themes for discussion. A pilot study to practise collecting and analysing data was also conducted. Through conducting a pilot study, I also took the opportunity to trial data collection methods, such as interviewing and conducting focus groups, and test my skills as a researcher. The pilot study, and lessons learned from it will be discussed in more detail in a later section.

As well as the amount of data they can generate, focus groups offer the opportunity to gather information on an issue from many perspectives., As a method of data collection, focus groups bring together a group of people with common lifestyle circumstances (Parker & Tritter, 2006) to discuss and explore specific issues of communal interest from a variety of perspectives (Acocella, 2011: Wilkinson, 2004) and concentrate not only on what people think, but why they think this (Gill et al., 2008). Hierarchical structure can inhibit participation in focus group sessions (Kitzinger & Barbour, 2011). Although it is important that focus groups are diverse, participants should also have similar levels of understanding of the topic under discussion (Litosseliti, 2003). It was almost inevitable that teachers would view what went on in the classroom differently from CAs. It was important therefore to group people by role within the school so that participants would not feel reluctant to share opinions that could be interpreted as being critical of management or either of the other groups. It was for this reason that I formed the focus groups of staff with similar status within the school: class teachers, CAs and Key Stage 2 children.

Focus groups offer a facilitated and focused group discussion. In the context of this study and to facilitate a communal exploration of specific issues, focus groups aimed to allow conversation, debate and the sharing of ideas within a structured framework, with a clear focus (Litosseliti, 2003). Kitzinger (1995) refers to focus groups as being a dialogic exchange, and thus the sharing of personal beliefs and ideologies is encouraged and recommended. As a researcher I had carefully planned to use stimulus questions to guide and direct the discussion (Dick, 1988).

In discussing focus groups Gibbs (1997) makes several points. Firstly, she notes that focus groups offer a platform to discuss and to discover shared views. Secondly, she also notes that a focus group is an open forum in which varying, often contrasting perspectives can emerge. Debate is healthy and in the context of a focus group can take place in a controlled environment. Social interaction through debating opposing views can contribute to a rich and purposeful discussion and facilitate thought expansion (Hand, 2003), which can give great insight into people's professional lives. In the context of this study, participants were invited to debate and offer professional opinions on the role that CAs play in the school. Teachers made up one group of participants and it can be assumed that they had an interest in CAs and the way they were deployed. It was hoped that they could describe what CAs do and what they thought they should be doing. The role of CAs was the focus of the study. It was therefore of utmost importance to understand how they viewed their role in the school, therefore, CAs made up the second focus group. Children were the stakeholders actually partaking in the language learning and were able to give their views from this perspective, thus they made up the remaining two focus groups.

Despite the advantages of focus groups regarding my study, I was aware that there is a chance that certain members of the group can dominate and interrupt the conversation (Acocella, 2011). As the group facilitator it was my role to minimise conflict and member dominance by emphasising the importance of hearing a wide range of views (Gill et al., 2008) from the outset. The opportunities to converse allowed respondents to construct meaning and to verbalise this meaning in a safe, comfortable and purposeful engagement. Conflicting views emerged as everyone involved in the process had had different experiences. A study carried out by Nelson et al. (2003) highlighted how people's experience can shape their views. This appeared to be the case in the context of this study. Some participants brought with them experiences from other schools and were able to draw

comparisons between these and their current experiences within the case study school. Such comparisons added depth to the discussion (Sim, 2002), offering contrast to the practices in the case study school, and causing others to reflect on current levels of practice in light of what happens in other schools.

Although focus groups can engender debate, Kitzinger (1995) notes that a major drawback of focus groups can occur when there is a consensus, which may make some participants reluctant to disagree or present an opposing viewpoint. In a focus group situation, some participants can find it difficult to express their ideas (Acocella, 2011). Because of this, I offered participants the time to write down their ideas briefly (if needed) as they gathered their personal thoughts, before sharing these with the group (Peterson & Barron, 2007). Colucci (2007, p.1424) advocates the use of a range of 'activity-oriented questions', which can support participants in collating and sharing their ideas with other participants in an interactive manner.

Partaking in focus groups can offer participants a sense of empowerment, especially when they feel that their views are of value and importance (Kitzinger, 1995: Goss & Leinbach, 1996). Race et al. (1994) supports this notion, noting that focus groups can very often act as a forum for change. Although gradually changing, in the case-study school at the time of the study, CAs rarely attended staff meetings, and seldom had the opportunity to attend staff training or discussions aimed at bringing about change at whole school level. It was hoped that this study would encourage the sharing of good practice, and a change in practice, if deemed required, in the case-study school regarding the deployment of CAs. In my experience working with a variety of CAs, I had noticed that some CAs appeared to possess great levels of intuition. Although the role CAs played in the classroom differed from the role of the teachers, they played an important role in the classroom, and it was hoped that CAs may note things that teachers did not and discuss these in the group.

The facilitator needs to find a balance between silence and intervention (Kitzinger & Barbour, 2011: Munday, 2006). Acocella (2011) suggests that the main role of the facilitator is to encourage participants to talk to one another. When pressure to interact is removed, this allows the facilitator more time to focus on group interactions as the discussion unfolds. The facilitator plays a role in motivating others to talk (Litosseliti, 2003), moving the discussion forward or redirecting the conversation when required to maintain purposeful group interaction (Morgan, 1997: Kitzinger & Barbour, 2011). Although the main interaction occurs

between group participants, facilitator interaction usually takes the form of 'probe questions' (Asbury, 1995, p. 416) which are used to draw out discussion. The personality of the researcher can potentially influence the success of the focus group (Litosseliti, 2003: Morgan, 1997). In order to maintain focus on the main discussion points, at points of digression during discussion, I took a very friendly but directive role in moving the discussion on.

In this study, the success of focus groups may have been influenced by the personalities of the participants involved (Bloor et al., 2011). Pre-existing relationships made recruitment relatively easy and most participants seemed to enjoy sharing familiar experiences which appeared to facilitate discussion and allow participants to challenge one another in a mutually respectful manner (Gill et al., 2008). Participants appeared engaged fully in all focus groups carried out for the purpose of this study and seemed to be expressing their perceived realities openly.

Although, not as prevalent during interviews, when conducting focus groups, I was concerned that my role on the Senior Leadership Team might cause a perceived imbalance of power and there was a risk that participants may not divulge information or discuss honestly what they wanted to say (Sikes, 2006: Breen, 2007). Steps were taken to reduce power imbalances and to create a comfortable environment for both myself and participants that would facilitate purposeful discussion and allow people to open up. These steps included: careful consideration of group make-up, implementation of a discussion schedule and the choice of familiar location. Creating such an environment can lead to a feeling of informality and power equality (Karneli-Miller et al. 2009). During focus group sessions participants sat in a circular arrangement, with the moderator sitting amongst the participants. This aimed to reduce any associations of authority (Gibson, 2007). All focus groups and interviews took place in a familiar environment in which the participants were the insiders, which can also reduce the power imbalance between themselves and researcher (Hill, 2005). Although I was also an insider, I felt that choosing a familiar location in which participants were comfortable would put them at ease. Tea, coffee and biscuits were offered to participants.

Having discussed adult focus groups, I will now provide a brief discussion about conducting focus groups with children.

4.6.5. Conducting Focus Groups with Children

Conducting qualitative research with children differs from conducting qualitative research with adults. Kirk (2006) offers 3 possible explanations for this. Firstly, it may be difficult for

an adult researcher to develop a rapport quickly with child participants. Secondly, children possess a greater range level of communication competency. Finally, power relations can be more prevalent between the adult researcher and child participants

As part of this study, two focus groups were conducted with a total of thirteen Key Stage 2 children. At the time of study, all children were aged 8-11 and had been a part of the immersion education system for at least five years. All child participants were acquiring Irish as a second language. Since children have the capacity to reflect on language learning (Kolb, 2007) the main aim of these focus groups was to gain insight into pupils' opinions about learning Irish and those who had helped them develop proficiency in the language.

Discussing the use of focus groups with children, Gibson (2007) suggests that focus groups can be a creative and interactive means of extracting information from children and young people. A context for discussion may need to be provided to encourage children to engage and share information (Morgan et al., 2002). Thus, verbal discussion may not be the most effective way of extracting information from children and focus groups conducted with children may require alternative forms of communication i.e. pictorial form or role play. Since the children who took part in this study were at an age where they could articulate their ideas verbally, offering such alternative forms of communication was not considered necessary.

During focus groups with children, much direction and guidance is needed from the facilitator. The facilitator needs to probe and clarify to ensure that children answer questions that the facilitator had in mind (Morgan et al., 2002). At times during discussions the children gave limited answers and I needed to reframe questions in such a way that allowed me to provide prompts. This may have been due to the fact that I was known to all participants, and children can be reluctant to offer answers to questions where they feel the adults already know the answer (Morgan et al., 2002)

There exists a natural imbalance of power from the outset when conducting research with children (Won Kim, 2012). In this study, there was also a dependent relationship as the children who took part in the focus groups were children who recognised me as a teacher within the school. Since using a familiar location can make children feel comfortable and reduce the power imbalance between the researcher and the participants (Broome & Richards, 2003) I chose to conduct the focus group in school as part of a normal school day. Such familiarity can, however, be distracting and can encourage behaviour that is synonymous to the setting (Green & Hart, 1999). Although these children spoke confidently and appeared to be expressing their views honestly, the teacher-pupil relationship prevailed

as they put their hands up to volunteer answers, which interrupted the natural flow of the conversation. Although the children appeared comfortable during the sessions, I had the impression that being a teacher in the school influenced their levels of interaction and their answers, especially when areas of negativity, such as the associated difficulties of learning a second language were being discussed.

When conducting focus groups with children it is important that all children are afforded the opportunity to make contributions to discussion (Hennessy & Heary, 2005) and are given time to weave their narrative with the narrative of others (Cameron, 2005). Even though children did raise their hands to speak, conversation during both focus groups appeared to unfold naturally and children contributed willingly, at times taking their lead from what others had shared. Due to time constraints, allowing the children the time to weave their narrative with that of others was a challenge. Some information offered by children at the time of discussion appeared to be irrelevant, however, I noticed during the analysis that this information was insightful (Irwin & Johnston, 2005) and offered the study a dimension that was not offered by the adult participants. As well as allowing all children the opportunity to contribute, it is important to validate these contributions by offering thanks. Thanking all child participants is a sign of respect (Gibson, 2007). I did this at the end of both discussions with children to reinforce the idea that their ideas were important for the purposes of this study.

The interview schedule and headings for discussion as shown in Appendix C shows the way the discussion with children was guided. Since many of the issues discussed with adult participants were not appropriate for discussion with children, the topics of discussion differed from those that were discussed during adult focus groups. Discussions with children focused on learning about the children's opinions of learning Irish, associated challenges of acquiring proficiency in L2 and learning through L2. Conversations also had a focus on those support networks that were available to children as they learned the language to gain insight into their perspectives on the role of the CA in the school for the purpose of supporting the development of children's L2 proficiency. Children's perceptions can be found in Appendix G.

4.6.6. Recording and Transcribing

Qualitative research generates much data to be analysed (Hastie & Glotova, 2012). Careful consideration was given as to how best to record dialogue during the data collection phase. Whilst acknowledging that no method of recording is without fault, Blaxter et al. (2006) suggest two successful means of recording information. These are: audio/ visual recording or

note-taking as the dialogue unfolds. Both approaches to recording undoubtedly have advantages and disadvantages. Audio/visual recording can be greatly beneficial during the interview process, as focus can be maintained at all times by the researcher without the pressure of notetaking (Blaxter et. al, 2006). Recording during the interview process and transcription afterwards means that the interviewer can spend time listening to the answers of the interviewees, observing body language and also paying close attention to tone of voice in order to build up an image of that which is being communicated explicitly and implicitly. This can limit distraction and encourages free flowing conversation (Kvale, 2007). Since everything is recorded, no detail can be omitted. Audio or visual recording can however inhibit data collection as some individuals may be unwilling to take part in an interview that is being audibly or visually recorded (Kitzinger & Barbour, 2011).

In light of the positives noted above, in this particular study I opted to use audio-recording equipment to record the actual interviews and transcribed them as soon as possible afterwards. Interviews were recorded using an iPad which was placed in the middle of the table. The positioning enabled a clear recording of all participants with good sound quality which aided transcription but did not appear intrusive. This gave me time during the interviews to focus on the discussion.

Since it is necessary for examination, interpretation and evaluation (Lapadat, 2000) transcription from the oral to the written word formed an important part of the data collection phase. Transcription is a process that is selective, interpretive and representational (Davidson, 2009) and refers to the transfer of the spoken language into the written word (Kvale, 1996). All interviews and focus groups were transcribed as soon as possible after the interviews and focus groups had taken place. These were transcribed verbatim in order to avoid bias (Gill et al. 2008). For validation purposes, transcripts were checked with the interviewees for accuracy and clarification (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). The transcripts can therefore be considered an accurate record of what was said.

4.7. Validity

As part of the research process, it is important that collected data and the analysis of it is reliable and valid. Validity is a tricky concept in qualitative research (Stenbacka, 2001). The validity of a study relates to the extent to which the findings represent the phenomenon under study (Silverman, 2006) and so it is important to be able to convince the wider research community that every effort has been made to ensure the trustworthiness of data and the

analysis. Triangulation or a mixed methods approach is often used as a means of ensuring validity or reliability (Denscombe, 2010). The process of triangulation is 'based on the principle of confirming findings through the use of multiple perspectives' (Wilson, 2009, p.120). To rely on one method of data collection could lead to a biased research project. As the amount of data collected increases, the risk of bias decreases as different sources of data and information gathering can be used to validate and complement previous findings (Hastings, 2010).

The credibility of qualitative studies rests on the reliability of the collected data and on the validity of findings (Silverman, 2006). In this qualitative study data was collected through semi-structured interviews and focus groups, comprising participants with different roles in the school. In the interest of adding to the validity of the study, respondent validation (Denscombe, 2010) was adopted. Participants were encouraged to check the transcripts in order to validate what had been said, ensuring that the transcript reflected the actual dialogue that had been exchanged throughout the interview process. As well as aiming to increase validity, encouraging participants to check transcripts also shows a level of respect for participants and a preservation of their dignity (Saldana, 1998).

In relation to validity, Campbell et al. (2004) suggest piloting and rehearsing interviews with a critical friend who can provide feedback that will both support and challenge the researcher, in order to reduce any bias forming. This process affords the researcher the opportunity to reword questions, ensuring that they are not leading the interviewee in any way, but allowing them to respond freely. Before the start of this study a process of piloting took place, which offered me the opportunity to trial chosen methods of data collection and develop my skills of facilitating interviews and focus groups as a means of data collection. This trial study also allowed me to identify areas for refinement (Malmqvist et al., 2019) regarding my approach as researcher. It was my aim during the trial study to use uniformity of language in questioning to offer all participants a similar experience. Feedback, however, showed that for some participants the level of language was considered relatively academic and difficult to relate to, for example, educational terms relating specifically to L2 immersion theory. Since the language of questioning should be comprehensible to all participants **(**Qu & Dumay, 2011), language was adapted during the current study and questions were worded in such a way that they were accessible to all participants, while retaining the intended meaning.

Since the data collected can be rich, carrying out research in one's own workplace can increase validity (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004). However, research in one's own work place can also be beset by bias, because the researcher in this instance is 'intimately involved with their research domains' (Breen, 2007, p. 163) and so may approach the project with preconceived ideas. As the insider, I was aware of certain issues regarding the role and the deployment of CAs in the school and areas which I felt needed improvement regarding the role of the CA in supporting learning and teaching and their deployment in the school for maximum benefit. Being aware of these issues allowed me to ask questions that perhaps an outsider might not**.** Furthermore, my knowledge of the immersion education system in Northern Ireland and my insight into the relationships in the case study school may have aided the collection of data that was authentic and rich. Nonetheless, I remained aware of the possibility of bias and interrogated each of the steps I took to ensure that I approached the data collection from as objective a stance as possible. My positionality as the researcher will be discussed in more detail below in Section 4.10.

4.8. Reliability

Although five major themes emerged, it would be naïve to think that these themes are neither inter-linked nor independent. Emerging themes should be considered as themes in their own right, as well as being considered in relation to other themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is also important, however, to consider that the emergence of patterns during data analysis may not always converge (Yin, 2015). Many of the themes regarding the role of the CA emerging in this small-scale study are not unique to the Irish Medium setting and will be of interest to any school where CAs are employed. Some issues were, however, distinctive to the Irish Medium setting, especially in terms of language use and the role that CAs play in the development of children's second language proficiency, especially in the early years. As the research took a case study approach, other matters arising from the analysis illustrated features which might be said to be particular to the school in which this study was carried out, especially elements of pedagogy, staff relationships and concerns pertaining to communication. Conducting a practitioner enquiry using a case study allowed me to build on already close relationships to probe more deeply than a researcher coming in from outside. In a case study, which focuses on a very specific context, (Yin, 2015) issues emerging from data cannot be considered generalisable. However, whilst accepting that those issues are not generalisable, many of them have also been identified in the literature and could be helpful

for other practitioners in both mainstream and immersion settings who have also identified areas of concern regarding different roles in schools.

4.9. Ethical Considerations

In order to answer the research questions, I worked closely with the professionals working within the case-study school. As with any piece of empirical research which involves human participants, ethical issues were considered. All research needs to be ethically viable and conform to ethical guidelines, thus, research proposals should pass through an ethics committee in order to protect both the researcher and the participants (Gibson and Brown, 2009). Since this project involved discussion relating to children and with children, who may be considered vulnerable during the research process due to imbalances of power (Punch, 2002), the consideration of ethical issues was of high importance. In order to conform to ethical guidelines, before undertaking this study I applied to the University's ethics committee for permission to conduct the research and have conformed strictly to their Code of Ethics, which is based on BERA ethical guidelines, throughout.

Conforming to the university's and BERA (2018) ethical guidelines, it was important that participants provided informed consent before agreeing to engage in the research conducted for the purposes of this dissertation. The aim of the study was explained in verbal and written form and participants were encouraged to ask questions and informed that they were under no obligation to participate and could withdraw at any point in time without any repercussions. As documented in the Plain Language Statements (Appendix B), all participants were invited to read the information pertaining to the study carefully and ask any questions should they require further clarification. Parental consent for their children to take part in focus groups, was also sought and obtained during the recruitment process. A letter of invitation to participate was sent to all parents of Key Stage 2 children, approximately 70 in total. 13 parents showed interest and gave permission for their children to take part in the study. These parents were then fully informed as to what participation for their child would involve and informed that they had the right to refuse their child's participation without requiring to provide any reasons. Again, parents, through the Plain Language Statement, were invited to ask any questions should they require further information or clarification.

As well as potential risk associated with issues of confidentiality (Sikes, 2006), the inclusion of children in the research adds another level of risk (Punch, 2002). During the research process 'avoiding stress or distress cannot be guaranteed' (Gibson, 2007, p. 481). In the

unlikely event of any child displaying distress or worry, I assured parents that the appropriate support person would be involved and the parents informed. During focus groups with children, one child, who had recently suffered the bereavement of a family member, become upset as the discussion unfolded. At this point, I adhered to the procedure laid out in the Ethics Form. This child was encouraged to suspend participation in the focus group for a short period of time, was comforted and was given the opportunity to return to the discussion when he felt ready. His mother was also informed.

It is important that educational researchers act in accordance with the ethic of respect (BERA, 2018), having respect for the views and the opinions of those taking part in the research and treating each participant fairly and equally. The researcher therefore has a duty to ensure that the reputation of any individual or establishment is not brought into any disrepute (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). It is important to make sure that collected data is relevant and to be faithful to the data generated during analysis and interpretation (Krefting, 1991).

To ensure the reputation of the school and individual participants would not suffer any harm, confidentiality was important. Due to the small-scale nature of this study and the fact that all participants knew each other, 'anonymity and confidentiality can be difficult or impossible to secure and maintain' (Sikes, 2006, p. 111). This study involved the open sharing of information amongst colleagues. Some of this information might have been seen as controversial by others. In such instances where participants are part of the same social network confidentiality can be difficult to guarantee (Kitzinger & Barbour, 2011). In the plain Language Statement, provided to all those who took part, participants were made aware of this before the study. Issues of confidentiality and anonymity were also re-iterated at the beginning and ending of each interview and focus group. If any dissent emerged during focus group sessions, it was vital that participants were aware that any information shared would not to be used against any particular member of staff and that judgements would and should not be made. Participants were reassured that they would not be named in the writing up of the thesis or in the analysis of the data. However, the research site is a small school, with a small pool from which participants can be drawn, and so some members of staff may be identifiable. Participants were made aware of this possibility before they consented to take part. Code Names were used for the purpose of transcription and interpretation.

4.10. Researcher as the Insider

Researchers and participants approach the research process with well-formed preconceptions and agenda and so, 'research is neither neutral, nor innocent practice' (Sikes, 2006, p. 105). Those researching using qualitative methods of data collection refer to their positionality as either insider or outsider (Breen, 2007). The insider researcher can be viewed as a positive or negative component of the research process. In practitioner research, the role of researcher can become blurred (Unluer, 2012). Qualitative methods of data collection acknowledge the subjectivity of the researcher and the researched; 'The researcher and research cannot be meaningfully separated' (Hand, 2003, p. 18). Both, therefore, influence the process and are influenced by it. The researcher approaches the research with an issue to explore and a clear agenda to aid this exploration. How the researcher interprets the gathered data is driven by his/her values, beliefs, history and interests (Sikes, 2006). Participants' interaction is equally influenced by their own values, interpretations and experiences.

Although I was acting as the researcher, I was very aware that due to my position within the school, I was also an insider during the research process. There is always the potential that this dual role of insider and researcher can create a barrier between the researcher and participants (Breen, 2007) generating a sense of reluctance to participate. As a member of the Senior Leadership Team I hold a position of authority within the school and was very aware of possible perceived power issues, which will be discussed in more detail below.

So that participants can respond openly, it is important during the data collection phase that the researcher does not share too much with the participants (Unluer, 2012). Participants knew my views because I may have expressed them formally in meetings or informally in staffroom discussions. It was important therefore that I focused on gaining information that was relevant to the aims of the study (Vaidya, 2010) by constructing questions that were not leading, and by reassuring participants that it was my intention to collect information with a view to improving the situation, regardless of my views, without judgement or bias.

As the researcher-insider investigating his/her own workplace, there is the potential for feelings of awkwardness on the part of the researcher and the participants (Breen, 2007). Looking at the positionality of the researcher, Mc Evoy (2001) suggests that when the researcher is an insider he/she may be reluctant to talk about difficult or pertinent issues with respondents due to the fact that it can be difficult to question the familiar. As a person holding responsibility, I made it clear to the participants that it was important that any issues

raised should not be seen as criticisms of any staff members because the focus of any discussion was on improving learning and teaching.

Being an inside researcher can, however, offer a good understanding of that which needs to be explored (Won Kim, 2012). In this study, as the insider I was aware of the issues which needed to be questioned and was keen to address what might have been seen by some as tricky topics, with a view to improving the deployment of CAs in the school.

Conducting the research in my workplace meant that I had to acknowledge that I had some preconceptions of the issue to be explored. This can cause difficulty, especially when gathering data via interviews because participants may assume that the researcher already knows the answer (Breen, 2007). Mercer (2006) notes that an insider who is conducting research poses a threat to objectivity. I was very aware of entering the process with background information and previous judgements and I sought to take as objective a view as possible so that my preconceptions did not influence data collection approaches or analysis.

In contrast to the challenges posed by the researcher as insider, the researcher as insider can also have positive connotations. The teacher researcher can facilitate the discussion of puzzling issues and can influence change (Xerri, 2017). An insider, due to their relational intimacy with the group (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002) may have the potential to identify areas of need. When research is conducted by someone who is familiar to the participants there is already a level of trust between participants and researcher (Sikes & Potts, 2008). In her research with families of children with ASD, Vaidya (2010) noted that emotional connections with participants offered the power to the interviewee to engender a willingness to engage and to divulge useful information. This could also be said to be the case in relation to the current study as there was a level of familiarity and comfort because of well-established working relationships. It could be argued that a level of initial awkwardness was diminished, and meaningful conversations were able to occur immediately.

4.11. Analysis and Interpretation of Data

Aligning with an interpretivist paradigm, which focuses on generating meaning in the multiple experiences of participants in qualitative research, I deemed thematic analysis to be an appropriate way of analysing the data. Braun & Clarke (2006) advocate the use of thematic analysis as a method of qualitative analysis due to its ability to provide a rich and

detailed account of participants' realities. Additionally, they suggest that thematic analysis can be a suitable method of data analysis for the novice researcher because there are few prescriptions and procedures. Thematic analysis can be useful because it gathers information from various perspectives and uncovers similarities and differences across data sets (King, 2004). Data analysis conducted as part of my pilot study showed that thematic analysis offered the opportunity to identify and report themes and patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2013) that had emerged from the gathered data. 'A theme refers to a particular, recognisable configuration of meanings which occurs in a way that is meaningful and systematic' (Willig, 2013, p. 58). In the context of this study, emerging themes were often interrelated (Willig, 2013). Participants' interviews and focus groups generated rich data pertaining to and on occasion beyond the research questions posed and was clearly the result of reflective and insightful thought on the part of the participants. The generation of a high volume of rich data can almost lead to a 'data overload' (King, 2004, p. 21) and thus data should be grouped in a controllable manner. Thematic analysis allowed for the grouping of data into manageable categories (Dickie, 2011). Chunking the data into themes allowed me to capture and make sense of the phenomenon under study or as Willig (2013, p.62) suggests, 'tell a story about what is going on in the data'.

As summarised below, Braun & Clarke (2006) offer a six-phase approach to the thematic analysis of collected data.

1. familiarise oneself with data
2. code gathered data
3. search for themes
4. review themes
5. define themes
6. write up themes.

When analysing the collected data, I followed this approach to analysis. Firstly, I familiarised myself with the generated data as I transcribed. Once all the data was collected and transcribed, I then re-read the transcripts to further familiarise myself with the data, noting any points of interest that appeared in the different data sets, which were assigned codes. There were a large number of codes to begin with, but through a process of careful scrutiny, checking and rechecking the data, overlaps became apparent. I was then able to group particular categories which led me to identify emerging themes. An example of this can be

found in Appendix E.. Since data analysis is influenced by the way in which the researcher interprets the data gathered, the iterative dimension of interpretivist research has implications for the analysis of data (Harper, 2003: Bruce, 2007: Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). In relation to this study, I set out to find codes that related to language learning. As the analysis continued, I realised that there were important themes emerging which mattered greatly to participants. These emerging issues could not be ignored, and therefore altered the focus of the research. Issues emerging during the analysis shifted the focus of the study from CAs' roles in purely language development to issues related to their deployment. Once I had identified emerging themes, I re-read the transcripts carefully. Comments which corresponded with the emerging themes were highlighted using a separate colour for each theme. An example of this can be found in Appendix F. Finally, I defined the themes which allowed me to interpret the data meaningfully. The analysis and interpretation of the data involved referencing the gathered findings to the scholarly literature, which, according to Aronson (1994) can add merit to the research by presenting a valid argument. A sample of the processes of coding and highlighting can be found in Appendix E and Appendix F.

Five main themes emerged from the data gathered through adult interviews and focus groups. These will be discussed in Chapters 5-6. Although five main themes emerged these were inter-linked and running through them all was the main theme of collaboration. Some emerging issues were unique to the case study school, others could be said to be distinctive to the Irish Medium setting and others will be helpful for practitioners in any school context working with CAs to support learning and teaching.

4.12. Pilot Study

Conducting pilot studies can have a major impact on the final design of a research study (Malmqvist et al., 2019). As part of the process of undertaking this piece of research I conducted a pilot study. This study investigated the challenges of teaching Numeracy in the Irish Medium classroom. Conducting a pilot study offered me the opportunity to test my skills as a novice researcher whilst at the same time offering the staff in the case study school the opportunity to discuss complex and previously undiscussed issues with regards to the learning and teaching of Numeracy. Having partaken in the pilot study, I hoped that staff would see this study as an extension of the previous research and since the pilot had appeared to go well, would participate willingly. As well as building on my own learning, the pilot

study offered the opportunity to familiarise staff with the research process, meaning that in this study they did not see it as something unknown.

As a novice researcher, the central aim of this pilot study was to trial the case study approach, the used of semi-structured interviews and focus groups as methods of data collection to gain many perspectives on the same issue. I also then analysed and interpreted the collected data. As someone who was conducting research in my own workplace and who was a member of the Senior Leadership Team, the pilot study also offered the opportunity to gauge levels of engagement amongst school staff.

