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Carrier localization and the origin of luminescence in cubic InGaN alloys

P. R. C. Kent^{a)} and Alex Zunger

National Renewable Energy Laboratory, Golden, Colorado 80401

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The electronic structure and optical properties of cubic (nonpiezoelectric) InGaN are investigated using large scale atomistic empirical pseudopotential calculations. We find that (i) strong hole localization exists even in the homogeneous random alloy, with a preferential localization along the [1,1,0] In–N–In–N–In chains, (ii) even modest sized ($<50 \text{ \AA}$) indium rich quantum dots provide substantial quantum confinement and readily reduce emission energies relative to the random alloy by 200–300 meV, depending on size and composition, consistent with current photoluminescence, microscopy, and Raman data. The dual effects of alloy hole localization and localization of electrons and hole at intrinsic quantum dots are responsible for the emission characteristics of current grown cubic InGaN alloys. © 2001 American Institute of Physics. [DOI: 10.1063/1.1405003]

The development and commercialization of InGaN-based optoelectronic devices has occurred despite a limited understanding of the underlying electronic structure and light emission mechanisms of this alloy.¹ Although relatively efficient emission has been achieved for the entire visible range, optimization based on an understanding of the underlying electronic structure is expected to substantially improve device performance. Current InGaN alloys exhibit numerous anomalous phenomena that have been interpreted as indicative of an unconventional electronic structure. The following have been observed experimentally: (i) highly efficient photoluminescence (PL), despite a high dislocation density,¹ (ii) discrete states of varying energy inside the bandgap in both quantum wells and epilayers,^{2,3} (iii) a large Stokes' shift between emission and absorption energies, in both cubic and wurtzite InGaN samples,² (iv) an S-like dependence of emission energy on temperature,⁴ (v) persistent photoconductivity,⁵ (PPC). Collectively, these phenomena are indicative of localized excitons. While many of the observed localization phenomena can be attributed to the strong electric polarization existing in the *wurtzite* alloy, measurements on *cubic* alloys,^{2,3} that lack polarization by symmetry, have found that the above phenomena persist. Thus, polarization alone is insufficient to explain the localization properties of InGaN. In general, there are two classes of localization in crystalline semiconductor alloys: (a) localization occurs even in a spatially homogeneous alloy due to the microscopic difference in potentials of the alloyed atoms,^{6,7} and (b) localization due to spatial inhomogeneity (e.g., clustering, dot formation).^{8,9} Recent electron micrography¹⁰ revealed highly nonuniform In distributions, primarily consisting of sub-100 Å “dotlike” regions of apparently very high In composition surrounded by larger regions of lower In composition. These observations have led to speculation that carrier localization at these In-rich “intrinsic quantum dots” [mechanism (b) above] is responsible for the efficient emission of these devices.^{8,9,11}

Here, we report large scale, fully atomistic electronic structure calculations on cubic InGaN alloys, and provide an

explanation for the current experimental observations of localization in terms of (a) emission due to hole localization extant in the perfectly homogeneous random alloy, and (b) emission from quantum confined states in intrinsic quantum dots. In order to investigate the electronic properties of InGaN alloys, we adopt a twofold strategy: First, we simulate perfectly random InGaN alloys using supercells containing random distributions of In atoms. Second, we simulate the effects of spontaneous dot formation by embedding In-rich spheres of varying In composition and diameter inside a lower In-content InGaN alloy. This approach permits us to separate the electronic

structure of the relaxed supercells is then obtained via the modern version of the empirical pseudopotential method¹⁴ (EPM). Unlike traditional EPM, this potential reproduces not only experimentally correct band gaps, but also effective masses, and interfacial band offsets. In addition, we use explicitly strain dependent pseudopotentials in order to accurately reproduce the deformation potentials for both valence and conduction band states and thus explicitly include the effect of internal strains in the material due to the large bond length mismatch. Wave functions are obtained in a plane-wave basis (thus, affording multiband coupling).

Electronic localization along [1,1,0] In chains in InGaN random alloys: We calculated the near-gap conduction and

^{a)}Electronic mail: paul_kent@nrel.gov

valence states of unstrained random alloys, averaging the results of 15 different randomly generated alloy configurations. Although no states are present within the gap at any concentration, we find a surprising localization of the valence states. Bellaiche *et al.*¹² demonstrated marked hole

287 meV. Thus, we find that the observed 240 meV reduction in gap in nominally 33% alloys³ is consistent with $\sim 28 \text{ \AA}$ dots of 100% In composition, and is also consistent with larger dots of lower composition, e.g., a 76% 40 \AA dots.