4.12.1 Learning from the Pilot Study

From the pilot study I learnt that I would need to have a clear focus in order to reap the benefits of the research process. The trial study gave me the opportunity to develop my own researcher skills before the dissertation study and highlighted the importance of using separate focus groups to reflect the hierarchical nature of the staff, rather than mixing people from across the school's hierarchy. Since mixing participants from across an organisation's hierarchy can inhibit the sharing of information and affect collected data (Kitzinger, 1995) I needed to ensure that members of management would be interviewed separately. Conducting a pilot study iterated the need to word questions carefully, in a way that was understandable to participants and which ensured that questions were not leading. Question construction was discussed in more detail above in Section 4.6.2. Through conducting a pilot study, I gained insight into how participants interacted with one another (Litosseliti, 2003) and learnt of the potential need for probe questions to help the flow of conversation and to help people formulate opinions.

4.13. Project Design and Methodology: Summary

Being contextual in nature, exploring real-life situations, and collecting and analysing data based on the perceptions and experiences of the participants in this study school, this study aimed firstly to add to my own knowledge and understanding within this area of education. Secondly, the findings of this study will be disseminated amongst staff in the case study school with the aim of contributing to the improvement of learning and teaching in the school. This study offers practical strategies which could maximise the role of the CA not only in the immersion but also in non-immersion settings. Furthermore, this study, the first of its kind that has explored the role of the CA in the immersion classroom, makes a significant

contribution to the field and will inform the wider academic community about the role of CAs in the immersion setting, in relation especially to children's language development.

This chapter has discussed the methodology employed in the study. In the context of the theoretical framework of the interpretivist paradigm, this chapter has provided justification for the methods used to collect and analyse the data. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with members of the school's senior and middle management teams and focus groups with Foundation Stage and early Key Stage 1 teachers, CAs and a selection of Key Stage 2 children. The rationale for each method of data collection was considered carefully, with the advantages and disadvantages acknowledged and addressed. Each method of data collection has been described and justified in the body of this chapter. All collected data was transcribed myself after interview and was then analysed using thematic analysis. This chapter also discussed ethical issues, as well as my position as the 'insider' researcher, drawing on both the positives and the potential challenges of this positionality. Five main themes emerged from the interpretation of the data gathered from adult discussion, which will be discussed in the next two chapters.

Chapter 5: Relationships and Communication

The aim of this small-scale study was to explore teachers' and CAs' perceptions of the role of the CA in the early years immersion context. The next two chapters will present the findings after the analysis of the data. The findings will focus on the three main strands of this study, as laid out in the research questions: the key role of the CA in the immersion context as seen by teachers and CAs; the collaboration between teachers and CAs in the early years immersion classroom; and the role of the CA to help children develop Irish language capacity.

As discussed in Chapter 4 where the methodology of the research was elucidated, power shifts emerged throughout the research process (Anyan, 2013). I was a member of the school's SLT and I was investigating my own working context and I could therefore have been seen as holding power over the participants, even though this was not my intention. During data collection, power remains with the research participants who choose which information they wish to share in response to questions. The research process aimed to minimise power issues, and while recognising that it is impossible to eliminate established power structures completely, I aimed to create a non-threatening space where participants could raise issues regarding the role of the CA with a view to finding solutions collaboratively to any perceived deficits in practice. My role as the researcher was to facilitate this discussion. Issues of power did, however, arise during discussion and will be discussed accordingly where appropriate throughout the elucidation of the findings.

Each group of participants offered different perspectives on the main themes which reflected their professional experiences to date.

The children who took part in this study appeared to be very focused on language and their language learning journey. The professional focus centred on collaboration and communication within the school and the impact of relationships on CA deployment. It may be that the children were unaware of any perceived tension between professionals within the school. Although the children's thoughts were insightful, they did not contribute to the overall findings of the study. For this reason, the themes emerging from the children's focus groups will be discussed separately in Appendix G.

Common themes and ideas for improvement that emerged were illuminating and revealed areas of strength in practice, and areas for improvement. All participants conducted

themselves professionally and through dialogue seemed committed to finding solutions to perceived issues. I am grateful for their professional insights and contribution and the willingness with which they discussed sometimes delicate issues in a sensitive and considerate manner. The main themes will be discussed over the next two chapters with collaboration being the thread that is woven through all other themes.

In relation to the study, five main themes regarding the deployment of the CA in the early years immersion classroom emerged. Those five main themes identified were:

- Relationships
- Communication
- Training
- Language
- Deployment

Each theme listed above is linked to all the others through the overarching theme of collaboration.

This is the first study to explore the role of the CA in the Irish Medium immersion classroom.. The major themes emerging from the data were relationships and communication. This study therefore offers some important insights into how professional relationships, collaboration and communication can influence the effectiveness of the CA's role in the classroom.

Figure 1 below shows how the main themes emerging from this study are all inter-related.

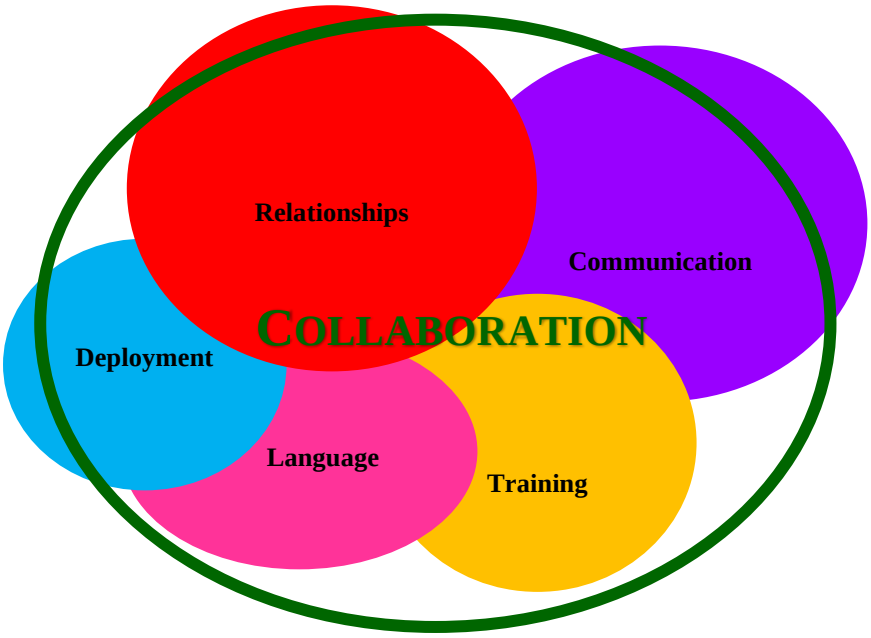

Figure 1: Deployment of CAs in the early years immersion classroom: main themes emerging from data

A brief explanation of the diagram which illustrates the overview of the findings will follow. The diagram above shows the key themes that emerged from the data. The size of each component of the diagram reflects how prevalent each particular theme was for study participants. A brief overview of the findings will now be given, before focusing in more detail on the first two themes in this chapter and the remaining themes in Chapter 6.

5.1. Collaboration

It is important to note that the central issue of collaboration is interwoven through the themes and all themes are also interlinked. The theme of collaboration links all other emerging themes. In the context of the case study school, the ability or inability to collaborate had particularly affected the establishment and maintenance of relationships. Through discussion it emerged that for some participants collaboration was happening, whereas for others it was not happening.

Issues around collaboration also affected the role of the CA in the school in terms of effective deployment. A lack of training affected teachers' and CAs' understanding of the role and their ability to collaborate to maximise the role of the CA in the classroom. Collaboration between class teachers and CAs, where CAs were involved in the planning process, was deemed to support the effective modelling of L2 use. These issues will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter and in subsequent chapters.

Another area that is strongly linked to collaboration and the other themes is communication. All participants noted that there was a connection between communication and the establishment of professional relationships within the school. Good communication was evident when dialogue, interaction and co-operative planning occurred between class teachers and CAs. Management and teachers noted minimal issues regarding communication within the school. In contrast CAs vocally noted a lack of communication amongst staff. This perceived lack of communication engendered much frustration for CAs and appeared to be having an impact on the role of the CA in the school.

5.1.1. Major Themes: Relationships and Communication

The main aim of this study was to investigate perceptions of CA deployment in the case study school. A secondary aim was to discover how participants perceived the role of the CA in the

development of children's language proficiency. These emerging from collected data will be of interest to anyone in the educational field working with a CA or organising CA deployment. The two major themes which emerged across all interviews and focus groups were relationships and communication. Issues of relationships and communication were also noted by Rhodes (2006) in his study of mentors in schools, who argued that a lack of communication between teachers and CAs can lead to a lack of understanding of how best to support learners. Regarding the role of CAs, problems may arise due to poor supervision and a lack of guidance and direction (Rhodes, 2006). CAs can be most effective when the class teacher and CA work closely together (Woolfson & Truswell, 2005) with a shared purpose.

In the context of the study school, it would appear that issues surrounding relationships and communication need to be addressed to ensure successful collaboration which facilitates effective input and interaction with the children for the purposes of language development.

In this chapter the two main themes, relationships and communication, will be discussed as they have a bearing on the other three themes and on each other. Direct quotes from participants will be used to highlight the main points which arose from the analysis. Interviewees will be identified using the word interviewee and other participants will be identified by their roles, either Teacher, Classroom Assistant or Pupil.

5.2. Relationships

As well as being featuring in all the other themes, the theme of relationships emerged on three levels: staff relations, relationships between staff and children, and relationships that exist beyond the school, mostly between staff and parents. However, there was also evidence that staff relationships existed on multiple levels most notably between senior management and other staff, and between class teachers and CAs, as illustrated in Figure 2.

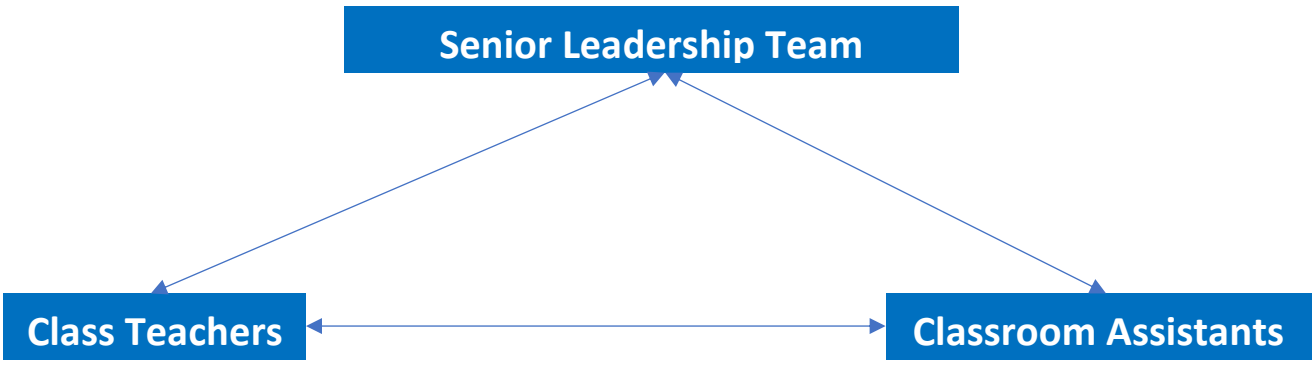

Figure 2: Levels of staff relationships in the school

Highlighting the complexities of establishing professional working relationships between class teachers and CAs one participant noted that:

Interviewee 3: "*sometimes . . . it can be difficult for teachers to find a balance".*

The need to find a balance between friendliness, conflict of views and professionalism will be discussed in further detail in Section 5.2.5.

Focus group discussions and individual interviews highlighted some tension with regard to the issue of relationships and individual personalities. This disagreement primarily centred around the influence of personal relationships on working partnerships. Discussion on the establishment of positive working relationships and productivity uncovered positive and negative viewpoints. Positive viewpoints will be discussed first. The next section will focus on how the establishment of positive working relationships was seen to enhance staff productivity.

5.2.1. Positives

The majority of class teachers and the management team commented on the positive relationships that existed within the case study school and the importance of these in terms of collegiality and productivity.

Below are some examples of what people said:

Interviewee 1: "I suppose I have tried to put people who would work well together, together".

Interviewee 2: "I see positive relationships between staff. I believe that if there are positive relationships between staff children see us interacting on friendly levels and they then behave like that themselves: with us and with others".

Interviewee 3: "Maybe I have a very romanticised vision of the school . . . it's very much we are here working together".

Classroom Assistant C: "You see to be honest I do think that I get on well with my class teacher. I worked with her last year. We had no issues".

All comments above show that positive working relationships were evident within the school and that these relationships have been able to facilitate collaboration and productivity. All three interviewees, although being positive, also appeared to subtly acknowledge that the

situation was not perfect, and it could be inferred that some pairings did not work. Interviewee 3's use of the word *'romanticised'* shows that she was aware that her interpretation of the situation may not wholly reflect what she saw as the reality of the situation. Interviewee 1's suggestion that partnerships were chosen for the ability of those in a pairing to work well together acknowledged that there might have been, and potentially will be pairings that do not work well together. Classroom Assistant C's comment shows that she gets on well with her teacher and highlights that good working relationships can exist between teachers and CAs.

From the quotes above, it can be deduced that these participants realised the importance of good working relationships in encouraging collaborative practice to aid learning and teaching. As noted in Chapter 3, relationships between staff can be conducive to an effective working environment in a school (DfEE, 2000). Whilst positive working relationships can engender a sense of community, collegiality and collaboration (Tschannen-Moran, 2001), the relationships that exist between class teachers and CAs will all differ (Kay, 2005). Problems in the relationships between class teachers and CAs can impair the CA's ability to fulfil the role (DfEE, 2000). In the case study school, relationships had the potential to positively influence the deployment of CAs, depending on how CAs were paired with teachers. This viewpoint can be clearly seen in all the quotes above.

At the level of the school's management, it was assumed that positive relationships between class teachers and CAs would lead to collaboration and productivity. Talking about how relationships can aid collaboration, one participant stated:

Interviewee 1: "well I think it will depend on three different things: the class teacher and how they utilise them, the classroom assistant and how they allow themselves to be used either positively or negatively and the dynamic between the two of them".

The use of the word *'allow'* is very revealing. It suggests a perceived imbalance of power between class teachers and CAs. Although this participant recognised the need to work together, the use of the word allow would suggest that the imbalance of power between class teacher and CA was condoned by management. It is, however, difficult to ascertain if allow was the best choice of word in this context. The use of the word *'allow'* may further suggest that the power lay with the class teacher, or it may relate to the CA's exertion of control over their role, suggesting that CAs sought to maintain a sense of control over their deployment in the classroom. The use of the phrases *'how they utilise them'* and *'to be used'*, however,

suggest that the main power is in the hands of the class teacher. It was clear in the interview with this participant that they seemed mindful of possible clashes between class teachers and CAs**.**

Although a process of consultation amongst the Senior Leadership Team can occur when pairing class teachers and CAs, this final decision is normally taken by the school Principal. From Interviewee 1's use of the word *'dynamic'* as a synonym for relationship, it could be inferred that individuals were often paired together who would complement one another and bring out their best for the benefit of the children.

In the context of the quotes above, when class teachers and CAs work together, an understanding of how each other works can create a positive working environment, which can maximise learning potential for the children (Kay, 2005). When teachers and CAs work in partnership, it is important to

Interviewee 3: "accept each other's weaknesses, whilst appreciating each other's strengths".

This comment links with the comment above made by Interviewee 2 in relation to the ideal working relationship. A class teacher's and CA's acceptance of one another may be grounded in mutual respect with the aim that each component of the partnership complements the other, working for maximum benefit of the children. A sense of self and an awareness of the strengths and limitations of others can lead to a positive working relationship (Kay, 2005). As seen from the quotes above, when class teachers and CAs are comfortable and professional with one another this can create an open and collaborative working relationship. Collaboration with a common purpose can increase trust amongst colleagues. Collaboration and trust 'depend upon and foster one another' and so productive collaboration and constructive positive dialogue may not occur between school staff without a degree of trust from all participants (Tschannen-Moran, 2001, p. 315).

Commenting on working relationships, Class Teacher A noted that although she had experienced a challenging school year for a number of reasons, she felt that the good working relationships between her and the CAs with whom she worked created a relaxing atmosphere in class which in turn created a positive learning environment for the children. Good working relationships can afford the CA the opportunity to become more involved in learning and teaching in the classroom: perhaps becoming more proactive and being involved in planning for example.

Classroom Assistant C: "*I would get it all ready the day before because we would plan".*

This suggests that a CA who feels a sense of purpose and who feels respected can feel confident in their ability to offer suggestions to teachers about approaches or resources to be used in the classroom. The use of the word '*we*' indicates that this CA saw this as a collaborative effort between herself and the class teacher.

In the classroom, CAs play a key role in children's learning (Sage & Wilkie, 2003) and can act as an important support for teachers, providing support that allows all children to succeed and reach their potential (Webster et al., 2013). The idea of a model of cohesive support was highlighted by two class teachers, who noted that the direction and guidance offered by long-standing CAs to new teachers can be invaluable. As one participant said:

Class Teacher A:"I feel as a new teacher coming into the school that I was supported very well by my classroom assistants".

This support related to the structured routines and procedures of the case study school, as well as the very specific approach to language development in the early years. A CA who is willing, enthusiastic and knowledgeable of school practices and procedures can contribute greatly to the smooth running of the classroom in a pastoral and pedagogical context (Burgess et al., 2007: Woolfson & Truswell, 2005). CAs can be described as 'the 'glue' which holds together the diverse activities of a busy primary school' (Kay, 2005, p. vii). It can be understood from this that through the development of good working relationships, CAs can help new teachers adapt to their environment by providing direction and focus for their teaching and learning. Close collaboration between new teachers and CAs can help a new member of staff to develop an understanding of school policies and procedures and consequently adhere to them. Since they are sharing their knowledge, experiences such as this can be empowering for CAs. Not all teachers showed willingness to accept the suggestions of CAs, however. This will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

Since 'children model their use of language on both adults and peers' (Kay, 2005, p. 64) it can be assumed that the relationship that exists between class teacher and CA can have an impact upon language acquisition. 'The way in which the adults around them use language is crucial in determining how well children learn to speak and use spoken language' (Kay, 2005, p. 64). Collaboration and clearly defined (and shared) expectations allow class teachers and CAs to be aware of each other's working model. Frequent communication, between class teacher and CA, in the presence of the children, models to them some appropriate ways of

using language. Interaction may take the form of role play and be heavily dramatised. It is interesting to note that only one participant made a connection between positive relationships and language acquisition.

Interviewee 3: "Children's language acquisition will not be effective if there is not good work between the classroom assistant and the teacher".

It could be argued that in a pairing where there is an established relationship with good communication between them there can be a clearly defined approach to language development with shared and common targets and expectations. Because this interaction is so natural, the pair may not even consider the impact of the relationship on language development. This may explain why only one participant made the connection. This participant's acknowledgment of the link between relationships and language development may also have been influenced by the fact that she held a position of leadership and presumably had a good understanding of immersion education theory. When a good relationship exists between a class teacher and a CA, interaction, either modelled or spontaneous between the two may be fruitful for children's acquisition. It can be deduced from the above quote that the teacher can aid the CA by acknowledging their importance as a language source. Both Interviewee 1 and Classroom Assistant A used the example of a teacher in the school who, whenever she was telling a story to the class included all adults in proximity and interacted with the CA to reinforce and develop language. The constant modelling of the type of interaction she expected with and from CAs was viewed positively by both participants and was seen as an aid to the development of children's language proficiency.

5.2.2. Relationships with the children

As noted earlier in this chapter, relationships in the study school existed on three levels. This section will look at the relationships that existed between school staff, namely teachers and CAs, and children. Participants on the whole spoke positively about the relationships that existed between CAs and the children. The establishment of positive relationships between CAs and children facilitates social interaction which in turns affords children the opportunity to develop linguistic proficiency in the L2. Discussions around relationships with children also drew attention to the pastoral aspects of the CA's role.

5.2.3. Relationships with the children: Positive aspects

CAs can support class teachers in addressing the personal and social needs of pupils (Woolfson & Truswell, 2005). It had been suggested by Interviewee 2 that the existence of positive relationships across the school's hierarchy offered a good example for children in their approach to relationships. This belief was also supported by 2 class teachers, with one participant describing the relationships between CAs and children as being

Class Teacher C: "fantastic".

This may stem from the good examples of partnership between teachers and CAs. Another participant noted that

Class Teacher C: "*it's lovely to see that the children feel so comfortable around the classroom assistants in our school too".*

It could be concluded that children felt comfortable interacting with CAs. To support target language development, it is important, especially in the early years that children are given opportunities to use and develop social language (Andrews, 2018). The positive relationships between CAs and children facilitate opportunities for a more informal approach to language development and acquisition through games and general conversation. As a result of their close relationships with children, CAs are invested in the children's learning and often possess knowledge of their learning and progress that may be on par with that of the class teacher. As one interviewee suggested,

Interviewee 1: "*I could ask them how such and such is getting on and they would be able to answer nearly as well as the class teacher".*

This opinion acknowledges the role of the CA and points towards a CA's intuition. It reinforces the idea that a CA can be very observant and pastorally involved in the children's development.

Many of the CAs in the school had themselves been pupils in the Irish Medium education system and live within the local community. The Irish Medium sector is very small and so the existence of relationships between school staff and the wider Irish speaking community is almost inevitable. For example, some members of staff were parents of children who attended the school; some members of staff were related to one another or were related to children who attend. Such relationships, in the Irish Medium community and in the community in general can have positive and negative connotations. The positive connotations of this will be

discussed here and the negative connotations will be referred to at a later stage where challenges surrounding collaborative practices are discussed.

In addition, some CAs had been working in the school for five years or more and were aware of how the background of some children can impact on their engagement with learning.

The comment below clearly illustrates the pastoral role of the CA in the study school.

Class Teacher B: "We are lucky we have a few classroom assistants who have been here for some time and they know a bit about the family history".

When CAs are aware of a child's situation,

Class Teacher B: "they know how to speak to certain children in a specific way to get the best out of them".

The relationships that these CAs have established with class teachers and their knowledge of the children's home circumstances can positively impact the way in which they interact with the children. Although talking about teachers, not CAs, Kyriacou (2009) suggests that teachers should recognise children as individuals, showing care and concern for their well-being and development. This could also be applied to CAs. Thus, knowledge that CAs may have about a child's background or family situation can engender a sense of compassion and understanding in their approach. Consequently, the way that experienced CAs interact with children can offer a good example to new CAs. A good rapport between adults and children can engender a positive working environment that is conducive to worthwhile learning (Marzano & Pickering, 1997), leading to meaningful dialogic interaction. Positive relationships and communication between CAs and children can therefore enhance children's language development.

5.2.4. Relationships with the children: Challenges

Although the positives of good relationships within the school were discussed at length by the participants, the establishment of relationships and their influences were not without challenge.

An awareness of the challenges which might arise between different personalities or styles of working emerged through interviews and focus groups and was noted by all groups of staff participants.

Below are examples of what participants said.

Classroom Assistant B: "If you are asked to do something else outside the classroom, sometimes you feel you can't do it because the teacher almost won't let you".

Classroom Assistant D: "I think a good team if no matter if you get on with another person or not . . . you have a job so you should concentrate on the job . . . it's not about being best mates".

Class Teacher C: "Building a relationship, which can be difficult if there is a clash of personalities".

It can be deduced from the quotes above that the area of relationships can be problematic for numerous reasons. All of the quotes above acknowledge potential tensions in the establishment and maintenance of relationships between class teachers and CAs, either through potential or perceived power issues or personality difference. Classroom Assistant D articulated professionalism in recognising that professional relationships can be difficult to negotiate.

In discussing relationships between class teachers and CAs, Kay (2005) makes a number of points. Firstly, it takes time for class teachers and CAs to build a working relationship. Secondly, CAs very often work with many different teachers who have varying models of working and the time taken to adjust to different working models may engender difficulty and frustration. Finally, the development of a good working relationship is the responsibility of both the class teacher and the CA.

CAs stressed the amount of time needed to build relationships within a new pairing, due to the perceived necessity of learning the teacher's preferred mode of operating and vice versa. Difficulty and frustration when new pairings are established were clearly noted by one CA who stated,

Classroom Assistant B: "I think it's difficult to be clear about your duties because you work . . . over the last 3 years I have worked with 3 different teachers and every teacher expects something different than what another teacher would say you can do. So you have to get to know the teacher, what they want. So, you don't know what your main duty is until you work with a teacher, you see what way they work and what they want of you".

Different expectations and the amount of time that it takes to build a relationship within a new pairing can at times lead to a difficulty in collaborating: teamwork and collegiality may

suffer whilst the relationship is being formed. The use of the phrases *'what they want you to do'* and *'what another teacher would say you can do'* points to issues of perceived power imbalances in relationships between class teachers and CAs. Language used by this CA indicates that the main control in the classroom is seen as residing with the class teacher, rather than there being a collaborative relationship.

It is not uncommon that conflict can arise between class teachers and CAs as they both strive to create an identity for themselves in the same classroom (Tucker, 2009). This same CA also commented that,

Classroom Assistant B: "I feel like it's been a very long time since I have worked with a teacher and been part of a team, both playing off each other, and knowing what was needed".

This participant had clearly enjoyed collaborative and close working relationships in the past but was not experiencing the same level of working relationship when this study was conducted. In her comments and demeanour in the focus group, this participant appeared rather despondent and from the quote above it seems clear that she experienced frustration and felt currently undervalued. Themes overlap, and although feelings of value affect relationships, it is particularly evidenced in the kind of communication that takes place between teachers and CAs. Feelings of value will be discussed in more detail in relation to the theme of communication in Section 5.3.3.

5.2.5. Re-defining relationships as friendships

Due to well established relationships between teachers and CAs it can be very easy for a professional working relationship to become re-defined as a friendship, where individuals then need to manage the collegial relationship and the personal relationships (Morrison & Copper-Thomas, 2016). The quotes below from members of the management team show that a conflict between friendship and professionalism can exist.

Interviewee 1: "Certain teachers and classroom assistants try to become friends, and that is ok to be a friend, but you have to maintain the professional, especially in situations where you have more than one classroom assistant in a room".

Interviewee 2: "Within this situation one classroom assistant was maybe favoured over another, in so much as there was a friendship there and that classroom

assistant was deemed to have more of a say . . . that caused tensions. That became a difficult situation".

Interviewee 3: "I think sometimes it can be difficult for teachers to find the balance: maybe they become too friendly with classroom assistants Therefore if an issue arises, because they are so friendly with the classroom assistant, it becomes difficult to approach it and to deal with it in case it creates a problem in their working relationship".

There is the potential that conflict between professionalism and friendship can become more of an issue when there is more than one CA working with one teacher. One interviewee commented,

Interviewee 1: "*the friendships at times can be a challenge because it can create a bit of tension, especially if there is a third or fourth person in the classroom".*

The notion of a friendship becoming challenging was also mentioned by both co-ordinators who were interviewed and one CA. As shown in the quotes above, there is a potential for

Interviewee 2: "tension"

when one CA is perceived to be 'elevated' above another. This elevation could take the form of overt friendship, levels of interaction between staff, and the dissemination of duties in the classroom. As highlighted in all the participant discussions, in terms of delegation and responsibility in the classroom, some CAs appeared to have been enjoying a greater involvement in the decision-making process and may have been more involved in the pedagogical, rather than functional tasks. Other CAs said they felt on the periphery, as if their ideas or insights were seen as irrelevant, which was also noted by one of the interviewees who stated,

Interviewee 1: "*I can see that one classroom assistant does not feel part of the group*".

This insight was supported by a CA who stated

Classroom Assistant D: "I don't feel part . . . I don't see a team working as we usually had . . . I don't really know what's supposed to happen there, but it's not a team".

For this participant, feelings that class teams are not all working collaboratively with a common purpose engendered much frustration as can be seen in the comment.

Relationships that are 'too' positive can become problematic. Although it was highlighted above about the importance of pairing teachers and CAs who will complement one another, the emphasis on relationships by management may have been given too much of an emphasis in this decision-making process if the result is that other members of staff present in the classroom feel excluded.

From a professional perspective, it could be expected that pairings should work together to enhance teaching and learning regardless of the type of personal relationship that exists between the two. One participant voiced this clearly, suggesting,

Classroom Assistant D: "I think a good team is no matter if you get on well with another person or not, like if they aren't your favourite person, you have a job so you should concentrate on the job and do it well as a team".

This particular quote offers great insight into the professionalism and maturity of this CA. It can be understood from this comment that collaboration and teamwork should be natural components of the working relationship between class teacher and CA, regardless of whether a friendship exists or not. It could be drawn from this that there is a need for the school management team to promote positive working relationships between class teachers and CAs, rather than focusing on friendships when choosing pairings. There was an assumption on the part of management that people would work together in a professional manner, but it seems not everyone knew how to do that. Induction training at the start of the academic year and frequent in-set training facilitated by the school's SLT could promote the development of positive professional working relationships.

The ability to promote positive working relationships may have been negatively impacted by a lack of training for class teachers and CAs. One participant commented,

Interviewee 1: "that's a challenge that again comes down to personalities and the lack of training for teachers and classroom assistants on how to work together: professional practice".

This quote indicates that those who hold positions of management within the school are aware of issues around professionalism and identity. It also highlights the usefulness of and need for training for all staff in setting ground rules for positive, productive working relationships. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

In this section, issues of professionalism and relationships have been discussed in relation to class teachers and CAs. The next section will discuss issues of professionalism and relationships in the context of relationships existing beyond the school, with a focus on the relationships that exist between CAs and parents. Relationships that exist between teachers and parents will not be discussed as they were not discussed by participants during individual interviews or focus groups.

5.2.6. Relationships beyond the context of the school

The inevitability of relationships existing between school staff and the wider Irish speaking community was mentioned above. Although relationships that exist beyond the school can be positive, they can also cause difficulty for school staff. As noted by most participants, the main area of difficulty for them centred on interaction with parents. As one teacher participant noted,

Class Teacher C: "*there has to be a line somewhere where they know what your role is. Like speaking to parents if something has happened. You want to be the one to inform the parent and sometimes maybe the classroom assistant does it. I would prefer to inform parents and I tell the classroom assistants this".*

The Classroom Assistant Project found that CA input can be most effective when parents have a clear understanding of the role (Woolfson & Truswell, 2005). The comment above from Class Teacher C indicates that parents may not always have that understanding and when CAs are approached by parents they could find it difficult to hold back if a parent raises an issue with them. Often CAs can be related to parents or know parents on a personal level; they may have worked together, attended school together or belong to the same clubs and societies, for example, sporting clubs and weight loss clubs. Two class teachers noted this as an area of controversy and they claimed that some CAs like to share information with parents and engage in discussion with them about their children's learning and the classroom.

The quotes below indicate that teachers viewed interactions with parents as an integral part of their own role, especially where issues need to be addressed and agreed that this is something that is beyond the remit of CAs.

Class Teacher C: "I would prefer to inform parents and I tell the classroom assistants this. I don't mind them telling the parent if the child has done a lovely wee picture or

something, but if there has been a more serious incident, I prefer it to come from me and I will always say that".

Class Teacher B: "That's tough. That is tough. That has happened to me and you appreciate where they are coming from in the sense that they have went out of their way to tell the parent, but sometimes it . . . you don't wanna say that it's not their place, but it's not really when you look at our roles".

In complying with safeguarding legislation, some sensitive information may only be shared on a need-to-know basis. This issue had been raised by Interviewee 3 and I felt it appropriate to discuss this in the context of the focus group. All 3 of the teachers who took part in the focus group, but B and C especially, highlighted the difficulty surrounding the information that needs to be shared with CAs:

Class Teacher B: "*what is gossip and what is need to know"?*

As noted above, the Irish Medium sector is small and so the sharing of sensitive information can be challenging. This issue could be solved by having a policy which teachers and CAs are required to adhere to.

Whilst there is nothing wrong with CAs interacting with parents, the sharing of information about children was deemed to be beyond their role by the teachers and school leaders. It may be that parents see the CA as approachable and less intimidating than the teacher and so feel more comfortable talking with them either to seek information, to offload or to rant (Kay, 2005). At times, these discussions can take place beyond the school which can compromise the professionality of the CA. It is here that the CA's understanding of his/her role comes into play. From the teachers' comments, it could be deduced that CAs do not always understand the need to be professionally discreet. This is something else that could be highlighted in training.

The ability to understand the need to be professionally discreet links with the issue of communication which will be discussed in more detail in the section below. With communication of a defined role for CAs with clear expectations, CAs should be able to develop a deeper understanding of the need to be professionally discreet.

5.3. Communication

Communication is a way to share information. For CAs, information sharing between teachers and themselves was the aspect of communication which seemed to engender the most frustration. This frustration can be seen clearly in the quote below.

Classroom Assistant D: "I would say there is no communication".

As one of the main themes arising from the data, communication can relate to adult-child communication and adult-adult communication. In the immersion environment where great emphasis is being placed on language acquisition, much communication relates to the development of L2 and the modelling of appropriate language use such as sentence structure, responding to questions, communication etiquette and grammar rules. In this first section, I will focus on adult-adult communication which can facilitate collaboration and collegiality for the wider benefit of children's language development.

5.3.1. Adult-adult communication

Communication was an issue that emerged directly during the focus group with CAs. The issue of communication also emerged inferentially in interviews with senior and middle leaders in relation to the deployment of CAs and was also apparent in the focus group with class teachers. It could be argued, therefore, that this could be seen as one of the most prevalent issues for CAs and accounts for much of any frustration that they experienced in their role within the case study school.

Below are some examples of what participants who were part of the school management team said.

Interviewee 1: "Some of them don't know what they're doing on a day to day basis".

Interviewee 2: "I think there should be space every year for a new classroom assistant and a teacher who might possibly come on board, that there is some sort of development day as to what the classroom assistant role is: not only for the classroom assistants, but for the teacher as well".

The quotes above show that senior and middle leaders in the school have identified issues and are aware that gaps in communication do exist, whether that be between pairings, or at a whole school level. Gaps in understanding of the role may have influenced the deployment of CAs in the classroom and their ability to fulfil their role purposefully. The above statements imply criticism of some of the teachers who may not have been working collaboratively with

CAs. The quotes show that the school's management team are sympathetic to CAs and are eager to improve the situation for all involved.

The quotes below show a correlation between the views of management and the views of CAs and highlight the perception that information was not always shared effectively across the school's hierarchy. The lack of a succinct job description engendered much frustration amongst participants, especially CAs, and this appeared to be impacting their ability to carry out the role effectively. The set of quotes below are only a sample, and many correlating opinions were shared on this issue.

Classroom Assistant B: "I think when classroom assistants start here it needs to be made clear to them what is expected of them".

Classroom Assistant D: "I can relate to that. I have been working nine years now 1-1. There's only one or two teachers who gave me the children's . . . IEP[5]".

Classroom Assistant D: "Communication is not one of the highest priority of everyone".

It is evident from the above selection of quotes that CAs feel that there is a major issue with communication within the school. Correlations can be seen between relationships and communication, as well as between communication and the deployment of the CA, most especially around the need to communicate clear expectations of the role. Russell et al. (2013) recommend that schools express the role of the CA in a school policy on CA deployment to communicate clear expectations of the role.

In the case study school, teaching staff met weekly to discuss the following week. At the time of the study, CAs did not attend this meeting. This engendered much dissatisfaction amongst CAs who felt that information was not shared with them in the same way that it was with teaching staff. As one participant commented,

Classroom Assistant E: "We don't get a meeting or anything. You (Teachers) have a Friday meeting. You get told stuff and it's meant to be passed on to the classroom assistant, but a lot of the time that doesn't happen".

The quote above suggests that CAs were frustrated at the perceived lack of communication and information sharing. It could also imply that CAs questioned transparency in the sharing

[5] An IEP is an Individual Educational Plan. This is a document that helps school staff plan for children with additional needs. It is influenced by a child's profile (strengths and weaknesses), assessment data and a Statement of Educational Need where applicable.

of information and felt on the periphery. The above statement could also suggest that CAs were not seen as needing to know important information, thus adding to their perceived feelings of 'inferiority'.

5.3.2. Involving CAs in planning

The involvement of CAs in planning also has implications for communication. To enable CAs to develop a professional identity it is important that they see that

Interviewee 1: "*what they are suggesting is valid".*

This validation is reinforced when CAs have been involved in the interactive process of collaborative planning with the class teacher and know what is expected of them (Briggs, 2012). Involvement in the planning process can allow CAs to take ownership over what they do and act independently (Kay, 2005). This corresponds with the comments of Classroom Assistant C earlier who discussed being involved in the planning and how this offered a clear guide for her work, which helped her feel secure and autonomous in her role.

During focus groups class teachers also stressed how important communication was to aid learning and teaching in the classroom. Teachers emphasised the need to communicate information that is important, or that is perceived to be important. The quotes below offer a sample of what teachers believed.

Class Teacher A: "You have to make sure that everyone knows what's happening in the class".

Class Teacher C: "Communication is vital. We need to be sure that everybody is in the know about what's important".

Class Teacher B: *"I have been really lucky with a few of the classroom assistants that I have had, that they helped me with planning, especially creative tasks, because it is easy to get stuck in a rut. They have sat down with me and helped me".*

The quotes above from teachers A and C highlight the importance of good communication in the classroom. Teacher C's use of the phrase *'about what's important'* is interesting. This could imply that only information that is deemed important by the class teacher should be shared with CAs. This could indicate a teacher's level of control in the classroom with regards to choosing that which they wish to share with CAs. Two class teachers specifically

mentioned involving CAs in the planning process and highlighted the perceived benefits of this, with one noting

Class Teacher B: "*that they feel more involved . . . because they are in the know".*

Having CAs involved in the planning or sharing planning with them could reduce the need for explanation later in class, which would allow more time for productive input (teacher and CA) in the classroom, with a more heightened focus on learning and teaching. As noted above by Class Teacher B, who was speaking from her own experience, CA involvement in the planning process can offer new ideas which in turn can renew teacher enthusiasm. This sentiment was also shared by Class Teacher C. Collaboration and CA input during the planning process can lead to a smooth and enjoyable learning experience for the children.

When CAs are not involved in the planning process, or when planning has not been shared with them, they are often unaware of what it is they are doing until the beginning of a particular school day which reduces their effectiveness (Calder, 2003). This was stated very clearly by one CA who said,

Classroom Assistant B: "you are just expected to do things, or you're told 5 minutes before an activity that you have to do it. I don't think that's very respectful of the classroom assistant".

The reference to a lack of respect indicates that CAs have felt undervalued. They may have felt that they were not always able to give of their best because of a lack of prior instruction or preparation. This feeling supports the work of Roffey-Barentsen & Watt (2014) who note that when CAs receive impromptu instruction, and when they are deployed in the classroom, without prior instruction or knowledge, their input may be less effective than when they are actively involved in the planning process. A lack of communication may therefore impact upon a CA's ability to do their job to the standard that would give them satisfaction. Although Classroom Assistant B stated that she felt valued in general and acknowledged that the school valued the input of CAs she also noted that when prior instruction is not available,

Classroom Assistant B: "*you don't know if you're valued that way and some teachers feel like they control you".*

The use of the word *'control'* suggests that some teachers felt a sense of ownership of CAs, which can diminish the CA's sense of autonomy as a professional. A strong feeling emerged in the focus group that CAs felt that there was an expectation that they would do whatever the

teacher requested or demanded, with little warning. As shown below, this aspect of control was also noted by Interviewee 3.

Interviewee 3: "You could have someone (teacher) who isn't happy at taking on board any suggestions that people make".

The quote above highlights a major challenge for teachers and CAs being able to plan collaboratively. Interviewee 3, whilst recognising the benefits of such collaboration was also realistic noting that some teachers can be and have been reluctant to take on board suggestions made by CAs. This links with the theme of relationships and personalities which were discussed in the previous section and where it was mentioned that teachers have very different working models which impact, either positively or negatively, on the CAs' ability to make suggestions.

Levels of responsibility attributed to CAs may vary according to teachers. Where CAs were involved in the pedagogic tasks, it appeared to offer them a sense of purpose and confidence in their role. Classroom Assistant C spoke with obvious pride when discussing how she supervised daily art activities and listened to children read. This highlights a good working partnership between her and the class teacher and signifies the teacher's confidence in her ability.

The majority of CAs argued that collaboration was not always evident across the school, and that a CA's judgement can be ignored. This viewpoint is in line with the findings of Roffey-Barentsen & Watt (2014) who found that CAs' voices were often unheard due to a lack of opportunity for them to share their opinions. As a result, some CAs did not always feel able to work collaboratively and felt that their ideas were not always taken seriously. One participant suggested,

Classroom Assistant B: "it's strange. When I worked with another teacher, there was a problem with the reading and I thought it would be a good idea to make up wee reward books so you could stick stickers on it. She was like 'yeah, do that' and she let me do that because that was something that I had an idea of and she thought that it would be good. Now, I feel . . . it's just different . . . it's not really the same".

This opinion was shared with 2 other CAs who also noted that at times their ideas and observations can be dismissed. The dismissal of the CA's ideas may indicate 2 things. Firstly,

it may demonstrate a lack of faith in CA judgement or secondly, it may highlight a teacher's desire to show originality in thought and ideas: the teacher may have a clear idea of what s/he wants to do and how, and therefore does not take on board suggestions. One CA suggested that teachers and CAs often worked with their own agendas and priorities and therefore feeling like a part of a team was an area of challenge. The focus groups indicated that some CAs felt isolated and there was a sense of acceptance among other teachers and CAs that this was the way things were. On the other hand, another CA was adamant that this was not how she viewed the situation.

Classroom Assistant C: "*We both spoke at the end of last year because we knew we would be together and we planned ahead. Every day after school we would sit and talk about what's going to happen in the week ahead. I don't know I just feel that there's no issues".*

This particular CA had enjoyed good levels of partnership with her class teacher, perhaps because a professional working relationship founded on the basis of collaboration existed between them both. Having made use of the time between 1.45 and 2.45, after the children in the early years had gone home, both the class teacher and this CA communicated regularly to plan to provide good learning opportunities for the children. The contrasting experiences highlight the importance of the establishment of positive professional relationships, based on a clear policy, in engendering a sense of purpose and collegiality. The establishment and maintenance of this type of relationship depends on input from both class teacher and CA. This point will be addressed further in the final chapter where the conclusions and recommendations will be discussed.

Whilst acknowledging that there was some good practice regarding the sharing of planning, Interviewee 3 also noted the issue of time as having an impact upon the ability to share ideas and to plan collaboratively.

Interviewee 3: "Unfortunately, there doesn't seem to be the same time because of the volume of other . . . because the curriculum is very broad. And classroom assistants don't have to stay beyond the school day".

Interviewee 3's concerns resonate with the findings of a research study conducted by Wilson et al. (2003) who found that 25% of CAs in their study claimed that they spent no time liaising with the class teacher. To overcome this lack of time, CAs could potentially stay behind after the school day, perhaps once a week for an hour, using their own time to discuss

the plans for the week ahead with the class teacher, which could help them develop a sense of ownership of their work in the classroom. Teachers often work more than the hours that they are paid for, staying behind after school for meetings, or preparation, seeing this time spent as part of their job. CAs could also show their commitment by doing the same. This suggestion may be controversial and difficult to achieve due to issues of remuneration and salary. It is clear from the responses of the CAs that many felt undervalued and this may also have an impact on their willingness to stay behind after the school day. It could be argued that asking CAs to stay an extra hour a week, and paying them for this, would confer value to them and their work in the school. Issues of value, worth and professional esteem will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

5.3.3. Perceptions of value

The discussions above show that there are correlations between communication and perceptions of value. It is interesting to note that CAs were described by managers and teachers as adding value and having a positive impact in the study school yet did not always feel valued themselves, nor did they feel empowered due to a perceived lack of collaboration between themselves and class teachers. Perceptions of value in the context of collaboration and collegiality will be discussed further in this section.

Varying levels of value attributed to the role of CAs emerged from all groups of participants. All 3 interviewees concurred that the role of the CA contributed to the effective running of the school. Such positivity recognised that the CA is a 'committed resource' (Sharples et al., 2015, p.9) who can play a vital role in schools to raise standards (Sage & Wilkie, 2003). CAs in the study school were described as hardworking and worthwhile members of the school team who

Class Teacher C: "need to recognise the importance of the work that they do".

This suggests that CAs do not see fully the impact of what they do for the school, and also suggests that the onus is on the CA to recognise their value and input, rather than teachers telling them that they are valued. Within the case study school, teachers and management believed that they provided CAs with frequent positive affirmation about their input, yet CAs themselves did not always appear see the value in their contribution to school life. Since they clearly did not always internalise this validation, it may have been that positive feedback was offered implicitly rather than explicitly. Teachers may have thought that they were providing

positive feedback to CAs, but this may not have been so obviously positive that CAs recognised it.

The notion of CAs not seeing value within their role was reinforced by CAs themselves during their focus group. In discussion, CAs described in detail the practical elements of their job noting the need for flexibility and being involved in offering

Classroom Assistant A: "support"

and in

Classroom Assistant C: "preparing".

It could be argued that support and preparation demonstrates that CAs 'add value' (Russell et al., 2013, p.59) to that which the teacher does. In the case study school CAs supported the work of the class teacher in a number of ways including working with small groups, engaging and interacting with children in the classroom, interacting with children in the playground and by reinforcing the language being used by the class teacher.

Although all CAs reported that they were happy within the role, they also perceived that there were areas for improvement. Classroom Assistant B noted that although she felt valued within the school, she also felt that CAs could at times be taken for granted, that they were treated with a sense of complacency and there was often the assumption that they would do things naturally, without direction, input or thanks. This claim was reinforced by Class Teacher C.

CAs in the study school were acknowledged by the senior management team to

Interviewee 2: "work very hard"

and so it is important that they are not taken for granted and feel that value is attributed to what they do. There appears to be a need for school staff as a whole to explicitly respect their willingness and their efforts. Opportunities for staff appraisal could offer CAs the opportunity to receive meaningful positive feedback on a regular basis, which could in turn engender a greater respect towards the role. The value that a teacher places on the role of the CA should influence the manner in which he/she communicates with the CA and conveys respect in this interaction.

The language used by teachers when addressing CAs emerged through discussions about communication. As with any individual or group, should there be something that needs done,

there is the need to make requests with diplomacy and tact, showing respect for the individual and for their role within the school. In a 'dictatorial' classroom where a teacher can be abrupt, CAs may become resentful of the way that they are asked to do anything and there is a risk that they will respond with

Interviewee 1: "*that's not my job to do that".*

It could be deduced from this comment that Interviewee 1 was speaking from experience, where this type of reaction had emerged in the past. This reinforces the need for training for teachers and CAs which will be discussed at a later stage. To engender a sense of respect and being valued, which the majority of CAs reported as lacking, it is important that when asking CAs to do anything, instructions or requests are given in a friendly appropriate manner.

Class Teacher C: "*So, it's kind of saying 'I really appreciate what you have done there but I'm going to move this here a bit', trying to put it in a more friendly way".*

It is important to frame instructions as requests in a way that allows CAs to take their lead and direction from the class teacher, and that although the class teacher is ultimately in charge, also showing that CAs' input and opinions are valued and that they are a valued component of the classroom teaching team (Calder, 2003). Having the confidence to communicate problems to CAs, when they have not done something the way the teacher envisaged, or what they had agreed to, can be an area of concern for class teachers and was raised by two teachers during the focus group. This was noted by one participant who said,

Class Teacher A: "I have had some issues. It's like a double-edged sword: do you say something and have an atmosphere, or do you not say, and the problem goes on".

Class Teacher A clearly was concerned that tackling an issue head on could lead to the CA taking offence, but equally, ignoring the issue would allow it to be repeated. This level of discomfort felt by Class Teacher A was noted by Calder (2003) who suggests that teachers can feel uncomfortable giving instructions to CAs, especially when something has not been done well enough. A teacher's ability to address difficult issues with a CA relates to the type of professional relationship that exists between the two. A professional approach (Kay, 2005) and ground rules are important in the establishment of good working relationships. A stated need for grounds rules and clear expectations for the role of CA indicates the need for a clear policy to define the CA's role, training and induction at the beginning of the school year.

Taking the language and learning needs of the children in the nursery classroom into consideration, a decision was taken a number of years ago by the study school that an extra CA would be employed to work with the children in nursery. At this level, since children need to hear substantial amounts of spoken language, there is a heavy reliance on the language provided by adults in the setting (Andrews, 2018). In the study school, the Nursery classroom is therefore staffed with 1 qualified teacher and at least 2 CAs. The presence and input of multiple adults, as well as increasing exposure to the target language, should also allow for the sharing and rotation of duties which offers a level of diversity in the CA role.

Interviewee 2: "*That has always been approved and we believe that it works well. We have two classrooms in which the three members of staff work, and they rotate . . . they are meant to rotate around activities, between free play, more structured activities and everybody gets their turn doing probably what they would feel would be the more . . . everybody is entitled to a bit of mixing it up in what their job involves".*

In this quote the use of the words *'they are meant to'* and *'everybody is entitled'* show that Interviewee 2 was probably aware that this might not be happening at the time the study was carried out or had not happened in the past. In the context of this approach to staffing, Interviewee 2 referred to a

Interviewee 2: "*difficult situation"*

in which tension was evident, deployment was perceived as unfair, and one CA felt isolated by the actions of the teacher who appeared to have elevated the status of the other CA, allowing her a greater level of input into the planning, and allowing her to partake in the more 'educational' activities, whilst the other CA was deployed in a more supervisory capacity or fulfilling the functional duties of cleaning and tidying. It is clear from this situation that one CA was deemed more valuable than the other who consequently felt less valued. This reiterates the need for training and the establishment of clear ground rules and expectations for the role.

5.3.4. Expectations

In terms of the role of the CA and the associated expectations of the role, the need for clear communication from the top of the school's hierarchy was called for by the CAs. All CAs noted issues regarding the expectations of the job or the expectations of teachers. All schools

and individual teachers' classrooms have different ways of operating and so CAs may not always know what is and what is not expected of them in a particular environment. Two CAs who took part in this study had worked elsewhere, and during discussion both noted very different experiences in other schools and so felt that it would be beneficial for all, both teachers and CAs, to know what is expected in the role of CA. This point was made very clearly by one participant who stated,

Classroom Assistant B: "maybe in other schools . . . they aren't allowed to do certain things' That's why I think that when classroom assistants start here, it needs to be made clear to them what is expected of them".

To have clear expectations of the role communicated to both teachers and CAs, as part of a school policy, could open up the communication process and facilitate collaboration. Increased communication around policy guidelines could contribute to a positive and fruitful working relationship. During the focus group discussion two class teachers noted the benefit of whole staff discussion during the inset days in August at the beginning of the school year with one teacher commenting that,

Class Teacher B: "if it's a given at the beginning of the year everyone goes through what should and shouldn't happen in the classroom, it makes it easier for everyone as the year goes on".

Interviewee 2 suggested that such an aspect of staff development would establish what exactly the role entails. If teachers and CAs are aware of the common expectations of the role, any issues arising may be solved more effectively as there is a very clearly communicated definition of the role and associated duties (Parker et al., 2011: Briggs, 2012). This would reduce ambiguity and personal interpretation of the role.

Information concerning daily activities, weekly activities and special events needs to be communicated at a whole school level. It was perceived by the majority of CAs that the approach to information sharing was poor and ineffective. As noted above one participant suggested that,

Classroom Assistant D: "communication is not one of the highest priority of everyone".

CAs felt that they were not always aware of events that were happening within the school and that they were often the last to find out about them. It is worth noting, however, that to facilitate the sharing of information at a whole school level, the study school displayed a six-

weekly planner in the staff room detailing upcoming events, displayed a weekly overview in the staffroom, communicated upcoming events via e-mail and facilitated a brief Friday meeting for members of teaching staff. However, making sure that information received at this meeting was passed on to CAs did not seem to be seen as a priority. This can be seen in the following comment with one CA believed

Classroom Assistant E: "you (teachers) get told stuff and it's meant to be passed on to the classroom assistant, but a lot of the time that doesn't happen".

The implications for CAs of decisions made at the Friday meeting were not known until the beginning of a new school week. Historically, only teachers attended the brief meeting on a Friday afternoon. It is my understanding that CAs were not excluded from attending. However, there was no obligation for them to stay in school beyond the end of the school day and it could be that they chose not to attend. Since they may not have felt welcome, they may also have needed a direct invitation to attend. The perceived issues of poor communication may also reflect individual personality types of teachers and CAs. Relationship tensions in specific pairings may hinder the sharing of information. There may not therefore be an issue with communication at a whole school level. This was mentioned before when the impact of relationships was discussed.

A perceived lack of communication engendered much annoyance amongst CAs. This annoyance was highlighted by one participant who noted,

Classroom Assistant B: "there have been times when I haven't known about things. It's always brought up by the classroom assistants. I don't think the system of if you have a classroom assistant in your class tell them really works".

It is evident from this quote that CAs have, in the past, voiced concerns: *'it's always brought up…'* about the lack of communication and their associated frustration. This comment also shows that this frustration continues because the issue did not appear to have been resolved.

A solution to the communication issues brought forward to management by CAs was offered at the beginning of the 2018-2019 academic year. To increase communication amongst class teachers and CAs especially, it was suggested that unless it pertained to confidential information meant for teachers only, CAs would receive the same e-mails as class teachers to relay general information. Considering this decision, it could be assumed that all CAs should have a school e-mail address. During their focus groups all CAs mentioned their inability

either to log on to school computers or to access emails. This appeared to cause much dissatisfaction and frustration. Although it could be argued that CAs should have taken some responsibility for this issue and dealt with it themselves, this was deemed, by them, to be beyond their remit as a CA, and using their time to sort out this issue could have detracted from their involvement in something that could directly impact upon children's learning. The CAs' frustration was potentially compounded by the perception that they were not being supported adequately.

5.4. Relationships and Communication: Summary

The two main themes emerging from the gathered data centre around relationships and communication. Relationships is the main theme which links to all other emerging themes. All staff discussions noted how the establishment of positive relationships had promoted a culture of understanding and mutual respect amongst staff, which in turn had fostered collegiality and collaboration. All participants also noted that at times, relationships within the school could be strained and lead to challenge. Areas of challenge mainly centred around overfriendliness, where a professional distance is not maintained, and professional relationships can become blurred. Perceived lack of value and respect shown towards CAs also emerged as an area of challenge within the school. Although it was apparent that class teachers and school management valued the work of CAs, the CAs themselves often felt undervalued. They did not recognise the value attributed to that which they did within the school. Communication within the school was influenced by relationships and vice versa. Good levels of communicative dialogue were evident when teachers and CAs shared planning. It was reported by CAs that there was a major issue in the school regarding communication and that they were often made to feel on the periphery. The impact of this influenced their ability to fulfil the demands of their role within the school, although that role was often not clarified. This perceived lack of value was having an impact on how CAs viewed their role, especially with regards to their understanding of the role they played in the development of children's L2 proficiency. A seeming lack of communication and collaboration which led to some strained relationships amongst teachers and CAs signifies the need for training for all staff to maximise the potential of the role. These themes of language development and training will be discussed in further detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 6: Language, Training and Deployment

The aim of this small-scale study was to explore teachers' and CAs' perceptions of the role of the CA in the early years immersion context. Five main themes emerged from the collected data, which are illustrated in Figure 1 on page 69. In addition to the overarching issue of collaboration, the two main themes of relationships and communication were discussed in the previous chapter. These two major themes, alongside the theme of collaboration, are interwoven through the three minor themes which are discussed in this chapter. This chapter will discuss the themes of training, the role of the CA in developing children's language proficiency and the role of the CA in the case study school.

Varying perceptions of the role of the CA emerged during this study. Much uncertainty existed regarding the remit of the position. The role of the CA was not clearly defined in the study school, and this influenced how CAs were deployed in the school for the purpose of learning and teaching.

Many interpretations of the role meant that CA deployment within the school was perceived by most participants to be inconsistent and not always purposeful. Positive and negative interpretations of the role emerged from the data. School management and class teachers spoke more positively about the impact of the CAs' input in the classroom. CAs were seen to have a very specific role in the Irish Medium classroom in supporting the development of children's L2 proficiency. CAs themselves spoke more negatively about their role within the school attributing little value to that which they do. They presented a high level of uncertainty around their role and did not appear to readily recognise the value of their input regarding children's L2 development. These perceptions will be discussed in relation to the following themes: training, the CAs' involvement in children's L2 development and CA deployment within the study school.

6.1. Training

The issue of training has already been mentioned in the last chapter, where CAs and teachers mentioned it in the context of communication and building relationships and in the literature review in Chapter 3 (Breyer et al., 2020: Sharples et al., 2015: Warhurst et al., 2014: Butt, 2016). In this section, I will focus on training needs, but inevitably there will be some overlap with the previous chapter. Although training was mentioned in relation to collaboration, communication and relationships, it was a recurrent theme across all interviews and focus groups, which made it important to discuss it separately.

The issue of training emerged in both teachers' and CAs' focus groups. Only one member of management team discussed training during the interview. Issues in training mentioned in the interview related to internal staff training in school and external training at local authority level. Through discussion it emerged that throughout Northern Ireland there is a lack of Irish language training, no compulsory immersion training for CAs nor training for teachers and CAs on how to work collaboratively in this context. A lack of training for CAs was also reported by Gerber et al. (2001) and Radford et al. (2014). The training needs of participants which centre around immersion pedagogy and class teachers and CAs working collaboratively in an immersion context, may not be issues specific to the study school, but were perceived to be impacting on participants' abilities to fulfil their duties within the school.

Below are examples of comments that participants made in relation to training.

Interviewee 1: "It would be great I think if there was a course that could be done to train classroom assistants to be classroom assistants, but more specifically immersion classroom assistants".

Interviewee 1: "Not all classroom assistants understand their role at times, especially if they have been here longer than the teacher . . . if they have more experience . . . they can sometimes do comparisons".

Management noted a lack of immersion specific training for CAs, which focuses on how children learn in the immersion classroom through the medium of the L2. In addition, management highlighted the need for all staff to receive training in the role of the CA, the role of the teacher and how these two roles combine to support purposeful learning and teaching in the classroom. The need for training of this nature was supported by teachers, as demonstrated by the quote below.

Class Teacher B: "I'm not sure if it still goes on, and I know it's boring for those who are here every year, but there are new people every year and it's good to go through the list of things that are and aren't expected".

The quote above highlights the need for regular internal training for class teachers and CAs on the expectations of the role of the CA in the school. The use of the words *'I'm not sure if it still goes on'* implies that training of this sort, although deemed to be beneficial was no longer happening. Class teachers noted the need to have a shared definition of the role of the

CA within the school and highlighted the importance of annual updates during in-service training days regarding the expectations of the role of the CA. Members of management and some class teachers noted that teachers would also benefit from training regarding working collaboratively and productively with CAs.

At the time of study, the role of the CA was not clearly defined, and class teachers and CAs were not working in the context of a shared definition of the role. Discussions with CAs also highlighted the need for training to consolidate the remit of the role. This can be seen clearly in the quotes below.

Classroom Assistant E: "I didn't know what I was expecting. I had no training whatsoever. I came in out of uni. and was put with this really . . . erm . . . like a child who has a lot of needs and had no . . . didn't know who he was, didn't know any background, had no training and just got put in as if I was expected to know what to do with him. Now I do like, but at the start I didn't have a clue".

Classroom Assistant A: "There should be training".

CAs noted that training was needed for all CAs, but especially those who are new to the school and who do not know that is expected within the role. They also suggested that a process of mentoring or shadowing would be beneficial for those who are new to the role.

As seen in the selection of quotes above, training was deemed necessary by all groups of participants to allow class teachers and CAs to work collaboratively in a productive manner. A major challenge within the Irish Medium sector, is the lack of CAs who have proficiency in Irish and who also have a good understanding of the education system and how children learn. However, the need for fluency in Irish can take precedence over the need for educational knowledge. Ideally both would be sought, but there is at times a challenge in finding both. Findings from other research indicate that CAs employed in Irish Medium schools can often lack proficiency in Irish (Ní Chinnéide, 2009). In the context of the study school, it emerged that the ability to speak Irish was considered the most crucial factor when employing CAs. This was noted by a member of management who said,

Interviewee 1: *"you get whoever is available as long as they have Irish. That's what you are going for and you bring them in and hope that you can train them in everything else. Obviously that they have Irish".*

It could be inferred, given that all the quotes above concur that training is an issue for development, that Interviewee 1 can only be referring to on the job training.

As noted by Interviewee 1, CAs do not currently need to possess any formal qualification to become a CA. Ní Chinnéde (2009) found that 43% of CAs who took part in her SEN study were not adequately qualified. 'There are no specific entry qualifications for teaching assistants, and many do not receive any induction training' (Sharples et al., 2015, p.15). This corresponds with the comments above of Class Teacher B and Classroom Assistant E who acknowledged that although beneficial, induction training did not always happen. It could be argued that the case study school was fortunate that all CAs were fluent Irish speakers, with the majority being qualified to degree level. At the time of study, some CAs continued to voluntarily engage with training and professional development of their own accord. This shows a level of commitment with CAs taking responsibility for their own professional and personal development to help them do their job better. When this study was carried out, seven CAs were qualified to degree level, two held a Level 5 qualification in Leadership and one was studying for a degree. CAs employed by the school, therefore, had a good level of education prior to taking up post. Due to the level of CAs' qualifications, experience and insight it could be considered surprising that CAs were not always seen to be deployed for maximum effect and often felt undervalued. It would be important to capture this enthusiasm and willingness to learn by, where possible, offering further opportunities for CAs to engage in Continued Professional Development, related to the immersion education context. This could enhance their professional esteem and vision for the role**.** CAs' continued engagement in learning indicates that CAs were keen to engage in professional development and may indicate a willingness on their part to remain after school to attend the brief Friday meeting, or to discuss planning with the class teacher, as suggested in the previous chapter.

Although there are formal qualifications for CAs (CCEA Specification Level 3 Certificate for Classroom Assistants is one such example), there is no obligation to complete these in order to become a CA. This qualification is also a general qualification: according to participants, and despite having conducted a thorough search myself, there is no qualification that addresses issues specific to Irish Medium education or Irish Medium pedagogy. This can be seen in the following comment, which points to the need for engaging CAs in training

Interviewee 1: "*… that actually teaches them what immersion education is because a lot of classroom assistants that we have had have come through the system, but they have never been taught about the system*".

CAs can therefore lack knowledge and understanding of the principles of Irish Medium education and immersion specific pedagogy. One participant commented that courses focusing specifically on the immersion context,

Interviewee 1: "*like for example Two Windows on The World: you know those types of courses that were available but there is no funding for . . . something that actually teaches them what immersion education is,"*

were once available when funding was available. Where funding is now no longer available for such courses, in-house training for CAs, or training delivered in collaboration with other Irish immersion schools could be ways of enhancing CAs' knowledge and understanding of immersion pedagogy. It would also allow them to support each other in a mutually supportive network across the sector. Involving CAs in training and professional conversations which encourage the sharing of good practice could improve their professional self-esteem. It is interesting to note that two interviewees both noted the lack of training in immersion pedagogy as an area of concern, whereas one interviewee and one class teacher believed that the CAs had a good understanding of the immersion system because many of them were past pupils of Irish medium education and so their memories of their schooling could influence their practice and the practice of other CAs. It could be argued that a good educational experience may not necessarily provide sufficient theoretical underpinning focusing on the principles of immersion education system, and the way that children acquire language in the said system to carry out the role of CA most effectively in this type of environment.

The immersion environment focuses very much on the development of the L2. There is a very specific approach to language acquisition, with an emphasis on natural and social development, as well as development that is focused and planned for (Andrews, 2018). It would therefore be important that all staff, not just teachers, are aware of, and trained in, the approach to ensure continuity in terms of language modelling. The role of the CA in children's language development will be discussed in more detail below.

Concerns were raised by a member of the school's management team that a high turn-over of CAs was evident in the school. From my own experience, taking a post as a CA is often seen as a stepping-stone for those wishing to become a teacher. Many CAs take on this role to

gain experience in the school environment before going on to complete a PGCE, with many choosing to complete the PGCE in immersion primary teaching. When the role of CA has been used in this way, practice within the case study school has been impacted positively in that those who have wanted to become teachers were keen to learn, and negatively in that the staff turnover was high. Although at the time of data collection, there were 3 permanent CAs employed in the school, CA turnover remained relatively high. At the time this study was conducted, a bank of CAs who would remain and who would therefore be familiar with the practices of the case study school was not fully established. Although

Interviewee 1: "you can't curtail people from going on and bettering themselves",

it could be seen that the inconsistent nature of CA staffing posed a level of challenge for the school because a higher turnover of staff could increase the need for greater in-school training of CAs, given the structured routines and procedures in place in the school. The construction of a handbook for new CAs could outline the role clearly and could also explain the structured routines and procedures in place in the school, especially regarding language acquisition.

6.2. The role of the CA in language acquisition

Although the role that CAs played in children's language acquisition was the main focus of this study, it was not the most prevalent theme emerging from the data collection. The most prevalent themes emerging from the data centred around relationships, communication and issues of collaboration. The role of CAs in children's L2 acquisition was discussed by all adult participants. Although participants on the whole agreed that CAs played an integral role in supporting the development of children's L2 proficiency, CAs did not talk readily about their role in L2 acquisition. Perhaps the lack of training for CAs in immersion education and immersion pedagogy meant that they were unaware of the way that children acquire language and so overlooked their important role in this process.

The school's management team advocated that CAs were pivotal in supporting children develop L2 proficiency. This can be seen very clearly from the quote below.

Interviewee 1: "I think their role is to help with the acquisition of language if you wanted to summarise it into one sentence".

It could be deduced from the quote above and others that management placed great emphasis on the role of the CA in supporting language development. This was deemed by members of

management to be at the heart of their role in the Irish Medium classroom. It was considered an important and crucial aspect of their work in the study school.

All three interviewees and participants in both teacher and CA focus groups communicated the belief that CAs have a very specific role to play in terms of language acquisition. This can be seen clearly in the selection of quotes below.

Interviewee1: "In my view, they are there to support the children's learning and more specifically their acquisition of the language by working alongside the teacher. They have a huge role with regards to language modelling".

Interviewee 3: "Classroom assistants are very very effective in terms of using them as a language prop".

Class Teacher A: "I think, especially in this school, their main role is to model language and support learning".

The above quotes show a consensus amongst participants that whilst carrying out the generic duties of a CA, in the immersion setting the CA was also a

Interviewee 2: "language tool within the classroom".

All groups of participants acknowledged the important role that CAs played in the development of children's language. However, not all CAs acknowledged this role and those who did needed to be prompted to discuss their role in the development of children's language proficiency, often downplaying their input in same. Members of the school's management team and class teachers reported that this role encompassed modelling language through interacting with the class teacher, working co-operatively with the class teacher to support language development, using simple and repetitive language in their interactions with children, engaging with the children during structured and unstructured parts of the school day and through dramatisation and role play.

All groups of participants, but particularly the school's management and class teachers, emphasised that CAs reinforce the work of the class teacher by increasing the children's' exposure to language, with an emphasis on structure and formation. In order to reinforce the work of the class teachers CAs were involved in constantly modelling correct language use, underlining the importance of repetition in the process of language acquisition through increased exposure to L2. This can be seen in the comment below.

Interviewee 1: "By repeating what the children have said [correctly], either in English, or wrong Irish, they are correcting them. I think they are invaluable. We couldn't do immersion education without the classroom assistants".

As noted earlier, in the immersion classroom, the CA can act as a formal and an informal source of language for the children. In the formal sense, CAs' interactions with children can be very teacher directed and reflect the learning intentions laid out in his/her planning. In the informal sense, CAs, through their general interaction with children, can help build language used for everyday conversation. In the immersion context, language learning is scaffolded in a highly socially and collaborative interactive classroom setting *(Gibbons, 2002)* and so, it could be argued that any interaction that a CA has with a child through the medium of Irish has the potential to develop language proficiency.

CAs' interactions with the children can me planned and unplanned. When these interactions are planned for, CAs often take their direction from class teachers.

Interviewee 2:'So, when it comes to the more structured interaction with the children, those classroom assistants will know from the planning and from the teacher's direction what the targets are for the children".

This guidance, which may focus on the target language that is to be reinforced, may increase the CA's confidence in speaking Irish (Andrews, 2018) or may enhance the CA's ability to develop the children's language by reinforcing and consolidating the language that the teacher uses with the children to encourage language development. Such interaction can be planned, structured and purposeful. 'Children learn best when learning is connected' (CCEA, p. 10, 2007). All teachers and interviewees agreed that key language is consolidated and built upon as children move through Nursery, Primary 1 and Primary 2 stages. To refine current practice and to further maximise opportunities for language consolidation, clear expectations regarding language targets should be shared between class teachers and CAs to ensure that CAs are purposefully deployed in the classroom for the purposes of developing linguistic proficiency.

In the immersion classroom, learning intentions are often coupled with language intentions and language instruction is 'embedded in meaningful tasks' (Hickey & de Mejia, 2014). Content and language instruction are integrated in full immersion programmes (Lyster, 1998). This approach to learning was discussed by members of the school's management team with one participant discussing a Numeracy activity to support this point. The aims of a

Numeracy task, for example, may be two-fold: the activity is used to support the development of the mathematical concept and to support the acquisition of Mathematical terminology in tandem. This participant said,

Interviewee 1: "*so if they are carrying out a Maths activity with the children they are there helping support the learning of Maths, but more importantly, they are there to support the acquisition of the terminology of the Maths".*

Interaction during formal learning in the classroom takes place between class teachers and children, between CAs and the children and between class teachers and CAs as they model language use. CAs therefore play a role in developing educational content and the acquisition of language.

In the early years classroom, much learning takes place through the medium of play. In the immersion classroom, play can be central in supporting children's learning, both academic and language. Most participants noted that CAs are central to facilitating learning in this way through interactions during play activities. When the interactions are purposeful they can reinforce and develop children's linguistic capacity (Hickey & de Mejía, 2014). Below are some quotes from teachers which highlight the multi-faceted nature of the role of the CA.

Class Teacher C: "I find that when we are doing play in the classroom that the classroom assistant would have a specific role and it usually is language based".

Class Teacher B: "You kind of hope that they would model it the same way that you do it yourself in the class, whether that be role play after the story time . . . erm . . ."

These quotes above show that CAs were very involved in the development of children's language. This involvement mainly centred around the modelling and reinforcing of language. It was noted by participants that this was done through role play, structured play activities and story time. Collaboration is alluded to in the quote from Class Teacher C above through use of the word *'we*'. This suggests that the class teacher and CA interact with one another and model appropriate language use. In this way, CAs can be used as a language prop. Class Teacher B's reticent use of the expression *'you kind of hope'* may relate back to and consolidate the lack of direction from teachers that was frequently mentioned by CAs.

As mentioned above, the learning of educational concepts and language is intertwined in the immersion classroom. One participant discussed the used of templates during craft activities to help children develop specific language.

Interviewee 3: "The younger the children are the art is purely, I suppose it wouldn't be art as such, but craft, is more template based. So, for example, if the children have to maybe fill in a face that the eyes are there, the nose is there, the classroom assistant has all the parts to put on the face. In an English Medium school, children will know what the word mouth is, they will know what the word eye is, but that's not the case in an Irish Medium setting. We have to physically have the things which is why a lot of the craft work is template based, which is another activity. And the craft task would be language led? Absolutely, completely language led".

Commenting on her interactive role during structured play, one CA noted that

Classroom Assistant C: "I would do the Art with the kids . . . I would supervise the art activities. I have to explain to the kids what they have to do . . . our Art is usually based on our theme too just to make sure they get their key words".

Such craft tasks focus on developing key language, rather than on developing creativity. Creativity is fostered separately during free art activities. The use of a template and concrete items shows that the physicality of items provides a context for the language which is being taught. This approach to context embedded language concurs with Cummins (2000) who suggested that learning is highly context based, especially in the early years. Due to the approach to immersion education, and the fact that there is a need to 'plan for deliberate exposure to aspects of the immersion language' (Andrews, 2006, p.94) the thematic approach to learning was discussed at length by participants who noted the importance of language targets, as well as academic targets. The quote from the CA above indicates that she has benefitted from planning with the class teacher for the purpose of language exposure. She also recognises the need to model language and shows a sound understanding of the need in the early years to provide very contextualised experiences to support the development of language.

Contextualised learning is achieved through delivering learning in a thematic manner. In the early years, much emphasis is placed on Thematic Learning (CCEA, 2009) and most learning

is organised thematically at this stage. Thematic learning, as well as helping children develop holistically, also teaches and reinforces very specific language.

In the early years, one participant commented that CAs

Interviewee 2: "are used mostly to work with small groups, help with whole class teaching, but mostly to sit 1-1 with children and interact in a very structured, child led way, for the children to begin to understand more of the second language that they are now being offered".

This interaction primarily aims to build and reinforce language that pertains to the current theme of learning, as well as consolidating basic functional language (BICS) to help children communicate with one another. All teachers agreed that the CA is an invaluable tool in helping children acquire language in the early years. This can be seen clearly in the following comment.

Class Teacher A: "I think, especially in this school, their main role is to model language and support learning".

Planned and structured interactions can take the form of 1-1 and small group activities. The ability to interact in small groups with the younger children can lead to a high level of impact for language learning, especially if a child has started school with a limited grasp of L2. This notion of supporting children's language development in a structured manner was iterated by most participants and can be seen clearly in the following comment.

Class Teacher C: "A child has come into Primary 1 with no Irish whatsoever. The role of the classroom assistant in that case is heightened because they are doing a lot of support work with that child when they have free time. If I'm working with the rest of the class and the child has finished their work, the classroom assistant is able to work with the child, even if it's just a wee game of pairs, with flashcards".

At times, the role of the CA lends itself to being able to engage in tasks that the teacher cannot because he/she needs to be engaged with the whole class.

All interviewees, all class teachers and some CAs suggested that the techniques employed to consolidate and develop language proficiency may include repetition, song, role play, drama and the constant repetition of simple language.

Classroom Assistant A: "It would involve prop usage, anything like that. It's all about their language acquisition. It's repetition, you becoming the prop for the classroom teacher maybe through song, dance, whatever. You are there to reinforce that".

The quote above shows that this CA had a solid understanding of her role in the early years classroom and possessed a good knowledge of how children acquire L2 and the adult role in this process of acquisition. To emphasise key words and expressions and to aid language consolidation, practitioners in the early years immersion setting may appear to frequently exaggerate and dramatize. Such practice may ensure that language use is as contextual as possible. Classroom Assistant A's use of the word *'repetition'* is very insightful, showing a knowledge that children need to be regularly exposed to the L2. She recognises that children need to hear the language and that language can be reinforced by CAs through their interactions with the children. In order to facilitate the children's use of L2 in their interactions with staff and one another, collegiality and collaborative planning is required as all parties need to be aware of the language to be reinforced and encouraged.

In best practice identified by Interviewee 1, purposeful collaboration occurs between teachers and CAs for the purpose of children's effective language development. Such collaboration may have involved the teacher and CA planning together, or the class teacher frequently sharing his/her planning with the CA (Kay, 2005). In this way, when planning is shared, all who are working with the children are aware of the language targets which optimise the opportunities for purposeful interaction to help develop children's language proficiency. This links well with Bruner's scaffolding theory (1978). As noted in the review of the literature Vygotsky (1978) suggests that it is in The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) that learning can most productively take place. The social process and interaction between the children and the more knowledgeable other are important components in the facilitation of learning and in relation to language learning can help a child reach his/her level of linguistic potential. Adult words and actions and the interactions between adults and children allow children to develop language proficiency in a systematic manner. Not only do CAs scaffold the children's learning, but, since they are working with the more knowledgeable other, the teacher, their learning of how adult intervention can support children's L2 development may also be scaffolded. Where collaboration in planning takes place CAs are aware of that which is expected of them. According to CAs, these expectations, however, vary from teacher to

teacher. CAs noted that teachers vary in their approach and so it is essential to be aware of their expectations to provide the best learning and teaching experience for the children.

Classroom Assistant B: "So you have to get to know the teacher, what they want. So you don't know what your main duty is until you work with a teacher, you see what way they work and what they want of you".

This statement further suggests that the skill of adaptability is required to work effectively as a CA. Often, CAs, who are low paid workers, have to second guess teachers and what it is they think they should be doing in the classroom. The classroom environment could be more collaborative and productive if the teacher followed a protocol which included the CA in planning, or which allowed the CA to access planning in advance. Teachers may however assume that CAs understand the remit of the role and what is expected of them in the classroom environment. Thus, the need for communication and collaboration is again apparent in this theme of deployment.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, children in the immersion classroom may not hear the target language beyond the school environment and thus high levels of exposure to the L2 are required during the school day. Meaningful interaction and communication are therefore crucial to help children develop proficiency in the target language (Krashen, 1984: Swain, 1985: Andrews, 2006, Baker 2011).

Since an emphasis is placed on the development of the second language, pedagogy in the immersion system varies from general pedagogy (Lyster, 1998: Lyster & Tedick, 2014). All teachers in the case study school, bar one, had graduated from Saint Mary's University College Belfast and having followed the Irish Medium route, had also been awarded a Certificate in Bilingual Education. Although it is important that all staff have awareness of how bilingual education works and how children learn within that system, as noted already, there is a lack of formal training for CAs. The need for training was identified by all participants and discussed earlier in the previous chapter regarding communicating expectations and working relationships in the classroom. With regard to developing the children's emerging language, it can be argued strongly that the need for training is also important in relation to the duties of the CA within the school and the expectation of the role.

CAs need the support of formal and informal training opportunities to develop professionally (Sage & Wilkie, 2003). As noted above, in the Northern Irish immersion context, training opportunities for CAs are slim and generally focus on their own language development rather

than on the principles of immersion education. Opportunities for CAs to attend training are influenced by a lack of funding and the challenges associated with facilitating CA absences to attend training engender challenge.

During the interviews with the school's management team, the difficulty in sending CAs on courses was noted.

Interviewee 1:"Because you are so lost without your classroom assistant, if a course does come up, and they don't come up on immersion education, you can't send them on it because you can't cope with having all the classroom assistants out in the one day. And you don't want to have to choose between them".

This difficulty may be influenced by funding issues and the perceived need for CAs to be in school during the school day. From the quote above it could be argued that since the school's management team are not facilitating attendance at such sources, they are compounding the problem. Finding training that matches the needs of CAs and sending them on training individually would counteract the issue of all CAs being absent at the one time. According to Interviewee 1, unlike teachers, CAs were not required to stay beyond the school day and so it may also be difficult to facilitate opportunities for CAs who have attended courses to disseminate their knowledge with others. It could be argued that there is a clear requirement to make opportunities available for class teachers and CAs to share knowledge with one another. Knowledge could be shared between teachers and CAs informally during their daily interactions or could be facilitated more formally during organised sessions on inset days. Such sessions could be facilitated by the school's SLT with targeted areas for discussion clearly outlined. As a result, it is possible that CAs could experience increased esteem and feelings of value by sharing their knowledge with class teachers and teachers could benefit from hearing what CAs have learned. This could be professionally beneficial for CAs by developing credence, autonomy and confidence in their work and role. Involvement in training which could facilitate reflection on their work in the classroom would further help CAs to develop their professional identity within the school and thus grow in confidence in their ability to contribute to discussions, Supporting the development of the CAs' professional identity could also be enhanced through the provision of training which focusses specifically on their role in the children's language development.

Training or discussion about language learning could enhance the CAs' use of language, as they would be more aware of the need to reinforce certain language, including incidental

informal language. CAs spend much of their time interacting with children through the L2. It is important therefore that their language use is at the correct level and that they understand the need to encourage understanding of L2 before making the move towards production. Language learning is both cognitive and social (Watson-Gegeo & Nielsen, 2003) and so language has a communicative function. It is important that children engage in the conventions of conversation, for example, turn taking and responding appropriately. In the early years especially, great emphasis is placed on developing the children's ability to use Irish as a language of communication.

Classroom Assistant A: "They sort of learn turn taking from a very young age. You become exposed to children very quickly who don't have that scenario at home".

In Irish, there is a grammatical relationship between questions and answers. Positive and negative answers reflect verb use in the question. Through conversation, input through modelling and reinforcement, children appear to acquire the grammar rules naturally. Since the principles of grammatical structure are 'genetically endowed in the brain' (Love, 1990, p. 165) it could be argued that children have the ability to deduce rules from the language heard around them and use this independently to produce sentences without any formal instruction in the early years (Chomsky, 1965: Krashen, 1984). In the study school, this is the premise of language development on which the early years works. In the study school, the aim of the interaction in the classroom is to afford children opportunities to communicate in the target language and to use their language to engage with others, adults and peers. Since motivation to develop L2 proficiency can depend on social interactions between the teacher and learner (Anjomshoa & Sadighi, 2015), praise, positivity and reinforcement can encourage children to produce in the target language. Informal learning between CAs and children such as asides, sharing of stories, funny comments, taking up of children's utterances and developing them, occur very naturally and offer opportunities for linguistic input and interaction.

6.2.1. The role of the CA in the Key Stage 1 classroom

Regarding the CAs' role in developing language proficiency, differences are evident as children move from the early years into Key Stage 1, (when children are aged 5-7 years and 'formal' primary schooling is established).

As children develop the ability to produce the target language, CA input becomes reduced through Key Stage 1. In the study school, CAs were not usually present in the Key Stage 1 classroom, apart from when they were there to support children with additional needs on a 1-

1 basis and so their language use and the input was different from that in the early years. The following quote shows that high levels of contextualisation may not be necessary as children move into Key Stage 1 as a more natural style of communication develops.

Classroom Assistant B: "So you're able to have . . . you don't have to be like 'Oh an bhfuil tusa ag dul chuig an leithreas . . . leithreas, leithreas, leithreas . . . gabh chuig an leithreas (Oh are you going to the toilet . . . toilet, toilet, toilet . . . go to the toilet). It doesn't have to be a whole song and dance about going to the leithreas (toilet) and washing your hands, you know"?

Whilst this quote acknowledges the need for high levels of repetition and exposure to the target language in the early years, it also suggests that input from CAs for the purpose of developing language proficiency lessens as children move up through the school. As children develop language proficiency and the ability to produce the immersion language, less caretaker speech (Baker, 2007) and dramatisation are required. When children acquire the language needed for the purposes of basic communication and have built up an established store of basic vocabulary, language delivery becomes less context embedded (Cummins, 2000).

The change in the CAs' role as children move into Key Stage 1 can be seen clearly in the following quote:

Class Teacher C: "I suppose the role of the classroom assistant is different in Primary 3. When I was in Rang a 3 I didn't have a classroom assistant with me most of the time and I found it was a lot more difficult because you were dealing with so many children in the class and you were trying to attend to everyone's needs in the class".

When a CA is working in the Key Stage 1 classroom, he/she is usually involved in providing 1-1 support for a specific child as a result of additional educational needs. The lack of additional adult presence reduces the opportunities for language development for all children, especially those who may struggle with Irish language acquisition and for whom extra adult input is of benefit. As children become exposed to more specialist academic language, a case for CA presence could be made. At this stage of schooling, CA input could help develop the more sophisticated levels of language. This was highlighted clearly by one participant who, reflecting on the language experiences of children in Key Stage 1 noted,

Class Teacher C: "*In P3 and P4 the language is so broad that you do need an extra person in the class. I find that it's hard to develop the language".*

Noting the potential impact that CAs could make if employed across the whole school, from Nursery to Primary 7, one interviewee stated,

Interviewee 1: "i*f I had my way, I would have a classroom assistant in every single class, especially in immersion schools because I think it would be the difference . . . if they were used properly".*

This statement refers to how CAs can help make learning more meaningful and purposeful not only by supporting language development, but also curricular learning. Furthermore, it reflects the reality of a lack of funding to facilitate CAs working in all classes. This statement is also an acknowledgement that school leaders have faced challenges in attempting to allocate scarce resources such as CAs. Frustration existed because CAs were a scarce resource, but also because they were not always being deployed for maximum effect, mainly due to a lack of communication and a lack of training for teachers and CAs regarding collaborative practice.

Children in the case study school came from a variety of backgrounds and so their levels of proficiency in L1 and L2 were not always on an equal par. Classroom Assistant B noted that children in Key Stage 1 can engage much more freely and willingly in L2, than they can in the early years, in a natural conversation, which reduces the need for constant reinforcement through repetition and reference to visuals. Although it was noted that CAs were not considered essential for children's language learning in Key Stage 1, teachers in Key Stage 1 noted the perceived importance of the CA in supporting general leaning and class management and organisation in Key Stage 1.

The relevance of the CA in Key Stage 1 was discussed a great deal by the teachers during their focus group session. Teachers noted that the presence of a CA in Key Stage 1 could lead to: improved classroom management, an increased ability to reinforce language use and greater opportunities for the children for purposeful interaction with adults which would increase the support for language development of those children for whom acquisition of the second language is more of a challenge than those who are exposed to and use it in the home. Interestingly classroom management was also noted as a potential benefit of CA input in Key Stage 1. This could imply a link between classroom management and opportunities for language development. It could be inferred from the comments made by class teachers that

the availability of a CA could facilitate classroom organisation in such a way that children could be working in small adult led groups which would maximise opportunities for interaction in the L2, reinforcing the notion that exposure to and use of the target language through having more than one 'expert' speaker in the room can maximise learning opportunities.

6.2.2. CAs' interpretations of their role in language acquisition

It is interesting to note that CAs were slow to acknowledge their role in children's language acquisition. It could be deduced that this is not how they primarily saw their role. This contrasts directly with the opinions shared by management and class teachers for whom the role of the CA centred around language acquisition and enriching the immersion experience. Probing was needed to encourage the CAs to talk about language and their role in the development of children's language proficiency. In contrast to all other participants, language modelling was not their initial starting point when discussing their perceptions of the role of CA. When asked to reflect on their main role in the classroom, one CA stated,

Classroom Assistant B: "*obviously to support the teacher and the kids. Take guidance from what the teacher wants*".

Very early on in the conversation, Classroom Assistant B, a CA for 11 years and therefore very experienced, made it very clear that she saw the main role of the CA as to take guidance and instruction from the class teacher. This allusion to teacher control may imply a lack of autonomy on the part of the CA. It may also, however, highlight this particular CA's awareness of the role that the CA plays in supporting learning and teaching in the classroom in whichever way this support is required for the benefit of the teacher and the children. Either interpretation of the statement points to a clear sense that the teacher is ultimately the person in control. This could lead to power struggles if the CA does not agree with the class teacher**.** It appeared in the focus groups that professional self-esteem of CAs in the study school was lacking. As already discussed in Chapter 5, from their perspective, the crucial input that they provided seemed to them to be unacknowledged. When discussing their perceptions of their role, CAs focused much more on the functional aspects of being a CA such as preparing, supervising, photocopying and cleaning, rather than on their educational input. This may imply that they were heavily involved in this type of work and that teachers expected the CA to engage in basic tasks. Although it could be expected that the role of a 1-1

CA would be more clearly defined, as implied by the following statement, this did not seem to have been the case. One participant noted,

Classroom Assistant D: "I know I am 1-1, but I don't know what I should be doing. I do photocopies, workbooks, supervise the yard, supervise dinners, put Art together, put the display up, put the display down, when there is something to go around in the school I do it. I don't really know what I'm supposed to be doing, but I do all that".

This comment shows once again that the role of the CA is multi-faceted. The complacency towards her that this member of staff has experienced, coupled with the lack of clarity around her role may also highlight issues within the management team who did not clearly define her role. The need for adaptability that has already been mentioned could be emphasised through the composition of a clear policy regarding what is expected in general and also in the 1-1 role of the CA. It highlights the lack of in-service training that is available to CAs who have never been explicitly told what their role is. This possibly explains why they found the role difficult to define themselves. This same CA noted a lack of collaboration developing amongst school staff.

Classroom Assistant D: "*Maybe you should add to your thing that this school needs to work on teamwork. Collaboration and acknowledging each other".*

This statement denotes a high level of dissatisfaction but is potentially tinged with an element of hope that issues were now being taken notice of.

The quote above and the evidence from the focus groups highlighted a high level of CA involvement in what might be considered operational tasks. The following quote from management offers a contrast to this opinion.

Interviewee 1: "So, in the best practice within the school the classroom assistant feels valued, the classroom assistant is never sitting idle, the classroom assistant isn't spending their day doing the menial tasks of photocopying, cleaning, the tasks that teachers think are below them".

Management believed that the role of the CA was most effective when CAs were heavily involved in the daily life of the classroom and were not partaking only what the interviewee above described as menial tasks, but played more of a pedagogical role in supporting learning and teaching. Since CAs felt that they were heavily involved in functional tasks, this would

indicate a need for management to state clearly their expectations for the role of CA in the school and communicate this to all the members of staff, teachers and CAs alike.

The deployment of CAs in the study school and their remits will be discussed in more detail below.

6.3. Deployment of CAs in the school

In the context of the study school the role of the CA appeared to be multi-faceted. Neither the role itself nor associated duties were clearly defined. Through all discussions it emerged that there were various understandings of the role of CA and that these different understandings influenced the deployment of the CA in the classroom. CAs in the study school engaged in many aspects of school life, yet they felt that their role often lacked direction. Differing attitudes regarding the deployment of CAs emerged depending on the role the participants played within the school. There was a great contrast in stance between class teachers and CAs, with class teachers being more positive about the deployment of CAs. This can be seen clearly in the following quote when one participant noted**,**

Class Teacher C: "I think they have so many roles in the school".

This quote also acknowledges that CAs were carrying out duties that may have gone beyond their contract.

All participants noted variations in practice regarding the deployment of CAs in the school. As one participant said:

Interviewee 1: "in this school, I don't think I could give one generic answer. It very much depends on the class teacher".

This comment from a member of the school's management team shows that variations in CA deployment were evident. It further suggests that such variations may have reflected professional personalities, teaching styles or may stem from differing understandings of the role of the CA. It seemed clear that the management team were mindful that current CA deployment depended heavily on individual class teachers. Furthermore, the school's management team was conscious of areas to be improved regarding the deployment of CA in the school.

CAs saw themselves as always being busy, often engaging in what was considered the operational tasks of classroom life, whereas teachers noted CAs as having a more

pedagogical input in the classroom. The quotes below show that teachers also acknowledged the variety of roles that CAs played in the school.

Class Teacher C: "I agree with the idea that the role of the classroom assistant is to support learning, be that supporting the teacher in preparing things, modelling language. I find that when we are doing play in the classroom that the classroom assistant would have a specific role and it usually is language based".

Class Teacher A: "I find that they are very helpful for the likes of PDMU [6]where you want to do a little drama, where you have the puppets. Maybe the teacher has a puppet and the classroom assistant has another and you are able to act something out to help children understand something a little bit better. They can actually see it in action".

In the comments above, class teachers demonstrated a more clearly defined understanding of the role of the CA within their immersion classrooms. Teachers talked about how, through interactions with the children, the CA modelled and reinforced language showing that they were aware of the role of CAs in the linguistic development of children. Although teachers acknowledged their value explicitly to me, they may not have always done so to the CAs.

CAs, however, did not fully support what teachers said. For example, one participant noted,

Classroom Assistant B:"I think it's difficult to be clear about your duties because you work . . . over the last 3 years I have worked with 3 different teachers".

This comment implies that the parameters of the role of the CA changed depending on who the CA was working with. The deployment of CAs therefore appears to lack consistency. Regarding CA deployment, the above comment would suggest that power and authority lay with class teachers and reiterates the idea that CAs need to be flexible in their role and be able to adapt to new expectations and new ways of working when pairings change. The observed lack of clarity around the role and inconsistency in deployment may again point to a lack of policy and training as a reason for this.

All participants noted that deployment of CAs is complex. The multifaceted nature of the role can be seen from the quotes below.

[6] Personal Development and Mutual Understanding.

Interviewee 2: "Again, as a school, I believe we have great staff. I believe that they are used for all types of tasks and that their roles are varied. This is a run of the mill classroom that has the challenges that any other school has. It is coupled with the fact that classroom assistants have an extra thing to do: it's helping out, classroom management, all those roles that they need to have as a classroom assistant and then the role that they have as a tool for language development as well".

Interviewee 3: "And classroom assistants have other jobs as well: they go to other classes, they do the bus, they do after schools clubs".

CAs in the early years were involved in

Interviewee 2: "*the usual classroom assistant jobs that happen in any primary school"*

such as preparing resources, tidying and supporting the development of children's fine motor skills. When CAs are involved in clerical or functional tasks, they are having an 'indirect impact on pupils' (Russell et al., 2013, p. 60). This was expanded upon by Interviewee 3 who suggested that the CA will be deployed

Interviewee 3: "*to support the teacher in whatever it is that the teacher needs".*

This appears as an acknowledgement that the teacher is in control and may direct the CA to work in a teaching capacity, a supervisory capacity, a pastoral capacity or to be engaged in so-called functional tasks such as cleaning, tidying and photocopying. As noted in the quotes above, CAs were usually deployed in the classroom to support learning. This might be general or targeted learning, supervising activities, language modelling or reading. CAs did not seem to recognise the extent to which they supported learning in the classroom. This reiterates the importance of this study. Although this is a case study and cannot be generalised, many of the issues that have arisen have been identified in other contexts (Kay, 2005: Blatchford et al., 2012, Russell et al., 2013, Roffey-Barensten & Watt, 2014, Butt, 2016). This is the first such study in the Irish immersion context and adds a new dimension to what has already been found highlighting the role that CAs play in reinforcing children's L2 acquisition. It can also be assumed that the CAs in monolingual early years classrooms perform a similar function in developing the children's L1. It could be argued therefore that the role of the CA is significant for the development of language and learning, irrespective of

the context. In order that CAs feel confident to contribute they need clear guidance, enshrined in policy and implemented by teachers.

In the study school, effective CA deployment appeared to depend on the class teacher and his/her understanding of the role of the assistant. This was stated very clearly by one participant who noted that

Interviewee 1: "*not all teachers understand the role of the classroom assistant".*

This statement may point to a weakness in the management structures who have, as mentioned in Chapter 5, not provided a clear Code of Practice for the deployment of CAs and who have not yet fully supported staff to work most efficiently with CAs. This statement further indicates that the class teacher's attitude and approach can lead to the positive or negative reactions to their deployment of a CA. Thus, this statement implies that tensions can arise between class teachers and CAs due to a lack of understanding of each other's role in the classroom. Since CAs often need direct instruction in the classroom (Calder & Grieve, 2004) they can place additional management responsibilities, for which they have not been prepared, on teachers (Woolfson & Truswell, 2005) who need to offer support and guidance. Teachers may not know how to manage and may in turn need support and guidance as to how to manage CAs**.** This lack of guidance for both teachers and CAs has the potential to lead to tension, which can also occur when CAs have been in post longer than a class teacher. A power struggle can exist when a CA with more experience than the class teacher may try to influence planning and take a stronger leadership role**.** As already discussed in Chapter 5, class teachers often have different approaches and expectations.

Classroom Assistant B: "I have worked with three different teachers in the last three years, not all of those teachers are going to want me to clean after school".

As new relationships and routines are established between teachers and CAs this can impact on how CAs are deployed in the classroom. This observation reinforces how the relationship that a CA has with the class teacher can empower or disempower him/her due to the power dynamics of that particular relationship. Clear expectations regarding collaboration can empower CAs to work independently and take control over their own work. In contrast, when collegiality is absent, control is perceived to lie with teacher which can cause the CA to be uncertain in his/her role in the classroom.

At times, the approach of some CAs can be at odds with that of the class teacher. During the focus group discussion two teachers discussed the issue of discipline and how CAs can change the aura and dynamic of the classroom. Teaching and non-teaching staff in schools naturally vary in their approaches (Kay, 2005). A level of awkwardness was noted by some teachers who felt that at times some CAs had taken a very disciplinarian approach, which was at odds to how they would handle situations. This highlights very clearly the correlation between deployment, the need for training, open relationships, clear communication and working to accommodate different personalities.

The deployment of CAs was deemed by management to be most purposeful when collaboration and communication between teacher and CA was evident. A working relationship where there is an understanding of role and a mutual respect should allow the class teacher and CA to work collaboratively with a clear focus. In such instances where direction is offered, there are clear shared expectations and CAs can engage productively to develop learning and language proficiency (Kay, 2005). Such elements of good practice and collaboration did not always appear evident. A perceived lack of collaboration, which impacted on CA deployment can be seen in the quotes below.

Classroom Assistant B: "Especially down in the Ceantar Dearg (Red Area), it's meant to be a team. You use your classroom assistants: they are there all the time and you need to use them. Sometimes I don't know if they are being used enough".

Classroom Assistant A: "Sometimes there is a lack of direction".

The above quotes, which come from CAs who were both experienced and who had been working in the school for some years, clearly suggest that CAs were not always deployed in the most effective manner, nor were they using their skills to the full. The use of the word 'use' in the quote above again relates to power dynamics in the relationship between class teacher and CA. The word *'use'* could also suggest that the CA is some sort of a utility: something to be used. In the study school, CAs questioned whether their skills and abilities were fully utilised for maximum effect. Furthermore, CAs who have been working in the school for some time questioned the respect and value attributed to their insights, observations and experience. One participant commented,

Classroom Assistant A: "you try and suggest things that have worked and are easy activities to do because you will know what you are doing because you will have done it ten times before and you will know what the craic is".

This suggests that teachers do not always listen to the CAs. The use of the phrase *'you will know what the craic is'* possibly suggests that this particular CA finds safety in familiarity and seeks to repeat this. Equally, this choice of phrase could suggest that experience has shown this particular CA that some ideas don't work, but these observations and insights were not always acknowledged in the teacher/CA partnership.

6.3.1. CA deployment in the Nursery classroom

It was noted across all interviews and focus groups that the deployment of the CAs in the Nursery classroom can vary slightly from their deployment in other areas of the school. The quotes below clearly highlight the role that CAs take on in the Nursery classroom.

Interviewee 1: "I'm thinking very specifically about Nursery actually, because in the Nursery, the classroom assistant's role is ever more similar to that of a teacher. In the nursery you would very rarely do a whole class 'lesson' as such: it is very much group work and those classroom assistants spend an awful lot of time having to use their intuition".

Class Teacher A: "In the Nursery, classroom assistants have quite a lot of responsibility, that would be quite equal to my own. They have the same number of children to observe. They are responsible for their own observations and keeping that up to date. They do assessments as well because I trust their ability".

Both quotes above demonstrate that in the Nursery classroom, the duties of the CA could be said to be approximately on a par with those of the class teacher. All members of nursery staff facilitated small group activities to provide worthwhile learning experiences and to aid purposeful language development. The involvement of CAs in observing and assessing is an integral role of learning and teaching in the Nursery, especially in relation to language development. Although the Nursery teacher at the time of study was seen by the CAs as predominantly planning independently for learning, it could be argued that in the delivery of the lesson the class teacher and CA roles within the classroom were interchangeable. CAs noted that, given the interchangeability of roles within the Nursery setting, a more collaborative approach to planning was not currently happening but would be favourable.

6.3.2. CA deployment beyond the classroom

In the case study school, CAs appeared to be heavily involved in the life of the school outside the classroom. One participant commented,

Class Teacher B: "our school everyone has . . . the classroom assistants have more involvement that in schools I have worked in previously".

The decision of how to deploy CAs beyond the classroom lay with the school Principal. Many CAs were engaged in activities beyond the classroom: with office work, after-school clubs, administration tasks being noted. Such deployment beyond the classroom relates to the skill set of the CAs in the school. Although not always the case in Irish Medium schools, all CAs in the study school were proficient in Irish. Their paid involvement in afterschool clubs allowed for the development of children's language proficiency beyond the classroom and beyond the school day. By leading afterschool activities CAs can reinforce the children's use of Irish in a more unstructured social context, whilst also developing their own leadership skills.

6.4. Training, Language and Deployment: Summary of findings

Varying perceptions of the role of CA emerged during the course of staff interviews and focus groups. There was a mixture of positive and negative perceptions of the role of the CA within the study school. Class teachers and senior and middle leaders appeared positive about the role, whilst CAs appeared to focus more on the negative aspects of the role.

Two major themes arising from the data focused on relationships and communication, with all themes being interlinked by an overarching theme of collaboration Although five main themes emerged, collaboration or the lack of it was a thread running through the findings, influencing CAs' job satisfaction.

This chapter has discussed the emerging themes of training, the role of the CA in children's language development and the deployment of the CA within the study school.

It is clear from the data that a lack of clarity existed around the role of the CA within the school. Training appears to be essential to clarify their role and to maximise their potential contribution by equipping CAs with the knowledge and understanding of the immersion classroom to carry out the role effectively and for teachers to get the best from their CAs. Training opportunities were consistently identified as lacking, in particular in three aspects:

Irish Language training for CAs, training for CAs in immersion pedagogy and training for both teachers and CAs to support collaborative working between the two groups.

Regarding the role of the CA in the development of children's proficiency in the L2, members of the school's management team and class teachers viewed CAs as a vital component in helping children acquire the L2. They argued that CAs were heavily involved in helping children develop accuracy and competence in the L2 through song, rhyme, repetition, small group work, structured play activities and through the informal and natural interactions which take place in the playground. Interestingly, CAs, whilst appreciating that their role within the school was multi-faceted, did not naturally view themselves as having a pivotal role in supporting children's language development.

Uncertainty existed around the deployment of CAs in the school. CAs were described as busy members of school staff who engaged in many activities in the workings of the school. The deployment of the CA varied with deployment often being dependent on the class teacher. Expectations for the role were not shared across the school's hierarchy.

Linking the data generated through focus groups with the children to/with the data generated from staff interviews and focus groups proved an area of challenge. The contributions of the children did not fit neatly into the main themes which emerged from staff discussions. Children remained very focused on language and their language journey thus far. Children did not seem to have any overriding concerns that they brought to the forefront as staff had done. It appeared that all children answered the questions as best they could, and their answers reflected their age and stage of development. For this reason, the findings from children's focus groups will be discussed separately and, in more detail in Appendix G

Chapter 7: Conclusions and Recommendations

The overarching aim of this research study was to explore how CAs were perceived to support learning and teaching in the Irish Medium immersion context. The study aimed to discover the views of school leaders, co-ordinators, teachers, CAs and children regarding the role of the CA. Through conducting a case-study which collected a rich and varied data set gleaned from a variety of stakeholders, I aimed to explore the role of CAs in the study school and how they were deployed with an additional focus on their deployment to enhance children's language development. This focus led to the central research questions:

- What do teachers see as the key role of CAs in the early years classroom?
- What do CAs see as their key role in the early years classroom?
- How are CAs deployed in the early years immersion classroom to help children develop language capacity?

7.1. Conclusions

This study was conducted to explore the role of the CA in the school with a view to refine already good practice and develop this if deemed necessary. This piece of research took the form of a practitioner enquiry. As a practitioner in the Irish Medium sector, I had identified a number of tensions regarding the role of CAs in the classroom and aimed to explore these issues with a view of improving the situation. The main aim of the current study was to offer a platform for reflective discussion to consider the effectiveness of current CA deployment in the school. A secondary goal of this study was to determine how participants perceived the role of the CA in the development of children's L2 proficiency In terms of the role of the CA, this study highlighted elements of good practice within the case study school, as well as uncovering areas for development and improvement.

The case study school followed the immersion method of bilingual education, with children being educated through the medium of Irish, which for the majority of children was not the language of the home. Great emphasis is therefore placed on children's language development in the early years. The school's approach to language development is structured, thematic and systematic, reflecting the principles of immersion pedagogy. All staff, especially in the early years, have a role to play in children's language development. It was clear from the teachers' and managers' responses that they saw CAs as vital components of

the educational community, upon whom they relied heavily to enable the school to provide a high level of education through the target language.

This study has shown that the role of the CA is multi-faceted and varied. In the case study school, however, the roles and duties of CAs were not clearly defined and thus CAs experienced a lack of direction. Various interpretations of the role were evident amongst members of management, class teachers and CAs themselves. Attitudes towards the role influenced the deployment of the CA and consequently the impact of their role on teaching and learning.

As discussed in Chapters 5-6 where the results of this study were elucidated, five main themes emerged from the collected data. These were relationships, communication, language development, training and CA deployment. The overarching theme of collaboration linked all other emerging themes. In an immersion setting, it could be assumed that all those involved in developing children's L2 proficiency would collaborate to ensure this happened. The ability or inability to collaborate had implications, either positive or negative, for the role of the CA in the case study school.

A contrast in attitude was evident across the school's hierarchy, however, regarding the role that CAs played, both in supporting learning and teaching in the classroom in general, and in developing children's L2 proficiency. Some participants, mainly those participants who held positions of management, deemed supporting children's L2 development to be at the core of the work of CAs in the school, whereas other participants did not appear to easily recognise the role of the CA in supporting children's L2 acquisition. These findings have significant implications for the understanding of how CAs can be engaged in supporting learning and teaching in the immersion early years classroom with a focus on supporting language acquisition. Furthermore, this study highlights the tensions that can arise if there are no clear policy and guidelines regarding the role of CAs. This has implications for all schools where CAs are employed. In addition, this study emphasises the need to offer opportunities for class teachers and CAs to collaborate and plan together to enhance the role and deployment of CAs in the classroom to support learning and teaching. Coupled with this need to collaborate more effectively is the need for training and upskilling to allow CAs to carry out their roles confidently, with knowledge and understanding of theory underpinning their practice. In the context of the case study school, the importance of developing the CAs' understanding of immersion pedagogy also emerged.

Differences were evident between the findings which emerged from data collected from adult participants and those which were collected from the children who participated in the study. It is for this reason that the results from the data collected from the children is attached as an Appendix. Adult participants focused on the practical and professional aspects of CA deployment. Children focused on perceptions of language, the process of learning a L2 and the avenues of support that were available to them in the language learning process. Although this study was not politically motivated, some of the children were coming from possibly highly politicised environments or backgrounds and thus the children introduced a political slant to the study that adult participants did not.

7.2. Practice in the case study school

From the analysis of the data generated as part of this small-scale study, it is clear that all staff in the case study school, teaching and non-teaching, worked hard to provide meaningful learning experiences for all children through the target language of Irish. Children were supported to access a full immersion experience in which their linguistic needs were being met in a structured and coherent manner. As one participant noted,

Interviewee 3: "*the language is built upon . . . the children in nursery have particular language and when they go into Primary 1 the Primary 1 teacher needs to go back over that language and introduce the new language and then in Primary 2 the Primary 2 children go over the language that was done in nursery and primary 1 and new language is introduced. So, the language is built upon and consolidated every year. Well, that's the plan".*

Members of the school's management team and class teachers demonstrated an understanding of immersion pedagogy and discussed how they implemented immersion strategies robustly, especially in the early years, to ensure academic and linguistic development. A small selection of CAs also made statements which showed some understanding of immersion pedagogy and strategies used to build children's language capacity.

Areas of good practice identified centred around the commitment of CAs, the existence of some good partnerships between teachers and CAs, staff proficiency in Irish and the involvement of CAs in pedagogical tasks to support learning and teaching in the classroom. CAs interacted with children in a very

Interviewee 2:*"structured"*

manner to aid language acquisition. This interaction which took place in small groups or on a 1-1 basis with the main emphasis being on purposeful language input, aimed to enable the children to produce meaningful utterances in the target language. In the case study school CAs scaffolded language learning in the early years in a highly social and collaborative interactive classroom (Gibbons, 2002) using song, role play, interactive play and drama (Howe & Mercer, 2007). In the immersion classroom much of this structured interaction in the early years takes place during play-based learning allowing language instruction and language acquisition to be 'embedded in meaningful tasks' (Hickey & de Mejía, 2014, p.135). CAs worked closely with children during these activities with the purpose of increasing their exposure to the target language. When required, CAs also provided directed support for specific children at times when the teacher engaged with the remainder of the class.

In the case study school CAs were involved in formal and informal language development, encouraging children to develop language proficiency and accuracy across a number of situations. Although formal interactions may have taken place in the classroom during structured activities, and more informal interactions may have taken place in the playground, in the dinner hall or during times of independent work, informal chat forms an integral part of the school day in the early years and so the formal and informal opportunities merge and overlap.

When discussing the general role of CAs, all participants noted that CA input was most fruitful when it was planned for with a clear focus for the role. In relation to the role of CAs in the development of children's L2 proficiency, target language input was agreed by all participants to be more effective when teachers and CAs interacted for the benefit of the children by modelling appropriate use of L2. In discussing the role of the CA for the purpose of language development, one participant noted that during interactions between teachers and CAs,

Interviewee 3: "the CA would model language and model responses that I would maybe hope that the children would be able to give me".

It could be argued that the interaction between teachers and CAs designed to model language is more effective when there is evidence of a good relationships between them. An

established relationship with good communication and collaboration equates with a shared approach to language learning in this context.

All interviewees and focus group participants indicated that some good relationships between class teachers and CAs had been established within the case study school. Where working relationships were positive, school staff noted that collaboration and collegiality were evident, which they argued created a positive environment for children which in turn facilitated purposeful learning and teaching. Good staff relationships served as an example for children, allowing them to establish and maintain positive relationships amongst themselves and with staff. An atmosphere of tolerance and respect within the school was evident.

Although good practice within the case study was evident, areas for improvement also emerged. Areas for improvement focused mainly on communication between staff, the development of professional working relationships, training and the need to develop a clear vision for the role of CAs within the school. These areas for improvement will be discussed in more detail below.

7.3. Implications of the study

This was a small-scale study, which focused on a very particular school setting. For this reason, some of the recommendations relate very specifically to the study school and were the result of numerous discussions with and between those operating within the school. The implications of this study will be discussed in three categories.

This piece of practitioner enquiry, which was driven by my role and interest in the sector aimed to discover new ways of articulating practice (Mason, 2002). What has emerged from this study therefore has implications for my own practice, for practice within the case study school and for the wider educational community regarding the purposeful use of the CA with maximum benefit for the children.

Therefore, certain recommendations will be of interest to those working with CAs, not just in the immersion setting, but also in the mainstream early years context and primary and secondary schools, as they aim to encourage maximisation of educational impact. Each set of implications will be discussed in more detail below.

7.3.1. Implications for self

The implications of this dissertation for me are twofold. Firstly, this study has had an impact on me as a classroom practitioner and secondly as a novice researcher. This study offered me the opportunity to reflect on my own practice as a class teacher and as a member of a school leadership team, and the relationships that I have established with CAs and other members of staff. Through listening to the discussions about challenges faced by both teachers and CAs, I have realised that in my practice I have always striven to involve CAs that I worked with in all aspects of classroom life to support learning and teaching, as well as recognising the need to develop positive working relationships with them to work with them in such a way that maximises their potential within the classroom to facilitate the most effective learning possible for the children. It became evident when conducting this study that not all teachers were exhibiting the same levels of commitment to collaboration when working with CAs by involving them in decisions regarding planning. This has implications for my role as SENCo and a member of the school's SLT, highlighting the need for me to make clear to CAs and teachers what is expected of them in their roles. In the future, when working with these assistants, it will be important that I systematise what up until now has been an intuitive process of collaboration, and offering CAs the opportunity to contribute to planning, thus ensuring increased CA involvement to enable them to be clear of their role and fulfil this role for maximum impact.

In the immersion context, this study is the first of its kind to focus on the role of the CA in the immersion classroom for the purpose of supporting the development of children's L2 proficiency. Having conducted this study, I aim to share the information gained as part of this study with others, both at school level and beyond. This will be discussed in further detail below.

7.3.2. Influencing Practice

The sharing of information with staff in the study school will highlight areas of current good practice and areas for development regarding the role of CAs in the school. This research aims to influence future practice positively within the case study school regarding how CAs are deployed. Emerging implications for the case study school will be discussed in more detail below.

In the wider Irish Medium context, the aim is to disseminate the findings of this study to other immersion schools with a view to encouraging reflection and interrogation of current practice regarding CAs in the classroom. This dissemination may take the form of in-service

training for schools, offering a particular emphasis on the role of the CA in developing children's language proficiency. Such training would offer the opportunity to consolidate and expand on the already existing good practice within the sector, but also to ensure that practitioners are able to recognise how they can maximise children's language acquisition through effective deployment of CAs in the classroom. I currently work as a teacher educator, teaching a module on The Holistic Development of the Child on the Irish Medium PGCE in St Mary's University College, Belfast. The knowledge and understanding of the complex role of the CA in the classroom I have gained from this study will be woven through my teaching on this module to provide guidance and support for newly qualified and qualifying teachers to highlight the importance of collaboration and establishing open and collegiate communication between teachers and CAs in the immersion setting.

Furthermore, findings from this study will be presented in publications in relevant journals and at conferences. The focus of the planned publications and conference presentations will not be limited to those working in the Irish Medium or immersion sectors, but will be of interest to all practitioners working in non-immersion contexts who have an interest in developing the role of the CA in the classroom for maximum benefit.

Additionally, information gathered from this study will provide the basis for further studies into the role of the CA in the Irish Medium sector as a whole in Northern Ireland. Further study could focus on the role of the CA in supporting older learners or may focus on the role of the CA in the non-immersion context. Such studies may shed light on other issues related to working with CAs.

7.4. Recommendations

It emerged from one discussion that negative perceptions surrounding the role of the CA existed, especially at the level of the local authority. Negativity mainly centred around wages and funding. This was highlighted by one participant who suggested that the role of the CA is

Interviewee 1: "a very undervalued role by many people: I will go so far as to say within government and within the Education Authority. Their wages are horrendous: it doesn't place value on the work that they do".

This view also could be said to be typical of the perceptions of the CA participants in this study who noted that little value or respect was attributed to their role and the work that they did. This implies that CAs perceive that they may not be given the respect they deserve

within their role and are not provided with recognition, as well as financial remuneration for their work and efforts. The following recommendations focus on refining and improving the role of the CA in ways that will increase recognition for CAs' input and professional judgement in the classroom. The findings of this study have a number of practical implications for those working with CAs and those organising CA input in schools.

Recommendation 1: Clear Policy Guidelines

One of the most significant findings to emerge from this study is that the role of the CA in the case study school is undefined and open to interpretation. At the time of the research, the study school had not developed a policy for the role of the CA in the classroom. The development of a school policy on CA deployment would clearly define the role of the CA and how CAs should be deployed within the school, with a specific focus on how, through collaboration, CAs could practically support learning and teaching, in particular, acquisition of Irish. This policy should highlight the value of the role and the skills and attributes that CAs bring to the classroom. Construction and implementation of a policy will reduce opportunities to mis-interpret the role, so that CAs can be deployed consistently within the school and their involvement is purposeful in supporting learning and teaching, with a refreshed focus on how they support children's language acquisition. As a general principle, and within the case study school especially, it is important that positive working relationships are established and maintained, the parameters of which are very clear. The creation and subsequent implementation of a policy for CAs, combined with providing more timetabled opportunities for collaboration between class teachers and CAs will provide a structured framework within which the development of purposeful professional relationships within the school can be promoted. Shared targets and expectations facilitate natural interaction between teachers and CAs. In this manner, co-operation and collaboration between class teachers and CAs can maximise the impact of the role. Offering opportunities for teachers and CAs to plan together, or to share the planning, perhaps for one hour a week. would offer autonomy for CAs and encourage them to take more responsibility for their work within the school.

There is, therefore, a need to clearly define the role of CAs within the school. From the focus groups and interviews it emerged that there was uncertainty amongst the majority of all staff regarding the main duties of the CA within the school. There was also a lack of understanding of the role and associated implications of the role in terms of pedagogical input and limitations. Most CAs demonstrated a lack of an awareness of the importance of their

role and did not appear to realise that they do and should have a central role to play in the process of children's language acquisition.

A high turnover of CAs was noted by one member of the school's management team. The school will make every effort to keep the CAs that they have, while recognising that for some, working as a CA offers them the opportunity to gain experience in the school environment before going on to complete a PGCE. Implementation of the policy would offer those who intend to move into teacher education a clear idea of good practice regarding how to communicate and work collaboratively with CAs to maximise the potential of their role for the benefit of learning and teaching.

Recommendation 2: Increased Communication

Discussions amongst all participants highlighted that communication amongst staff must be a priority for development. There was a perceived need for closer co-operation and collegiality through encouraging a transparent communicative dialogue between class teachers and CAs. As noted above this could be achieved through the creation of a policy, but also by ensuring that CAs will be invited to attend meetings more frequently, thus affording them opportunities to take part in staff conversations and staff training. CAs may feel that they have a stronger voice through the election of a 'head' or CA representative who speaks on behalf of the group as a whole, voicing any concerns that they may have.

Although it was perceived that the fault lay with the teachers regarding communication, the lack of clear communication cannot be down to teachers alone. At the time of study, all staff were informed of upcoming events via a large calendar in the staff room which provided a termly overview. This was supplemented with a weekly overview, which was changed every Friday afternoon. One way of increasing lines of communication is by offering CAs an invitation to the brief meeting which takes place every Friday afternoon after school. The issue of CAs not receiving correspondence via emails in a similar fashion to teachers was reported by CAs. This is something that could be easily solved by including CAs in the staff email system and communicating regularly with them using this platform. Feeling more informed and having a greater understanding of what is going on in the school could allow CAs to develop a sense of autonomy in their work, using their own initiative rather than being passive members of the school community.

Work-place performance appraisals, through dialogue between management and employees, can help employees improve their capabilities by identifying areas for development and

offering training to facilitate this development (DeNisi & Pritchard, 2006). The word appraisal suggests evaluation, which may be seen by the CAs as a threatening process. It may be preferable to use the term yearly review of work done in the classroom, which would suggest a greater focus on providing CAs with positive feedback for their work. This approach would provide regular feedback on their work within the school, which would confer value and respect for the role and offer aspects for individual professional development. This could also offer a chance for CAs to regularly reflect on the work that they do and identify further goals for development and training opportunities, which could add to their professional identity within the school.

Involvement in training and systematically reflecting on their work in the classroom could help CAs to grow in confidence in their ability to contribute to discussions, either in the classroom with their individual teachers, at a Key Stage level, or on a whole school level. The aim of such opportunities would be to help CAs become active members of the school community who feel confident to ask questions about what is going on.

Recommendation 3: Working Collaboratively

As mentioned above, there was a perceived lack of communication in the case study school which engendered much frustration for CAs. This study has reported that CAs were not always involved with class teachers in the planning process nor was planning always accessible to CAs. This has impacted the way CAs have viewed their role in supporting the development of children's L2 proficiency.

CAs failed to recognise the valuable input that they were having in supporting the development of children's language. As highlighted by members of the school's management team, in examples of best practice occurring in the classroom, CAs were benefiting from working with the more knowledgeable other, the teacher, regarding the development of their understanding of planning and how to provide opportunities for learning to help children develop language and content knowledge. It would therefore be advantageous to arrange time for teachers and CAs to plan together. Collaborative dialogue would guide the work of the CA in the classroom and would reiterate their important role in the development of children's L2 proficiency.

Recommendation 4: Training Opportunities

Although involvement in the planning process can help CAs know what to do, it may not ensure that they know how to do it properly themselves. All adult participants who took part in this study highlighted training, for teaching staff as well as CAs, as an area for development within the school. Training to develop their knowledge of immersion pedagogy and to help them internalise and develop their understanding would further ensure that involvement in the planning process is beneficial for teacher and CA. Each training need will be discussed separately below.

Historically in the case study school, CAs were not involved in whole staff training during staff development days. CAs who had worked in other schools indicated that involvement in training does not seem to have been a priority for schools in general. This dissertation has identified a lack of focussed training opportunities for CAs. In recent years, in the case study school, a new approach to CA involvement in staff training has been developed. At the time of study, CAs were beginning to take part in whole staff training workshops. It would be advantageous to encourage this practice and continue to engage CAs in in-school training. Such opportunities for increased engagement can provide direction for their input by involving them in decision making, increasing their knowledge of immersion theory and practices, which could then be implemented in practice.

Although all other groups of staff noted the pivotal role that CAs play in children's L2 development, this was not something that CAs themselves acknowledged without a great deal of prompting. In-school training could iterate the role that CAs have to play in children's L2 development and would reinforce the value of their role in this regard.

Although training opportunities, provided by external agencies, existed for CAs to develop their linguistic proficiency in Irish, there were limited training opportunities for practitioners working with children with a particular emphasis on immersion pedagogy. Any qualifications that CAs held were not Irish Medium specific and therefore they had not been trained in how children learn in the immersion environment. A local Irish Language organisation delivers childcare training through the medium of Irish, however, course content and delivery appears to have been a translation of English materials with little emphasis on Irish Medium pedagogy. The same organisation has, however, recently delivered a course for Irish Medium school staff thorough the medium of Irish with a more tailored focus on immersion pedagogy. Courses such as these could be especially helpful for CAs.

The school's SLT has a great deal of experience and expertise in Irish Medium pedagogy. Therefore, in the absence of such courses, or the lack of funding to send CAs on them, the school's SLT could work on compiling a tailor-made induction programme for new CAs, with a clear focus on the role of the CA in language development which will be helpful for them in their role. In addition, training specifically for CAs, delivered in conjunction with other Irish Medium schools with an immersion specific focus could facilitate the sharing of good practice across the sector.

To sum up, to ensure that CA input is as effective as possible, it would be beneficial to provide more in-school opportunities and more formal opportunities outside school for training. During the academic year of 2019/2020, as part of the training schedule delivered by the Education Authority in Northern Ireland, some sessions focused on how teachers can deploy CAs to support learning and teaching in the classroom. Some other sessions facilitated CA attendance on workshops to help them develop their skills and understanding in supporting children in the classroom. Whilst it is positive that such opportunities are being made available at a national level, more of these opportunities could be provided, with more specific sessions being delivered at local authority level targeting specifically those CAs working in the Irish medium sector. It may be unlikely however that the local authority will have much money to spend on what may be seen as a minority version of education. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the Irish language is often affiliated with Politics. Spending increased amounts of money on Irish Medium education may be construed by some as a political issue and might be seen as detrimental to mainstream schools. It should nevertheless be considered that while the Irish Medium sector makes up a small component of the education system in Northern Ireland, it is a sector that continues to expand, therefore, training which is specific to the needs of practitioners within the sector should be made available. The teacher competencies as laid out by the General Teaching Council of Northern Ireland (2011) notes that those teaching in Irish Medium and other bilingual settings should have sufficient pedagogical knowledge to teach the curriculum. This argument could also be made for CAs who make up a large component of the workforce and who spend a large part of their working day interacting with children to develop their linguistic capabilities.

As noted above, if a policy is introduced, this will provide a clear focus for the development of CAs' skills. The construction of a policy could offer a focus for this training.

Speaking from my own experience, there is also a lack of training for teachers regarding how to work closely with CAs in the classroom, especially at the level of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) where student teachers' views regarding the role of the CA are shaped. Given the increase in the amount of CAs employed in schools, preparing teachers to work with others would appear to be an area of priority.

7.5. Limitations of the study

The main goal of this study was to determine the perceived role of the CA in the Irish Medium early years immersion classroom. A qualitative approach to data collection and analysis was deemed appropriate to answer the research questions guiding this study. Quantitative data were not gathered and there were no statistics to analyse. This study was small scale and was neither intended for the purposes of generalisation or to be a statistical sample. However, some of the issues raised around the role of CAs and how they work with teachers in classrooms will be relevant to other educational contexts: the immersion context, mainstream primary and secondary classrooms as well as in the ITE sector.

Although the study was as robustly designed and well planned as possible, I encountered a number of limitations and challenges whilst conducting the research. An issue that was not addressed in this study was the perception of parents regarding their children's' language development and their motivation for choosing Irish Medium Education. Although some of the children appear to come from highlight politicised environments, I aimed that this would be an apolitical thesis.

Furthermore, in informal gatherings, parents have often used the opportunity for discussion to focus on what they perceive as negative characteristics of the school: its organisation, particular members of staff, lack of support by the local authority for Irish, all of which may reflect the backgrounds from which their views have been informed. I was very concerned that the focus should be on the role of the CAs to support learning and teaching, as well as to support the development of L2 proficiency, rather than a wider critique of school systems or political issues and for this reason, I did not include the parents as participants. A study with a different focus, such as reasons for choosing Irish Medium Education and perceptions of progress in the language would naturally include the parents.

The manner in which this study was conducted and the way in which the data was analysed and interpreted was influenced by my position as the 'insider' researcher. As noted in Chapter 4, I was approaching this piece of research with some preconceptions and my own

ideas on the issue of CA deployment in the school. It was my aim to allow participants to share their interpretations of reality, rather than sharing my vision of the situation with them.

Being the 'insider' researcher can create a barrier between the researcher and the participants. This became obvious during the focus groups with children. Since I was a teacher in the school and a member of the management team, a relationship of relative power existed between me and the teachers/CAs in the school. A relationship of relative power also existed between me and the children. During the focus groups, children behaved in a way that was akin to the classroom. My positionality of 'insider' researcher was discussed in Chapter 4, where I detailed the measures taken to ensure that the power differential was lowered as much as possible.

Being an 'insider' researcher, I approached the research process with my own judgements and preconceptions. As outlined in more detail in Chapter 4, I strove to remain objective throughout the research process. My own preconceptions became evident when I was interpreting and analysing the data, where I felt protective over some practices in the school. At times I found myself being defensive in the analysis and I was cautious in the way I interpreted the data. Since I knew the situation, I did not want to be seen to be too critical of my own workplace. Any criticisms that I have made in this piece of work have been made with a view to improving the situation for everyone.

7.6. Suggestions for further work

This study has explored how CAs were perceived to support learning and teaching in the early years immersion classroom. Additionally, this study offers a brief insight into the role of CAs in the development of children's language proficiency in the Irish Medium immersion context**.** A natural progression of this work would be to explore and analyse:

- the role of CAs in Irish Medium classrooms on a more National scale with a more specific emphasis on their role in developing children's L2 proficiency
- the role of the CA in monolingual Northern Irish classrooms . Since UK related research usually talks about England, Scotland and Wales and does not mention Northern Ireland, it is important to investigate the Northern Irish context. Furthermore, when professionals in Northern Ireland refer to research about CAs this research is neither sited in, nor specific to the Northern Irish context.

- perceptions of practitioners on qualifications and levels of training that CAs bring to the classroom
- preparation at ITE level for supporting teachers to work with CAs in the classroom

7.7. Conclusions and Recommendations: Summary

Notwithstanding the relatively limited sample, this work is the first to offer valuable insights into the deployment of CAs and the role that CAs play in supporting learning and teaching in the early years immersion classroom. This study draws attention to the role that CAs can also play in supporting children's development of target language proficiency in the immersion classroom. Furthermore, this study has offered insight into how relationships can influence the deployment of CAs in the school environment, highlighting how the development of positive working relationships can positively influence the role of the CA in the classroom by increasing cooperation and collaboration between class teacher and CAs. In the Northern Irish context, this is the first study of its kind. Not only will the subject of this study resonate with practitioners, it also will, hopefully, encourage greater focus on this context. Furthermore, no previous study has investigated the role of the CA in the early years immersion classroom for the purposes of developing children's language proficiency. This study emphasises the importance of creating a shared vision for the role of CAs in schools, ensuring that CAs are fully aware of the role they play in the classroom. It also highlights the need to provide opportunities for training to allow CAs to develop a deeper understanding of their role in the classroom, which would allow them to work with confidence and agency. Therefore, this study makes a significant contribution in informing the wider academic community about the role of the CA, both in that context and in general. Drawing on the insights and perceptions of participants in the case study school, this study offers practical strategies to maximise the role of the CA in the classroom. This study will also be of interest, therefore, to the wider education community where CAs are a common feature in primary and secondary classrooms.

Appendices

Appendix A – Ethics Approval

University of Glasgow

College of Social Sciences

College Research Ethics Review Feedback

Ethics Committee for Non-Clinical Research Involving Human Subjects

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Application Details

Staff Research Ethics Application ☐ Postgraduate Student Research Ethics Application ☒

Application Number: 400180082

Applicant's Name: Thomas Rogan

Project Title: The role of the classroom assistant in developing children's language proficiency in the early years immersion classroom.

Application Status: Lead Review Complete - No Changes Required

Date of Administrative/Academic Review: 10/03/2019

NB: Only if the applicant has been given approval can they proceed with their data collection with effect from the date of approval.

Recommendations (where changes are required)

Where changes are required by administrator, these should be done on the relevant documents and the changed versions uploaded as the current submission documents. This is the first stage in the review process.

Where changes are required by reviewers all applicants must respond in the relevant boxes to the recommendations of the Committee and upload this as the Resubmission Document through the system to explain the changes you have made to the application as well as amending the documents.

All resubmitted application documents should then be uploaded.

If your application is rejected a new application must be submitted via the online system. Where recommendations are provided, they should be responded to and this document uploaded as part of the new application. A new reference number will be generated.

Appendix B – Plain Language Statement and Participant Consent Form

University of Glasgow

College of Social Sciences

Plain Language Statement – Class Teacher

Study Title: The role of the classroom assistant in developing children's language proficiency in the Irish Medium Immersion Classroom.

Researcher Details: Thomas Rogan

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

Introduction

The purpose of this research study is to examine the role of the classroom assistant in developing children's proficiency in Irish in the immersion classroom. This study will offer an opportunity to examine and to reflect on the varying views of teachers and classroom assistants regarding the deployment of the classroom assistant to develop language proficiency in the immersion classroom. It is hoped that information gathered in this study will help to influence future practice and deployment of classroom assistants. The study will hopefully help to identify areas for future improvement and areas of need regarding staff training to build staff capacity to develop children's language in a collaborative manner. You are being asked to participate because you are a teacher with responsibility for delivering the Literacy curriculum and you also play a role in working alongside classroom assistants to plan for Irish language development.

Details:

If you decide to take part, I will ask you to participate in a focus group of 6 colleagues to discuss a number of issues regarding the use of classroom assistants in developing children's language proficiency. The focus group will be audio-recorded. Transcripts will be returned to you to check for accuracy of your contribution and can be amended up until the analysis of results begins. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time, without any prejudice. Participation can be withdrawn without providing any

reason. Should you choose to withdraw from the study, data collected before this point will be destroyed.

Confidentiality:

Every effort will be made however to ensure that confidentiality is preserved. Although pseudonyms will be used when then study is being written up, it may be possible to identify participants because of the nature of the focus group process and the roles of some participants. All personal data will be anonymised and participants will have the right to delete anything from the transcripts if desired. Personal data will be locked away. Once the study is complete, all hard copies of data collected will be shredded. All digital documents connected to the study will be password protected.

> **Please note that confidentiality may not be guaranteed; due to the limited size of the participant sample and that assurances on confidentiality will be strictly adhered to unless evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered. In such cases the University may be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies/agencies.**

Use of data:

Data collected will be compiled and analysed as part of my EdD dissertation. Your child's personal identifiers will be destroyed after the assessment has been written. Collected data will be stored on the University of Glasgow OneDrive and will be accessed by myself and my supervisor Dr Hazel Crichton. Research data gathered will be kept for up to 10 years, as per University guidelines. After this time, data will be destroyed.

In the future, data may be used in other research outputs, or potentially shared with other researchers upon request. Please be aware that:

- research findings may be published and
- findings may be presented at conferences.

This project has been considered and approved by the College Research Ethics Committee. Anyone with concerns regarding the conduct of the project should contact the College Ethics Officer, **Dr Muir Houston, email: Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk**

Researcher contact details:
Thomas Rogan, email:
Supervisor contact details:
Dr Hazel Crichton, email: hazel.crichton@glasgow.ac.uk

_____End of Participant Information Sheet_____

University of Glasgow

College of Social Sciences

Consent Form

Title of Project: The role of the classroom assistant in developing children's language proficiency in the early years immersion classroom.

Name of Researcher: Thomas Rogan

I confirm that I have read and understood the Plain Language Statement for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

I consent / do not consent (delete as applicable) to interviews being audio-recorded.

I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by pseudonym.

I acknowledge that there will be no effect on my employment arising from my participation or non-participation in this research.

All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymised.

The material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.

I understand that other authenticated researchers may have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.

I agree to take part in this research study ☐

I do not agree to take part in this research study ☐

Name of Participant …… Signature ……..

Date ……

Name of Researcher …… Signature ……..

Date ……

…… End of consent form ……

Appendix C – Themes for Interviews and Focus Groups

These questions were designed to be the base for discussion in the open-ended semi-structured interviews and the focus groups. They are 'starter' questions and reflect the themes of the research and the areas identified as important from the literature. It was envisaged that these themes would be further developed in the interviews/focus groups.

Interview Questions – Co-Ordinators

1. What do you perceive as being the main role of the classroom assistant in the Early Years/Key Stage 1 immersion classroom?
2. In your opinion, how are classroom assistants used in the school?
3. What strengths can you identify regarding the deployment of classroom assistants?
4. What sort of challenges have you perceived in the deployment of classroom assistants?
5. In your opinion, are classroom assistants involved in helping build children's language proficiency?
6. If so, how?
7. In your opinion, what do classroom assistants see as their main role in the immersion classroom?
8. Are you aware of any particular areas of effective collaboration between class teacher and classroom assistant?
9. Leading from this, are there any issues regarding the effective deployment of classroom assistants that you are aware of?

Interview Questions – Principal

1. What do you perceive as being the main role of the classroom assistant in the Early Years/Key Stage 1 immersion classroom?
2. When employing classroom assistants, what, from your perspective, are the most important attributes of the classroom assistant?
3. In your opinion, how are classroom assistants used in the school?
4. What sort of challenges have you perceived in the deployment of classroom assistants?
5. In your opinion, are classroom assistants involved in helping build children's language proficiency?
6. If so, how?

7. In your opinion, what do classroom assistants see as their main role in the immersion classroom?
8. Are you aware of any particular areas of effective collaboration between class teacher and classroom assistant?
9. Leading from this, are there any issues regarding the effective deployment of classroom assistants that you are aware of?

Issues for discussion during adult focus group sessions:

- perceived role of the classroom assistant in the Early Years/ Key Stage 1 classroom
- the deployment of the classroom assistant in the school
- associated challenges of working with teachers/classroom assistants
- the role of the classroom assistant in helping build children's language proficiency
- how classroom assistants see their role within the classroom

Issues for discussion during focus group sessions with children:

- how they feel about the Irish language
- what they like about speaking Irish
- what they don't like about speaking Irish
- which subjects they find easiest to speak Irish in.
- how they have learnt Irish
- whether they speak Irish at home or not
- how Irish is similar to and different from English.
- areas of confusion
- whether it is easier to listen to it, speak it, read it or write it?
- who has helped them learn Irish
- perceived levels of fluency
- what would help them to learn Irish even better

Appendix D – Sample Interview Transcript

Focus Group With Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 Teachers

29th May 2019

R: First of all, thank you for agreeing to do this today. It is very helpful and it is very much appreciated. We are going to talk about classroom assistants, more specifically classroom assistants in this school, how they are deployed and how they could be deployed better. I suppose, the first thing I want to chat about is what you perceive to be the main role of the classroom assistant in the Early Years or Key Stage 1 immersion classroom.

A: I think, especially in this school, their main role is to model language and support learning.

B: A second pair of eyes for the teacher as well because you can't see everything that is going on. It's helpful to have classroom assistants to tell you about things that are going on that you might not know about.

R: What sort of things might you not notice?

B: Like children who appear to be getting on better that want they are. The classroom assistant might draw your attention to the fact that they have been copying or that they have been silently struggling. You can then go to them and help them a bit better, whereas they might be reluctant to tell you themselves.

A: Yeah. Even in Nursery, especially with friendships, there may be some children who you think are playing and who have made friendships and perhaps the classroom assistant sees that they weren't playing all that well or that they were on their own a little bit more than they should have been. They can draw our attention to this so that you can put a plan in place to help those specific children.

C: I agree with the idea that the role of the classroom assistant it to support learning, be that supporting the teacher in preparing things, modelling language. I find that when we are doing play in the classroom that the classroom assistant would have a specific role and it usually is language based. There would usually be a classroom assistant deployed at the art table where we would promote most of our language through the art activity of the day. There would also be an adult at the Maths table to promote mathematical language, which is language that isn't

heard outside of the classroom, for most of the children in the school. There are certain activities where there always have to be adult. I suppose it's for language learning to be sure that the children are being equipped with language and given the new vocabulary when needed.

A: I find that they are very helpful for the likes of PDMU where you want to do a little drama, where you have the puppets. Maybe the teacher has a puppet and the classroom assistant has another and you are able to act something out to help children understand something a little bit better. They can actually see it in action.

C: In story-time, if there is a new word that comes up and you are trying to explain it: if you are talking about hood for example and you don't have an item of clothing with a hood, but the classroom assistant might, you can physically show the children what it actually is That's a visual cue that the children are able to then remember what the word it. It's like acting. If you have a classroom assistant in the Early Years you are constantly acting out everything so that the children are given the clues to help them with their language development.

A: Even, again the likes of learning new words. If you are reading a story and looking at the pictures, I would read out look at this big dog. The children would say no no no it's not. The classroom assistant would make another guess that seems silly and this gives the children the opportunity to think it's not a dog or a cat but a cow and they can come up with the word themselves, or at least contribute to the fact that they know it's not the others.

R: Can I ask you to tell me a wee bit more about what classroom assistants do to model language? How do they act as language models?

B: You kind of hope that they would model it the same way that you do it yourself in the class, whether that be role play after the story time. . . . erm . . .

C: In the role play area in the gníomcheantar (play area), we change that according to themes every half term. It's very important that there is a classroom assistant hanging about that area, not getting too involved in the play, but hanging about the area to give the language to the children. Say it's the doctors for example and a child says in English, 'I'm sick and I'm waiting on the doctor', the role of the classroom assistant in that instance is to say in Irish 'Oh tá mise tinn, tá mé ag fanacht ar an dochtúir' and over exaggerating the words and phrases so that the children remember what they are supposed to be saying and that's what

I'm going to say the next time. It helps the children pick up the language then. They model language in very many different ways.

B: It can take them by surprise as well when they think that you are not listening and the classroom assistant might say oh maith thú and repeat what they say in Irish to them and they might feel a bit of praise about it.

C: Yeah. Small language activities. They would be very useful in promoting language development that they are able to sit with the children and maybe if you are working with the whole class you don't always hear what the children are saying, especially if you have a larger class, it's handy when the classroom assistant can pick up that a child has made the effort to talk in Irish and have praised them. It does make the child try harder. We have had the instance this year, when a child has come into Primary 1 with no Irish whatsoever. The role of the classroom assistant in that case is heightened because they are doing a lot of support work with that child when they have free time. If I'm working with the rest of the class and the child has finished their work, the classroom assistant is able to work with the child, even if it's just a wee game of pairs, with flashcards. Constantly playing wee games to help children catch up with the language development of the other children in the class.

A: And again, modelling questions so that if you have ask a child a question and they don't have the answer in Irish, instead of telling them what it is, you ask the classroom assistant. So for example, you could ask 'Ar mhaith leat bainne?' and the classroom assistant could reply 'Ba mhaith' or 'Níor mhaith', depending on what the child wants to say and then they can tell you. My classroom assistants have the target language that we want the children to learn each term, so they have that with them and they know the words at each area that the children are supposed to be learning each term and they can focus on those words.

C: That would be included in the planning and I would have that displayed in the classroom so classroom assistants can see what the language targets are for that term or that theme.

R: Do you find things are slightly different in Key Stage 1?

B: Yes definitely.

C: Yeah.

B: It's such a change. I know there should still be structured play, but the play is different. The children are so much more involved in where they want to go with the play whereas in the earlier years you can sway them where you want them to go.

C: It's more teacher led at the bottom of the school. The children direct their own play in Rang a 3 and Rang a 4. You provide the activities but a lot of the time you have to be flexible because the children end up doing something totally different.

B: Yeah.

R: And would they take the language in a direction that you wouldn't have expected?

B: Yeah. Sometimes they can surprise you when they are in the roleplay area by themselves but then sometimes they are not as motivated to speak in Irish when there is not two pairs of eyes or two pairs of ears on them. Especially at the iPad table, I find that they get over excited and it's difficult to manage. Whereas, if you have smaller groups who are playing with Lego or puppets, it's slightly quieter and you can zone in more easily on specific groups and find out what they're talking about. It's a big change.

R: Slightly more formal.

B: Yeah.

C: I suppose the role of the classroom assistant is different in Primary 3. When I was in Rang a 3 I didn't have a classroom assistant with me most of the time and I found it was a lot more difficult because you were dealing with so many children in the class and you were trying to attend to everyone's needs in the class. There were some children whose standard of spoken Irish was fantastic and you knew you didn't have to worry too much about those children, but then you wanted to create a bit of a challenge for them. There were other children who were struggling with Irish and you were trying to bring it right down to basics for them. I found that difficult with one adult trying to juggle everyone's needs. I still think the classroom assistant is still really relevant for language development in P3 and P4. The vocabulary widens at that point. In the early years, language development is very directed in this school and we know what our language targets are. If other words are learned it's fantastic. In P3 and P4 the language is so broad that you do need an extra person in the class. I find that it's hard to develop the language.

B: You almost feel sorry for them because there are some children who really do try. There are some more complicated words in English to do with 'Houses' that they automatically have that they don't automatically think about in Irish, but they are trying to get their two cents in, but they don't have that yet without the teacher supporting them. So, if you had a classroom assistant, it would be much easier to visit around the groups.

C: It's important that you go back over the language that was done at the start of the year. Our first theme is 'Animals' and all the activities are based around animals. You don't however ignore animals for the rest of the year. You are constantly putting out the animals every now and again so that they children have the opportunity to revisit the language development. You are making sure that they don't forget things. September to the end of June with young children is a massive time frame and so much opportunity for language to be learnt and to be lost, if it's not constantly revisited. It's important that classroom assistants are aware of that too, that they aren't always focusing on new language, but that they're constantly giving the children the language that has already been previously learnt.

R: The next bit might seem to be a wee bit repetitive, but think about this school specifically, Move on from what you perceive to be the main role and look at how classroom assistants are used in this school and tell me a wee bit about it. Think about the whole school and be honest.

C: I think they have so many roles in the school. There are so many classroom assistants erm that I suppose they are qualified in other areas and they are used in other ways. There are classroom assistants who take the Art club which is fantastic because they all have a high standard of Irish and obviously we are allowing them to utilise their skills as well in other areas. I think they have so many roles to juggle in the school if you think of all the different classroom assistants and they're always doing above and beyond.

B: We are very lucky you know.

C: Taking reading groups and listening to reading, in both English and Irish. There are lots of classroom assistants who work 1-1 with children as well.

B: We are lucky that we have a few classroom assistants who have been here for some time and they know a bit about the family history: they know how to speak to certain children in a specific way to get the best out of them. That's good for new classroom assistants who come in because they model how a classroom assistant should behave.

C: And they know what's expected of them.

B: Not behave but . . . how they should work within a team setting.

A: I feel as a new teacher coming into the school that was supported very well by my classroom assistants. They helped me learn the ways of the school. I think our school is very different to any other school I have worked in.

B: It definitely is.

A: Erm . . . so like our school has lots of routines, the focused target language and just the activities that our school takes part in. I feel that classroom assistants gave me a lot of support when I came and really helped me settle in and learn the way of the school and the Nursery.

C: I can back that up. When I first started I was in the Nursery as well, with a classroom assistant who had worked there for years and if she hadn't been there that first year would have been a nightmare for me. She knew what she had to do and what I had to do and it made life so much easier. It is good that we have classroom assistants who have been here for a while and who are knowledgeable of the everyday working of the school.

B: I'm the same. When I came, the classroom assistant who I had, had worked with the class the year before. She knew the class very well and knew the layout of the year so she knew when things should be done. It's very easy to get carried away in your own planning, but realistically you have to follow the school's reading plan and the way that Maths is taught. That was really helpful for me. Without that I would have been completely lost.

R: Is there anything specifically relating to how they are used at the bottom of the school?

C: I know that when I am doing the reading books in primary 1, when we first started, the class was divided in half because it was easier to deal with half the class when we were learning the words in the book. The classroom assistant would have taken the children out to play in the play area. They were able to do a range of activities and then after 25 minutes they were able to swap over. The other group got the reading activities in the classroom with the teacher and the other played in the play area with the classroom assistant. Supervisory role. They are supervising, health and safety: there is water on the floor and they clean it up. It's not only for language. We are very lucky that are classroom assistants are qualified. They are able to . . . .

B: Take on a more pastoral role as well.

C: Take on various different roles in the school. I also know that when children fall in the yard, the classroom assistant would deal with that. If there are accidents in the classroom, the classroom assistant would help settle the child and change the child if the child needs changed. She knows that she's not just there for one certain activity. She understands that the role is greater than that, depending on what happens in the classroom.

A: In the Nursery, classroom assistants have quite a lot of responsibility, that would be quite equal to my own. They have the same number of children to observe. They are responsible for their own observations and keeping that up to date. They do assessments as well because I trust their ability. I observe them as they are doing them and I know they are doing them well. They would assess the children for certain things like doing a puzzle or completing a pattern. They help them write their name, they help them recognise their name. Those are the main things they would do during class time. They also have other responsibilities like preparing break, putting out the beds for nap time and things like that, putting up displays. Their role . .

C: There is an element of preparation.

A: Yeah.

C: The homework books need prepared. The classroom assistant can help with that. Like when they get their reading books with the wee card in the front of it with their name on it. Again, we are lucky we have classroom assistants who understand the workings of the school. They can use their own initiative and go ahead with many of the activities in the classroom. Especially the art activities: getting things prepared and getting everything we need for art activities. We do try to get the children involved sometimes, picking what colours they want, or what colour they would like in the playdough. A lot of time, classroom assistants would sit and make the dough with the children and the children are able to learn the language of mixing, pushing. It's a language based activity, but the classroom assistant is leading it and dealing with the children.

R: It's an activity that is relevant to them.

C: Yeah. I know that classroom assistants have after school activities: Sport on a Wednesday. For health and safety, someone outside the school does sport with P1 and P2 and it's an obligation on the classroom assistant to sit in and make sure ratio wise that there are enough adults and health and safety wise that if something happens they are there to help.

B: They know who to keep separate from each other too and who works well in a group. Even to know who their parents are for afterwards. We are lucky that it's a small school community and they know a lot about their backgrounds.

A: I think it's also important to note that the things we mentioned aren't specifically the role of the classroom assistants. I feel that I work very well with the classroom assistants and we all pitch in. So, maybe one time it is the classroom assistant who makes the dough and then the next time I'll make the dough. It's the same for preparing the break or putting out the beds. Everybody takes turns and it shows that we value the classroom assistants that we have that there is some work that perhaps people . . . I don't know. . . preparing things, that it'snot always left to classroom assistants as if that's their role, because it's not. Classroom assistant's role encompasses everything, the same as a teacher's so it's important everybody works as a team.

B: Our school everyone has . . . the classroom assistants have more involvement that in schools I have worked in previously. Sometimes the classroom assistants have got the less desirable jobs . . . the cleaning side of things.

R: The donkey work.

C: I always say that I wouldn't ask them to do something that I wouldn't do myself.

B: If they do it this week, you'll do it next week.

C: You aren't expecting someone else to come along and clean up after you.

B: Even the really boring things. You aren't giving them the photocopying, cutting out: things like that there. Those things have to be taken in turns.

R: I'm trying to hold back . . . the menial tasks . . . the less favourable tasks.

B: Yeah. You don't want classroom assistants to get demotivated thinking 'oh no, I have to do this again.'

R: Yeah. If they are photocopying or cutting out all day, their day could become very boring very quickly.

B: Understandably it has to be done at times. Sometimes you have to give out that job, but if that's your job day in day out then . . .

C: It's about delegating and prioritising what needs to be done and what can wait until you have ten minutes to yourself. If you need something photocopied there and then, it's easier just to ask the classroom assistant to run up and do it.

R: Can I go back to what you were saying about classroom assistants being involved in language specific activities. Could you tell me a wee bit more about what these sort of activities would look like, or how a classroom assistant would be involved?

A: One of the major activities for Nursery would be Bingo. We have Bingo on every theme, every season. The classroom assistant would lead the bingo. Sometimes in the first week of a new theme, the classroom assistant would say the word and show the picture, maybe asking the children to repeat or try to say the word. Then as the weeks go on, the classroom assistant's role becomes . . .

C: They take a back seat and let the children . . .

A: Let the children lead it and maybe observe, or say the word before showing the picture to see who has acquired that language. That's just one activity and that would be a small group activity, maybe 4 or 5 children at a time with an adult.

C: We would be similar in Primary 1 with the Bingo activity. We would always have the art table. There is always an adult, either the classroom assistant or myself at the art table, directing the language that we are trying to reinforce for that theme. We have moved into the new theme this week. We were doing about Space today and we mentioned about spaceship and rocket and the children were really involved. They were making a picture of space, applying it, putting a rocket on it and wee things like that there. It's just constantly saying things like 'cén dath atá ar do roicéad?' and they would be able to answer because they could understand what we were saying to them.

A: That's another thing that's important as well. Going back to the Bingo: it's not only the word of the picture, it's what else can you bring in. They know to do that as well and they would. Say it's a dog, they would ask 'what colour is the dog?' or 'how many legs does the dog have?'

C: I do find that our classroom assistants are very good at that there, extending the language. It's not just the language that you are expecting the children to know. They do bring in counting, shapes and things as well which is fantastic. I just find that they just know.

A: Very natural.

C: Yeah.

B: A lot of our classroom assistants have come through this environment, which probably helps too. They remember that it was a more comfortable, not as strict environment. Like, when I was at primary school, we had to call our classroom assistants by their title. It's much more relaxed here and the children feel that it's another teacher or them. They go home talking about 'my teachers' so they are very comfortable around them.

C: I love the fact that children do that actually. They would say 'I have two teachers' or 'I have three teachers' and you don't really correct them.

B: It's not really a hierarchy with them.

C: I think it's lovely the way the children just accept that everyone is there teaching the children and helping with their language development. So yeah language activities can be anything really. There are lots of language activities outside, with the parachute even: having toys on the parachute and asking the children to go and get things so that we can assess so we know what they understand what we have asked them to go and get. They love running under the parachute to pick out whatever the toy is and come back out again. Everything is literally language based: there are Nursery Rhymes for everything that the classroom assistants would always mention. So like for the theme of the house, 'Is taephotoa mise', they were just talking about a house, or serving something in the roleplay area with a teapot and they would just suddenly start singing 'I'm a Little Teapot'. The classroom assistants are able to do that and they just know. It does come so naturally to them. They just reinforce the language that the children have been learning.

A: Because many children come to school and the Nursery without having Irish at home, every time the classroom assistant speaks to the child is a learning opportunity. Whether it's at the sand tray or the water tray, they are constantly giving some language cues that the children haven't heard before: 'an bhfuil sé ag snámh san uisce', 'an bhfuil sé ag tumadh', 'ag tochailt'. There are just so many phrases and words that the child would never hear at home, even parents who are trying, and would know their 1, 2, 3 or their colours, there's things at every turn around, like there's something that the classroom assistant can afford the child that they won't be getting at home.

C: I love the fact that you mentioned the language that we use at the sand and water tray. I feel that that's something that is lost as they go up through the school, as there is not the same emphasis on sand and water play. So, words that the children would have understood or would have known, they get lost as the child goes up through the school because the structured play is different. As you are saying, there isn't always a classroom assistant there when they are doing structured play and it is more child led.

R: The levels of interaction change.

C: Yes, dramatically.

R: The type of interactions that children encounter change as the children move up through the school. That's a huge observation I suppose.

C: It's a pity that the children don't have the same opportunities for play as they don at the bottom of the school because they do lose words that are important.

R: I suppose on the flip side of that, they do gain a different type of vocabulary.

C: Yeah (Unenthusiastic).

B: More formal.

R: Yeah, it's a more formal type of education and I suppose there is less input, in a way from adults.

C: I think the relationship that the classroom assistants have with the children at the bottom of the school is fantastic. As B mentioned previously, they do know the backgrounds of the children. The children just click so well with the classroom assistants because they are so friendly and they are just able to . . . sometimes the teacher can be the authority figure and sometimes it's the teacher who needs to tell a child off for doing something they shouldn't have done. The classroom assistant is like the good cop or something. I don't know if that's the right way to describe it but the classroom assistant's the one . . .

R: Partnership.

C: It's lovely to see that the children feel so comfortable around the classroom assistants in our school too.

R: Ok, can we move on from the positives. In the next question I want you to be very honest. In your opinion, are there any associated challenges around working with

classroom assistants? I don't mind starting. My biggest challenge when working with a classroom assistant is being able to let go and not be such a control freak, and realise that it's ok to ask them to do things. I think that was one of my issues when working with classroom assistants. I know when I got a classroom assistant once, I had been on my own for three years before, and I actually didn't know what to do with the classroom assistant. I was trying to do everything myself and not letting go. That's one of my challenges.

B: I was the same in another school. I had a classroom assistant who was much older and I found that difficult. When I came here, the classroom assistants were sort of around my age and it didn't feel like I was giving that many orders. I was lucky with who I got, and I know sometimes it can be challenging if there is a clash of personality because you don't want to feel like you're the one giving out all the orders and you're the one giving out all the horrible jobs that you don't want to be seen to be doing, but there are times when you have to give them out because you have to go to another class or you have to go to meetings. Sometimes it's like one of the duties that you have to clean a table after school. You don't want to have to be the one to say 'can you do this for me?' because you don't want it to make it seem like you're the slave driver. But, it would be difficult.

R: I suppose it's working out as well how that person is going to take to you asking them to do things.

B: It takes a few months when you start working with someone new to see what way they work and for them to learn what way you work and to see what way you can bounce of each other, rather than it being. . .

R: In a positive way.

C: Building a relationship, which can be difficult if there is a clash of personalities. Luckily I haven't had any issues. I go back to the first year when I was here and I had an older classroom assistant. Without her I would have been lost. I did feel like she was the teacher because she knew what to do and I didn't. I was constantly asking her questions. I suppose that was difficult the following year because I knew what I was doing and was going to change things. I wanted to put my own swing on things and I felt like Oh God, am I going to be putting anyone out of place by doing this here. So I did feel a wee bit awkward at times when we were doing things a wee bit differently. I suppose it depends on the classroom assistant: how long they have been there and what experience they have. With a newer

classroom assistant coming in, you can start from the start, right this is how things are happening and this is how I do things and what I expect both of us to do. There are certain things that only I will do. I always like to listen to the children reading individually. This year, it has been a wee bit more difficult because there are so many children and we do have to share that. I have always liked to read to listen to every children reading individually every day but it got to the point where I thought that I'm killing myself doing this, there wasn't enough time especially when the words got more difficult and there was more to read, I had to say I need you to start listening to reading. I suppose it depends on the classroom assistant and the experience that they have. I am laughing at your OCD. I know you like to have things done a certain way so I can imagine what you're like with classroom assistants, but thankfully I have had classroom assistants put displays up and it maybe wasn't the way I was expecting it to be or the way that I had envisaged and it can be a bit awkward saying 'is there any chance you could maybe move that there' and you feel awkward if you move it yourself in case they come in the next day . . .

B: And take offence.

C: So it's kind of saying 'I really appreciate what you have done there but I'm going to move this here a bit', trying to put it in a more friendly way.

R: You're much nicer than what I am.

C: You're quite blunt, I would imagine. I would always try to put it nicely.

B: It's difficult when you have to pull someone on something that they have done in that sense because you don't want to create an atmosphere in the classroom and you don't want to them to huff or take offence at what you have said.

C: The personality of the classroom assistant is very important in that case because you have to be able to be open with them, be able to approach them if there is a problem or something that you weren't too happy with. I have never really had issues with classroom assistants so I have been lucky.

A: I have had some issues. It's like a double edged sword: do you say something and have an atmosphere or do you not saying and the problem goes on.

R: Just say something.

B: That comes with age too.

A: Then what happens when you say something?

R: You would be doing it in an open forum.

B: I had to get help from someone else about a few issues. Then you can get their advice, has this happened them before because you don't know if it's you being fussy or whatever. Each year and each person is different.

R: There is that challenge of people adapting to your style you adapting to their style. (Agreement).

C: It's that hand in hand partnership with the classroom assistant. Sometimes they gel and sometimes they don't. I know of other people who haven't gelled with the classroom assistant and I personally would hate to be in that situation because I do think it would have a negative effect on the children. You would hope the children wouldn't notice but I think it would be difficult coming into work everyday if there was an issue.

B: And that's natural too. Not everyone gets on in real life.

R: And we all work very differently. As professionals we all have a very different approach to things. On the flip side of that, would you see that there would maybe be a challenge if you got on too well with a classroom assistant?

B: Yes.

C: There has to be a line of professionalism somewhere. I have had classroom assistants in the class who I have got on absolutely swimmingly with, but there has to be a line somewhere where they know what your role is. Like speaking to parents if something has happened. You want to be the one to inform the parent and sometimes maybe the classroom assistant does it. I would prefer to inform a parents and I tell the classroom assistants this. I don't mind them telling the parent if the child has done a lovely wee picture or something, but if there has been a more serious incident, I prefer it to come from me and I will always say that.

B: That's tough. That is tough. That has happened to me and you appreciate where they are coming from in the sense that they have went out of their way to tell the parent, but sometimes it . . . you don't wanna say that it's not their place, but it's not really when you look at our roles.

A: It has happened with me that a classroom assistant from a different class has said to a parent when the parent has picked up the child from a different class. It was an issue that I

wasn't going to mention. It was something that the parent didn't need to know about. Sometimes children mess about. It was something that I was going to keep an eye on and wasn't going to mention, but then the classroom assistant from a different class went to the parent and the parent kind of was angry about that. It is something that has happened a few times.

R: Sometimes as well the parents approach the classroom assistants before they will approach teachers.

B: They feel that they will get more information out of them.

R: They feel that they will either get more information or they sometimes just feel more comfortable talking to them rather than talking to a teacher. That can be a wee bit of a challenge as well.

B: They might know them from outside: they might have went to school with them or know them from a certain club.

R: Drawing that line can be difficult. Any other challenges that there might be?

B: The discipline. Certain classroom assistants sometimes I feel have a different approach to discipline than the class teacher and that's awkward because you have your own way of dealing with certain things. Sometimes the classroom assistants might have . . . might be a bit more cross, or a bit more disciplinarian that you may be. That's something that has to be dealt with before in the school. When you are here a long time too, you feel that it becomes your role.

A: Sometimes the aura that they bring to the classroom can change the dynamic and can change how your day is going, depending on the mood of the classroom. It can have a negative impact on how your day is going. Maybe the class is messing, or is a little bit too loud but that's ok . . . it's after lunch, they had custard, you're dealing with it, but if you're classroom assistant is really loud or really cross it can escalate things. You think 'Oh my goodness, are they really loud' and you get angry and then suddenly everybody is loud.

B: They don't know the child as well as you know them or whatever.

A:Or something that wasn't annoying you or something that you could kind of deal with in a different way: zone it out or zone them out. It can just have that impact.

R: Yes, I have found sometimes that a classroom assistant will focus on something much more sometimes than we would, if that makes sense. Like sometimes if a child has been rude to a classroom assistant, the classroom assistant could make a huge thing out of it then question what we are going to do about it. Sometimes I would question if it's my place to do something, because I wasn't there when it happened. Does it take away from their role as a professional if I wade in and say you were rude to such and such. I don't know. . . that's a wee bit . . . we react differently to different things.

B: And especially with the like of you pair. You are the teachers and you have three classroom assistants and you have two classroom assistants who are both different. It's hard to get the happy medium for everyone that everyone's on the same page of how we go about dealing with things. I've only ever had one. . . .

A: In saying that, that's something else that I have found, I wouldn't say overly difficult, but it is something that I am aware of. Because you have two classroom assistants, they both have different roles in the school: I have one classroom assistant who leaves the class at 1.45pm every day so I'll be speaking to my other classroom assistant about something: maybe we would be discussing a child, maybe we're discussing n art activity for the following day and then the other classroom assistant comes in the next morning and doesn't know what's going on. You have to be aware, 'ok I have had this conversation with one person and I need to have it again'. Not in a bad way, but you have to make sure that everyone knows what's happening in the class.

C: Yeah, that can be a bit of a challenge sometimes.

A: Or even talking about a child if there has been issues. There was an issue today and a parent came and spoke to me. I spoke to the classroom assistant about it, but it's in the back of my head that when the other classroom assistant comes back, then it's an issue that I need to raise with her so that everyone is looking out for the same things.

C: Communication is vital. We need to be sure that everybody is in the know about what's important and what maybe isn't as significant.

R: Sometimes it's hard to know what information to share with your classroom assistant. Sometimes you worry maybe about where that information is going to go.

A and B: Yeah.

C: I would like to hope that any information we share with classroom assistants in school would remain confidential. I would like to hope erm . . . but sometimes I do feel, what exactly do they need to know and what . . .

B: What is gossip and what is need to know.

C: Yeah. It can be difficult.

R: I suppose if a classroom assistant has connections to children or connections to . . . maybe they have friend's children in the school. Sometimes that's difficult to know. . .

A: Or friends with parents. I have had an occasion where a classroom assistant has told me that the parent was questioning her in a social setting. She answered and she said you know I shouldn't have answered but I was put on the spot by the dad and it was in a social setting. It kind of . . . she didn't know what to do. She came straight in and she said. It wasn't even an issue. It wasn't even a big thing or something she shouldn't have said, but it could have been. That is a difficulty.

R: I suppose a lot of the classroom assistants do come from the area, from the community . . .

A: I think that's a thing with Irish Medium. It is so small.

R: There is much chance of connections.

B: People know someone.

R: We'll move onto the next wee bit. The last, potentially the last . . . How do you feel that classroom assistants see their role within the classroom? I'm talking very specifically about this school.

B: Hopefully to work hand in hand with the teacher. Hopefully they sort of see their importance, that they are there to back up what we do with the children on a daily basis, how best to model language, how best to encourage, motivate the children to get the best out of their language ability.

C: And to work with the child to make sure they are reaching their potential. Erm. . . the classroom assistants would work 1-1 with a child as well so they need to recognise the importance of the work that they do. I would like to think that they do but I do know that sometimes classroom assistants do feel undervalued and it's sad to say that I have heard

classroom assistants before saying I have to do this today and I have to do that and I don't feel it should have been left for me to do. I think it's important that they don't feel undervalued and that they realise that their role is vital to the effective working of the classroom.

B: I have been really lucky with a few of the classroom assistants that I have had, that they helped me with planning, especially creative tasks, because it is easy to get stuck in a rut They have sat down with me and helped me because you would do the same things over for easiness. I think that helps. That's good well that they feel more involved and you don't maybe have to be so specific in what you put up on the wall that we are doing this and that this week, because they are in the know.

R: Do you think on the flip side of that, that they can become too involved? That they almost expect that because they have had such a high level of involvement with one teacher . . .

B: I'm sure then that that does happen.

R: They expect that that happens.

C: I'm not sure that they would expect that that happens because they understand that every teacher works differently and that everyone has their own teaching style. I dare say that it does happen like they maybe get used to doing things with one teacher and they expect it to be the same with another teacher. Every relationship between classroom teacher and classroom assistant is going to be different. Again it comes down to personalities. Sometimes it doesn't work and sometimes it does. It happens in real life that you don't get on with everybody, so if you don't get on with somebody and you are expected to work with them six hours a day, then it's not going to be a nice work environment at all. I suppose you have to try and accommodate.

B: Some people need that though. They need direction, written direction and without that they feel a bit lost. It happened on an occasion that I got a classroom assistant who was new and I was saying that I thought would be understood and they weren't. I had to ask for help because I didn't know what to do. You feel flustered as the teacher trying to explain something to the children and the classroom assistant so it was easier for things to written in a list form of what needed to be done each day and how we go about doing different tasks. It depends on the person. I can see where, if someone has been working in a partnership for a

few years and they move on to someone else and they aren't getting that constant guidance it could be hard for them to do their own . . . they maybe feel that they are going overboard, or that they aren't doing enough.

C: Yeah.

R**: I know that when I had a classroom assistant, she was very heavily involved in everything that we did, the planning and we thought of activities together. Maybe that doesn't happen as she has moved on, or as people move on to other teacher . . . does that create an issue? Was I expecting too much?**

C: I like having the classroom assistant involved in the planning. I think it's nice to have a fresh pair of eyes to say I know you have done this before, but can we try this this year and you think fair enough, we will try something different. So I think it's nice to have . . . to not be working all the time with the same classroom assistant. It spices things up for the teacher as well. You are more . . . you can be more enthusiastic about doing things sometimes. If you are so set in your ways you can get stuck in a rut sometimes, doing the same thing again and again, year after year. Luckily I don't have that problem because I have been moved to that many classes to do that. I know I am in the same class next year and I am actually really looking forward to it because I know where I want to change things and I know erm . . if I have the same classroom assistant, the two of us will be able to things much different next year and hopefully for the sake of the children it will be better for them. I'll be able to start afresh and do things a wee bit differently.

A: I think the same way teachers are suited to certain classes and certain age groups, classroom assistants are the same. It's not every classroom assistant who is suited to working in the nursery.

C: Oh definitely not.

A: In the Nursery there is a much higher level of cleaning, prep work, tidying up. . . . there are people who are the cleaners and who go in and get stuck in and don't mind sand trays, water trays everyday and beds. Then there's other people who don't really enjoy it and feel that it's too much of that sort of work. I do think it's important where classroom assistants are placed: that it's in an area that suits their personality and suits what they are capable for, if that makes sense.

R: It does. It makes a lot of sense.

C: You say, it's the same with teachers. Not every teacher is suited for the Nursery. It's a very difficult place to be, if it's not where your interest lies. It's vital . . . I do think that the principal takes that into account when allocating classroom assistants to certain classes. She takes into account what experience they have had in other classes before, and personalities. I do think she takes into account the teacher that are going to be in the class as well, which all created a better atmosphere in the classroom.

R: Ok, I know I said that was going to be my last question, but I have found another one as I have flicked through, that might be interesting to ask. Are you aware, and please feel free to give examples of any particular areas of effective collaboration between class teacher and classroom assistant?

B: I think it's pretty obvious when partnerships get on well.

R: How? Give me an example.

B: You don't hear any complaining.

C: The children are happier and it just looks like a fun friendly classroom. When you go in you can sense the positive atmosphere in the classroom.

B: There's work going on. It's not like. . .

C: The children are busy and learning all the time. It's just a good relationship and you just notice it. I think we're quite lucky in our school that you do notice it in all the classrooms: there are always good partnerships.

A: I would say, this year for me, as much as my class has been quite challenging, it has been a quite relaxing atmosphere in the class, and I hope that is down to myself and the classroom assistants working effectively together. Hopefully they would say the same. I feel that we have this year and we have got on very well. Everybody has kind of naturally found their own role. We have been working together and we have tried to be helpful to each other. You know . . . so . . . just even the atmosphere, being quite peaceful.

C: It has been a challenging year for everybody. There have been ups and downs throughout the year but I do think that good partnerships are evident through the school. Classroom assistants have been well place and everybody seems to enjoy their job. I'm hoping the classroom assistants would say that. But, I'm just realising I have classroom assistants who work 1-1 with children and one of them only works until lunch time. It is a challenge for us

because we have to deal with the child in the afternoon. There is another classroom assistant who would be in the Nursery covering lunch supervision. Sometimes I am on my own in the afternoon and that can be a challenge because classroom assistants have been placed somewhere else. Even if it is only for 15 or 20 minutes. Sometimes after lunch when you are taking them in from the yard, it's craziness.

B: Depends what they have ate that day.

C: I am back tracking there to the challenges, but it can be a challenge because classroom assistants do have other roles in the school and sometimes I am left on my own. Trying to deal with the children alone after lunchtime can be difficult.

B: You don't really realise how much you use your classroom assistants until they are off sick for a day. Then you realise you have to change your whole day because you wanted them to do this, that and the other for you.

C: Yeah, that happened to me recently actually. I had to be completely flexible that morning and change everything about because someone was needed elsewhere. Understandable. It happens. Communication is important so that everyone knows where they stand, everyone knows their role and what's expected of them.

R: Sometimes you can get to the point of working with someone where you don't actually need to communicate. It just happens.

C: One year when I was in the Nursery and everything just clicked. It was myself and 2 classroom assistants. Everyone was able to get on with everything and everything just ran smoothly that year.

R: I have had that before and she knew what I wanted, sometimes before I did, and the classroom just went. It was fantastic.

C: Everything just went smoothly and it meant there was more learning happening because you were able to focus your time.

B: That's when you see when you don't have a good partnership too.

A: Like an example this morning, there has been a child in my class who has been struggling coming to school recently, running out the door crying. So, this morning I was ready to take the roll, and I had it sitting beside me. All the children were sitting on the mat and this child came late. I went to get him from the door. I had him and I was trying to comfort him and

settle him down. It was taking a long time and just naturally my classroom assistant lifted the roll and started taking the roll. That was exactly what I needed at that point in time. We didn't even have to . . .

B: That made your morning go so much better.

C: They use their initiative. They just understand how things work.

A: And just asking simple questions. Almost like doing a little Circle Time, while the children were waiting. She was able to say 'well did anything happen', just asking the questions that were needed. It just gave me that bit of space where I was able to help comfort that child.

R: We had an incident last week in another class where a child refused to come in from the football pitch. I was out there. The classroom assistant brought the class in and when I got back she had the roll done, the dinner money collected and they had just been talking about what everybody was going to do after the First Communion. It was so so helpful. I was able to walk in, the children were relaxed and it was a lovely atmosphere when I came in after what had happened outside. I was extremely grateful.

C: We are very lucky. Our classroom assistants can use their initiative with that and they can just go on with it. Again, that comes with good partnership with the teacher that they understand what they need to do.

R: I think she questioned if she did the right thing. I said 'of course, the children are talking, there's engagement and interaction and they are lovely and relaxed'. It was a lovely way to start the day.

A: One of my classroom assistants has been off for over a week and had a few days missed before that. Today I was speaking to my classroom assistant and I was saying you don't half notice when someone is off, but at the same time, everything has been ticking over just fine. That goes to show how effectively we have been working.

B: You have probably both taken on more roles than what you have realised.

A: Although we were a little bit more stressed, there hasn't been any issues or problems. We have just picked up the slack.

B: Yeah.

R: Will we finish up? Just before we do, is there anything that anybody wants to add? Don't feel obliged.

B: I'm not sure if it still goes on, and I know it's boring for those who are here every year, but there are new people every year and it's good do to go through the list of things that are and aren't expected.

R: From teachers or from classroom assistants?

B: Both. From like the Principal, or your line manager. I do think that's important to go through so that someone isn't coming in and doing something that's inappropriate and the teacher has to go back and go over it, when it should have been already explained. So, if it's a given at the beginning of the year everyone goes through what should and shouldn't happen in the classroom, it makes it easier for everyone as the year goes on.

R: Whenever I started we were given a book and the classroom assistants were given a book of guidelines for classroom assistants. So we knew what was expected of classroom assistants and classroom assistants knew what were expected of classroom assistants.

A: I think that would be really helpful because I did have an issue . . . I was going to another class 2 days a week for the last hour. And in Nursery, probably more than other class, things are so frantic and change so quickly, there is a lot of cleaning, tidying toys away and nothing was getting done. I spoke to the classroom assistant and the answer was like 'well what do you want e to do?'. I was like 'well the things that I have written down and asked you to do'. They still weren't being done, whereas if you had that book at the start of the year and it was laid out very clearly . . .

B: If it came from an official place.

A: Yeah. It's not just me telling you. That's like a job that is part of your . . . it's everybody's . . . and if I had been there I would have been helping, but I wasn't there. You know, something should have been happening, whereas there was nothing happening.

C: I have done a little bit of training with the classroom assistants on how to promote Maths in the classroom, just giving them little games so that no child is ever sitting there not working, not being busy, not doing something. If the classroom assistant had a few wee ideas, they could go over and help someone. I would like to think that was helpful. I do think that maybe things like that, training, even if it isn't yearly, just to refresh everyone's memories,

what is expected of them and what isn't. I remember getting new classroom assistants in. I think it's better off from the onset in August saying what they are expected to do. Obviously if you have a problem, raise it with the teacher.

B: Where to go when you have a problem too. Problems happen because you don't want to be the person carrying it all inside and coming to school unhappy. There has to be a solution to it. Someone to go to and ask for help.

R: In the past, classroom assistants didn't attend training. Some of the classroom assistants have found recent training opportunities enjoyable.

C: There was something else about communication. They don't get all the e-mails that we would get. If I, and sometimes I do forget, if you don't pass on, sometimes the classroom assistants aren't getting messages. It is important for the teachers to stay on the ball, make sure that they are passing on information.

R: Sometimes there is an onus on the classroom assistant.

A: That's what I was about to say. Equally, dates are written on the board. I have found classroom assistants going 'what, I didn't even know'. I was like 'well you eat your lunch in the same room that I eat in and you read the same board'.

C: Well I have a WhatsApp group for my class and I can put information like that on the group, like just found out today that we are staying late on Tuesday and things like that there. I just find it handy that everybody is kind of . . . they will see it and I don't have to go round individual classroom assistants and say what's happening. It is specifically for our class stuff and if you see things on the internet you can screenshot it and put it into the group and we can try and do it and put it into the planning. We use See Saw. I wouldn't allow the classroom assistants to do that. I like being in charge of that, knowing what's going out to the parents and knowing what the parents are seeing.

R: And seeing what's coming back.

A: That wouldn't be a responsibility for the classroom assistant.

R: Is that us? Or does anyone else want to add anything else?

C: I would like to hope that they do feel that they are valued and that they do see their role as important. Not just in the class that they are in, but in the school. You do see that the

classroom assistants do have friendships with the children. I would like to hope that they do understand that they do have an important role in the school.

R: Should I stop? Just before I do, thank you very much and thank you for being honest.

Appendix E – Sample of Data Coding

Comments (Tags)	(Coding)	Theme
'In my view they are there to support the children's, their learning and more specifically their acquisition of the language by working alongside the teacher'.	Acquisition	Language Development
'They have a huge role with regards to language modelling'.	Modelling	
'If they are carrying out a Maths activity with the children, they are there helping support the learning of Maths, but more importantly, they are there to support the acquisition of terminology of the Maths'.	Terminology	
'I think their role is to help with the acquisition of language if you wanted to summarise it in one sentence'.	Acquisition.	
'There is one particular teacher, who you walk into her classroom and no matter who you are, she engages you in conversation . . . If the teacher isn't modelling that, the classroom assistant isn't going to model that back'.	Modelling Translation	
'Every conversation that they have with a child is	Interaction	

building the child's language proficiency'. 'But, they don't translate for the kids, as much as they can they use simplified language at the early stages, they understand the importance of repetition'.	Use	
'Some of them don't know what they're doing on a day to day basis. They don't find out until they walk in in the morning'. 'If you involve them too much they feel that they are level but they know that they are not because of what's required of them. You risk them saying that's not my job to do that. But, if you ask their opinion, I was thinking of doing this here, what do you think about that? You also have a 'would you mind putting that up there?'. You ae showing that you are the one who is in charge but making them feel part of the classroom'. 'They (teacher and classroom assistant) feel that they can talk to each other and be honest with each other'.	Information sharing Sharing ideas Working together	Communication

‘Well I think it will depend on three different things: the class teacher and how they utilise them, the classroom assistant and how they allow themselves to be used either positively or negatively and the dynamic between the two of them’.	Pairings	Relationships and Personalities
‘You try . . . I suppose I have tried to put people who would work well together together’.	Pairings	
‘Certain teachers and classroom assistants try to become friends and that is ok to be a friend, but you have to maintain the professional’.	Friendship	
‘You might have a classroom assistant and SEN assistants in the same room . . . it isn’t best practice for them just to be with the child who they are supporting . . . those people have skills to offer. It can come across as favouritism at times’.	Working relationships	
‘You can’t always put certain classroom assistants with certain teachers’.	Pairings	
‘Personality is a challenge’. The friendships at times can	Friendships	

be a challenge because it can create a bit of a tension, especially if there is a third or fourth person in the classroom'. 'I can see that one classroom assistant doesn't feel part of the group'. 'Sometimes people try to be too friendly to the point where they try and make them so equal with them, but that can lead to resentment because they think they don't get paid your money to do that'.	Collegiality	
'I don't think I could give one generic answer. It very much depends on the class teacher'. 'In the best practice within the school the classroom assistant feels valued, the classroom assistant isn't spending their day doing the menial tasks of photocopying, cleaner, the tasks that teachers think are beneath them'. 'I have been in classes where a teacher is in complete control, won't even ask them to cut things out, that type of thing, won't even allow them to do the menial task. And while they say they feel bad asking	Multi-faceted role. Power dynamics	Deployment

them to cut something out, what they are doing is, unintentionally making the classroom assistant feel useless, that they are not trusted, or that kind of thing'.		
'I know that the language modelling isn't always being used'.	Effectiveness of role	
'They carry out their duties. They are hard working'.	Enthusiastic	
'A mutual respect, yes, where the teacher understand the classroom assistant's role, the classroom assistant understands the teacher's role and they both understand how their own roles, where they fit into the big picture of the class and the school'.	Understanding	
'Id say some of them see their role as doing whatever the teacher tells them to be honest'.	Power	
'I think some of them know that they make a difference, but do they value themselves . . . I don't think that they do. Because they are not valued – I would like to think that they see themselves as an important part of the school. I do tell	Value	

them that we couldn't survive without them. I do say that regularly and I have said it to the staff as a whole staff. I do say these things but I don't know if they believe it about themselves'. 'I would like to think that they value themselves and see themselves as an integral part of the class and that they are there helping the children with language acquisition, with academic, as well as pastoral, as well as supporting the teacher'.		
'At times you get whoever is available as long as they have Irish. That's what you are going for and you bring them in and hope that you can train them in everything else'. 'If I could, I would love them to have a qualification in immersion education'. 'Something that teachers them what immersion education is because a lot of classroom assistants that we have had have come through the system, but they have never been taught about the system'. 'I think it would be great if there was a course that could be done to train classroom	Need for proficiency in Irish Pedagogy	Training

assistants to be classroom assistants, but more specifically immersion classroom assistants'.		
'Not all teachers understand the role of the classroom assistant'.		
'Not all classroom assistants understand their role at times'.	Definitions of role	
'If a course does come up, and they don't come up on immersion education, you can't send them on it because you can't cope with having all the classroom assistants out on the one day. And you don't want to have to choose between them'.	Logistics of accessing training	
'What happens with teachers is you send one, they come back and they disseminate, whereas classroom assistants, that's not in their job description'.	Sharing information	

Appendix F – Sample of Highlighted Theme Identification

Key:

Language Development **Deployment of the CA**

Relationships **Communication**

R: First of all, thank you for agreeing to d this today. It is very helpful and it is very much appreciated. We are going to talk about classroom assistants, more specifically classroom assistants in this school, how they are deployed and how they could be deployed better. I suppose, the first thing I want to chat about is what you perceive to be the main role of the classroom assistant in the Early Years or Key Stage 1 immersion classroom.

A: I think, especially in this school, their main role is to model language and support learning.

B: A second pair of eyes for the teacher as well because you can't see everything that is going on. It's helpful to have classroom assistants to tell you about things that are going on that you might not know about.

R: What sort of things might you not notice?

B: Like children who appear to be getting on better that want they are. The classroom assistant might draw your attention to the fact that they have been copying or that they have been silently struggling. You can then go to them and help them a bit better, whereas they might be reluctant to tell you themselves.

A: Yeah. Even in Nursery, especially with friendships, there may be some children who you think are playing and who have made friendships and perhaps the classroom assistant sees that they weren't playing all that well or that they were on their own a little bit more than they should have been. They can draw our attention to this so that you can put a plan in place to help those specific children.

C: I agree with the idea that the role of the classroom assistant it to support learning, be that supporting the teacher in preparing things, modelling language. I find that when we are doing play in the classroom that the classroom assistant would have a specific role and it usually is language based. There would usually be a classroom assistant deployed at the art table where we would promote most of our language through the art activity of the day. There would also

be an adult at the Maths table to promote mathematical language, which is language that isn't heard outside of the classroom, for most of the children in the school. There are certain activities where there always have to be adult. I suppose it's for language learning to be sure that the children are being equipped with language and given the new vocabulary when needed.

A: I find that they are very helpful for the likes of PDMU where you want to do a little drama, where you have the puppets. Maybe the teacher has a puppet and the classroom assistant has another and you are able to act something out to help children understand something a little bit better. They can actually see it in action.

C: In story-time, if there is a new word that comes up and you are trying to explain it: if you are talking about hood for example and you don't have an item of clothing with a hood, but the classroom assistant might, you can physically show the children what it actually is That's a visual cue that the children are able to then remember what the word it. It's like acting. If you have a classroom assistant in the Early Years you are constantly acting out everything so that the children are given the clues to help them with their language development.

A: Even, again the likes of learning new words. If you are reading a story and looking at the pictures, I would read out look at this big dog. The children would say no no no it's not. The classroom assistant would make another guess that seems silly and this gives the children the opportunity to think it's not a dog or a cat but a cow and they can come up with the word themselves, or at least contribute to the fact that they know it's not the others.

R: Can I ask you to tell me a wee bit more about what classroom assistants do to model language? How do they act as language models?

B: You kind of hope that they would model it the same way that you do it yourself in the class, whether that be role play after the story time. . . . erm . . .

C: In the role play area in the gníomcheantar (play area), we change that according to themes every half term. It's very important that there is a classroom assistant hanging about that area, not getting too involved in the play, but hanging about the area to give the language to the children. Say it's the doctors for example and a child says in English, 'I'm sick and I'm waiting on the doctor', the role of the classroom assistant in that instance is to say in Irish 'Oh tá mise tinn, tá mé ag fanacht ar an dochtúir' and over exaggerating the words and phrases so that the children remember what they are supposed to be saying and that's what

I'm going to say the next time. It helps the children pick up the language then. They model language in very many different ways.

B: We are lucky that we have a few classroom assistants who have been here for some time and they know a bit about the family history: they know how to speak to certain children in a specific way to get the best out of them. That's good for new classroom assistants who come in because they model how a classroom assistant should behave.

C: And they know what's expected of them.

B: Not behave but . . . how they should work within a team setting.

A: I feel as a new teacher coming into the school that was supported very well by my classroom assistants. They helped me learn the ways of the school. I think our school is very different to any other school I have worked in.

B: I have been really lucky with a few of the classroom assistants that I have had, that they helped me with planning, especially creative tasks, because it is easy to get stuck in a rut They have sat down with me and helped me because you would do the same things over for easiness. I think that helps. That's good well that they feel more involved and you don't maybe have to be so specific in what you put up on the wall that we are doing this and that this week, because they are in the know.

Appendix G: Children's Voice

The aim of this small-scale study was to explore teachers' and CAs' perceptions of the role of the CA in the early years immersion context. I felt that it was important to collect data from possibly the most important stakeholders in the immersion process – the children. I was keen to find out how they viewed learning the Irish language and those who had helped them to do so, with the aim that in the process I would gain deeper insight into the role of the CA as a support for learning and for their language development from another perspective. Having already analysed the data gathered from adult participants before the children's focus groups began, I was interested in whether the children were aware of any tensions in the classroom. During the collection of data from staff, five main interwoven themes emerged through all of which the overarching theme of collaboration was a recurring thread. These themes have been discussed in the previous two chapters. This chapter will discuss the themes that emerged from the children's focus groups. Those children who took part in this study were in Key Stage 2, aged 8 – 11, and were coming towards the end of their primary schooling. They were reflecting on their Irish learning experiences and responded with their own truths. The learners were an important group of stakeholders and the children's ideas enriched the data already collected from the adult interviews and focus groups.

Children's responses were focused in the practical elements of learning the language and the emphasis placed on their feelings and attitudes towards learning reflected the affective dimension of learning (Hyde, 2006). Responses centred on their feelings around the Irish language, the process of learning Irish and those people who had been involved in helping them develop proficiency in the second language.

Children appeared to enjoy school and learning, benefitting from positive learning experiences. This indicates that they were unaware of any tensions and issues that adults believed to be in existence and emphasises the professionalism of class teachers and CAs in their interactions in the classroom.

Findings from children's focus groups

The findings arising from the adults' data were different from those findings arising from the children's' data. Relationships, communication and language arose and were discussed during the children's focus groups, although they were not the main focus of discussion. It is unsurprising that training and deployment were not mentioned by the children. Throughout both focus group discussions, the children remained focused on the Irish language, their

experiences of learning Irish and those people who had been a part of their language learning journey. The children's comments regarding language learning were very perceptive. Some children showed an intuitive understanding of the role of the more knowledgeable other and how the social cultural context had helped them acquire the language.

Three main themes emerged from these discussions. Those main themes identified were:

- The importance of the Irish language
- Learning experiences
- People who have aided their language development.

Each theme will be discussed in more detail below.

The importance of the Irish language

In the focus group discussions, it emerged that all children were proud of their bilingual ability. All children spoke positively about Irish and their links with the Irish language. It appeared that the ability to speak Irish contributed greatly to their sense of identity.

Below are some quotes highlighting the importance that the children attributed to Irish.

Child B: "It's good to have a second language."

Child C: "It can help you get jobs."

Child D: "It's a pleasure to speak Irish."

It is clear from the quotes above that the children spoke positively about the Irish language and its significance in their lives. For the children, being able to speak Irish clearly engendered a sense of pride: it is something that they can do that others cannot. There was a consensus amongst the children that having a second language is beneficial. Whilst being able to acknowledge that being bilingual

Child C: "can help you get jobs"

the children seemed unable to develop this idea further.

Whilst it is not my intention to write from a political point of view and whilst this dissertation has not gone into great detail about the political motives of choosing Irish Medium Education, it is important to be mindful that when discussing the Irish language and its place in Northern Ireland, political outlooks inevitably arise. In the context of this study, it was

only in discussions with the children that any reference to political ideologies emerged. Some of the comments made by the children with political undertones can be seen below.

Child D: "Because there are people who want Irish to not be a language anymore so it's great to be able to speak Irish."

Child E: "It's your own language."

Child A: "I think that it's our own language and that we should be happy about it."

For the children who took part in the focus groups, the ability to speak Irish played a major role in their identity as an Irish citizen. Some children spoke about connections between the Irish language and politics, perhaps as a result of having absorbed such attitudes in the home setting. The notion of 'owning' the language is interesting and may be attributed to the parental views of the children regarding the perceived suppression of Irish.

The children brought a political perspective to the discussion that other participants did not. When discussing the positive aspects of speaking Irish one child stated *'*

Child C: "if the Brits come back they are gonna hate us and they are gonna kill us"

followed by the declaration that

Child C: "they hate Irish".

This statement is controversial and shows that this child saw himself as being apart from the mainstream, which, from his tone of voice seemed to engender a sense of pride. This statement also highlights how the children have developed their sense of self in connection with their family and wider Irish speaking community taking into account the experiences of their forebearers which have been handed down through folk and family history, with a potential political slant. The political perspective noted by the children concurs with O Riagáin (2009) who suggests that interest in the Irish language often equates with Nationalistic viewpoints and political ideologies. This statement from Child C also highlights that parents have chosen bilingualism and bilingual education for a variety of reasons. When the Irish Medium sector began, parents noted Irish identity and quality of education as being two of the main advantages of being educated through the medium of Irish (Maguire, 1991). From the statement above, it could be inferred that parents may also have been politically motivated in opting for Irish Medium education, rather than being fully driven by the perceived advantages of bilingualism.

Learning experiences

Although some areas of challenge when learning Irish were noted, all children spoke positively about their experiences of learning Irish thus far. Children reported being exposed to Irish language learning opportunities at home and in school. Most children highlighted the role of their early home experiences in learning the language.

Below are some quotes that relate to the children's experience of learning Irish.

Child C: "It's boring."

Child E: "Sometimes there can be History and I like learning about History."

Child B: "I love my Irish."

Child F: "I feel happy."

It is evident from the quotes above that the children, apart from Child C, enjoyed learning Irish and felt positive about their experiences thus far. Although one child referred to learning Irish as

Child C: "boring",

this appeared to be his attitude to learning in general. This disposition was not shared with the remainder of the group, who presented a much more nuanced view about learning through the medium of Irish. Children spoke about their experiences of learning Irish, highlighting positives and the challenges. They talked about a mixture of formal and informal opportunities with which they had engaged to learn and use Irish including experiences at school, experiences at home and memberships of clubs and societies where Irish is the spoken language.

Showing perception regarding the process of language learning, one child commented that he has been developing proficiency in Irish

Child B: "by people talking Irish that's what made me develop it, like by listening, using different senses".

This statement intuitively refers to the support provided by the more knowledgeable other during the process of language acquisition (Vygotsky, 1978). This input from the 'expert' facilitates interaction which helps build proficiency. This comment also alludes to the

development of receptive language and the period spent gaining understanding of the L2 before developing the ability to produce (Krashen, 1985).

Another child also described learning Irish as a cumulative experience stating,

Child F: "I started with the easy words and then it got a bit harder and then I started doing work".

This showed a recognition that the development of proficiency in Irish has been long process with various linguistic inputs and at each stage of development. Both this quote, and the following quote are highly perceptive and relate to scaffolding (Bruner, 1978) and the notion that language learning has been broken down into manageable chunks by the more knowledgeable other to help the learner develop language proficiency. A gradual and systematic approach to language acquisition encourages the learner to first master basic vocabulary, before introducing a wider breadth of vocabulary and grammar.

Child D: "The way I learnt Irish is: I would listen to people say like one word and put them in with an English sentence. If I was trying to say I want a drink, when I was only like 5 and all, I would say I want uisce (water)".

This links to the work of Cummins (2000) on BICS and CALP who proposed that for children to be able to engage in academic learning through a second language, in this case Irish, they first need to engage in the communicative process and develop basic vocabulary before developing the language required for academic endeavour.

All children reported positively about subject learning through the medium of Irish. History was noted as being a particularly interesting topic to learn through Irish. For example, one child noted a sense of fulfilment learning about Ireland through Irish, being able to see a link between the topic and the language of instruction, reflecting the context and relevance to his/her life.

As highlighted by the quote below, parental input and attitude can influence children's attitude and motivation in the language learning process, and thus positively support their development of the L2.

Child B: "Yep. My mummy always tells me she is proud that I can speak Irish. I try not to correct her but if she says something wrong, it's a bit annoying."

Some children reported positively on their ability to help others develop their proficiency in Irish. ‘

Child D: “If my mummy wanted to learn a new phrase, I’d tell her it and keep saying it in Irish to help her learn”.

This comment show that this child recognised the power of repetition and reinforcement. In this example, the child refers to himself as being in the position of the more knowledgeable other, supporting his mother in learning Irish. When discussing using Irish at home, one child said

Child B: “I’m not gonna lie but sometimes I do. My mummy is learning the Irish language. My granny and mummy have their Fáinne Óir (Gold [7]Fáinne)”

pointing out that there are times when his mother and grandmother talk to him in Irish to develop his linguistic capacity as well as their own. Informal learning opportunities such as these can be invaluable in helping children increase their confidence as second language learners and users (Stein, 1999). An ability to communicate with others in Irish coupled with positive affirmation engenders a sense of positivity and so the learner may continue improving to reproduce such positive experiences.

Challenges

With any type of learning comes challenge. Although the majority of children presented a positive disposition to learning, when asked, most children spoke insightfully about the challenges associated with learning a second language, as well as those challenges associated specifically with learning through the medium of a second language.

Children identified and focused on very specific issues relating to learning through a second language, rather than the generic challenges of learning.

One of the main challenges noted by a number of the children was the conflict between English and Irish.

Child B: “*Because your family talk in English and you talk more English than Irish because you only talk Irish during school or to certain family members or teachers”.*

[7] A Fáinne Óir or Gold Fáinne is a pin badge that can be used to identify someone as a fluent Irish speaker.

The wider English-speaking society can impact upon children's usage of Irish and retention of vocabulary.

Child D: "*Because like everybody always speaks to me in English in my house and sometimes you forget some of the Irish words, but when you go back to school you're in an Irish environment so you can get them back if you know what I mean".*

This quote, which highlights the influence of the English language dominated society can lead to Irish learning becoming a school only phenomenon (Baker, 2007). As suggested by Swain & Johnson, 1997) second language exposure for some children may be limited to the classroom or school environment.

I found it interesting that one child noted,

Child C: "sometimes I get confused as well because there are words I know in Irish but I don't know in English".

It could be argued that children feel a level of confidence in their Irish ability and can recognise the standard of their language understanding and production. However, it was noted by other children that sometimes they can be confused in Irish. Words do not always sound how they look and reading, and spelling can therefore become a challenge. This was mentioned by one of the children who noted

Child A: "if you can read the word but you can't spell it. That's what's a bit annoying about Irish. You can say it but you can't spell it".

Teachers stated that they felt that children in Key Stage 1 may perhaps have terminology in English that they do not have in Irish. Those children taking part in this study were in Key Stage 2 and therefore were children who had developed a wider range of vocabulary and were well and truly situated in the productive stage of language development.

People who have helped them learn Irish

When questioned about those who have been influential in their language development, all children mentioned a range of individuals who had helped them learn Irish. It is clear from the children's responses that they had been positively supported in their development of language proficiency both in and out of school.

Children noted their main sources of support when learning Irish primarily as being family members, pre-school staff and school staff. It might be considered surprising that, since the

majority of the children in the study school come from English speaking homes, most participants noted the influence of family members before school staff. Although all children found support in different places, school staff were noted by all children as being pivotal in their learning experiences.

Below are some quotes relating to the individuals who have helped the children learn Irish.

Child C: "My brothers and sisters taught me it."

Child A: "My mummy is nearly fluent."

Child A: "Probably my mummy because if my mummy didn't go to university I wouldn't be in an Irish school."

The variety of responses offered by children to this question may highlight the many reasons parents choose Irish Medium education for their children. All children took great pride in the fact that family members were instrumental in their language learning process. Familial motives may have involved choosing this particular school, or parents/carers learning the language themselves and conversing with their children in Irish, no matter how basic their level. Parents may choose to learn the language to strengthen their own and their families' sense of identity, or to be able to play an active role in their children's education. Three respondents noted that their parents are/were Irish teachers, who are/were very active in the language learning process. This had clearly had great significance in their lives and in their own learning of the language.

One child noted that his relationship with the Irish language began before he entered the school, with the positive experiences of close family members having influenced parental choice of school.

Child C: "*But before I went to the teachers my both aunties went to the school when it first opened. They were telling my mummy about it and she was jealous".*

Although this child's formal language instruction began when he entered Nursery, he felt that his relationship with the school and the Irish language began before that. It appeared to be the positive experiences of his relatives who had attended the study school which were influential in his mother's decision to choose Irish Medium education.

As already noted, the children saw being able to speak Irish as a major part of their identity.

Child E: 'I learnt Irish because most of my family is fluent. My family like worked to save the Irish language".

This particular child's family could be described as Irish language activists who have played a major role in the revival of the Irish language in Belfast.

The majority of respondents noted early informal language learning experiences before the formal experience of schooling. This can be seen clearly in the quote below.

Child C: "Because I went to an Irish crèche and I started learning there. I went to an Irish nursery and now I'm in an Irish primary school."

Informal language learning experiences consisted of creche, experiences in the home where at least one family member spoke Irish and communicating with siblings. One child discussed how she and her sister speak Irish to one another in the home.

Child B: "*Sometimes I always . . . my sister always talks Irish in the car and my daddy says what does that mean and sometimes I have to explain it to him when we are on our way to school".*

Their ability to translate shows how language learners often mingle L1 and L2, which is known as translanguaging (García & Wei, 2018), in natural communication using 'interlanguage or transitional language' (Mac Póilin, 1992, p. 32) as part of the language acquisition process. Another child noted how her little brother, who was in creche at the time of focus group and who was in the very early stages of language acquisition, only speaks in Irish and so all siblings must use Irish with him.

In the formal context, school staff were noted by all the child participants as having played a role in their language development. Children initially referred to school staff as

Child A: "*teachers really".*

Probing was needed to encourage the children to expand on this. Even after probing, however, only two children mentioned explicitly the role of the CA in helping children develop language proficiency.

Child F: "*My assistants".*

One child mentioned one CA by name. Singling out and recognising her efforts may show respect for this particular member of staff and what she has done to support staff and

children's language learning. It was noted by children that not only do CAs always interact with children in Irish, but sometimes

Child D: "they have brought new words that we have never heard before".

Multiple sources of language input such as class teachers, CAs, visitors and other children intensifies children's exposure to the target language through language modelling, consolidation and sharing (Andrews, 2018).

Children's Views: Summary of findings

This chapter detailed the main themes emerging from the children's focus groups. Although the children's contributions did not fit neatly into the main themes which emerged from staff discussions, the ideas they explored in their discussions enriched the data collected because it provided views from an important group of stakeholders, namely the learners. Those themes which emerged during staff focus groups were not entirely appropriate for exploration with the children. The children who took part in this study appeared oblivious to any tensions that might have been present between staff. This could be said to demonstrate how professional the teachers and CAs are, even if there are tensions.

The main themes emerging from children's focus groups centred mainly on perceptions of the Irish language, their experiences of learning Irish and those people who had been instrumental in their language acquisition. Much insight and information were gained from the children regarding the process of language acquisition from the perspective of those who are acquiring a second language. In their discussions, school management, class teachers and CAs focused on the practical and professional aspects of the role of the CA. In contrast, there was a political slant connected to some of what the children said which added a political dimension to the study that discussions with staff did not. Children's views may be the result of ideas passed on to them from others either explicitly or implicitly in attempts to preserve a sense of identity and a link with the past, whether actual or romanticised.

Each group of participants in this study offered different perspectives regarding the role of the CA in the immersion classroom based on their own experiences. The main themes emerging from the data collected were interwoven and connected by an overarching theme of collaboration. Themes from adult's and children's' data were illuminating, highlighting areas of strength in practice, as well as areas for improvement. The next chapter will draw on this

analysis of data to elicit conclusions and to offer recommendations to further strengthen practice regarding the role of the CA in the early years immersion classroom.

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